

Today, we made our annual pilgrimage to Mount Moriah, the place of Isaac's binding. Today we heard the Torah chanted within the framework of Leonard Cohen's haunting Story of Isaac. Isaac remembers the trauma of his father's vision, and he warns us: **"You who build these altars now to sacrifice these children, You must not do it anymore..."**

At the last moment, an angel stays Abraham's hand. My favorite painting of this scene, done by Caravaggio, takes us beyond our comfort zone; right up close to the terrified boy, to the blade against his flesh. You might say: lucky for him, there's a ram conveniently ensnared in a nearby thicket. Untie the lad, slaughter the animal; no harm, no foul. Over the years, I've become too skeptical to go that route. The boy will never be whole again, and neither will his father or mother. As for the God who gifted Abraham with this vision, let me simply suggest that if this is really what God wants, perhaps His followers should consider some kinder options... This text is soaked in violence and cruel domination. There are too many Isaac's these days who aren't lucky enough to have a ram subbing for them. In our world - a world that struggles with murderous intolerance - children are still sacrificed on the altars of violent ideology. The child still warns us, but to no avail. The blade, the מאכלת, that insatiable devouring blade calls for more sacrifice. It seems that every day brings more sad news of the innocent souls, young and old, offered up in flames to someone's twisted religious vision, the killer's hands fulfilling the mission. Their god has blessed the slaughter.

Yesterday we watched as Abraham, driven on by Sarah - with God's backing - cast out Hagar and Ishmael. God's rationale for Sarah's demand: "Isaac will carry on the covenantal promise; not Ishmael. Don't get too riled up over this, Abraham. Listen to your wife." But why such a fate? What did the boy and his mother do to deserve being cast into the wilderness with a loaf of bread and a skin of water? Didn't this slave-girl Hagar run away once before, fleeing from the punishing hand of Sarah, her mistress, Sarah our mother, Sarah - by whose name we bless our daughters? Didn't an angel of God tell Hagar to return home and submit to the treatment of Sarah her tormentor? What kind of comfort and solace is that? The frightened woman flees and the angel offers no quarter to the battered slave?

How can we avoid cringing as we revisit the cruelty and violence of our Patriarch and Matriarch, and how can we not wonder about God's role in this drama? You can feel the mistrust and the anger between the brothers. No good can come of this banishment. The festering wound will explode into strife. Blood will flow. You can sense the strutting vanity of another battalion marching off to the good war, confident about God being on their side, certain that the enemy's God is a demon, prepared to annihilate the hated foe.

If you call me brother now, forgive me if I inquire, "Just according to whose plan?" When it all comes down to dust I will kill you if I must, I will help you if I can. When it all comes down to dust I will help you if I must, I will kill you if I can. And mercy on our uniform, man of peace or man of war, the peacock spreads his fan.

עקידה

Binding a child's limbs to the altar, preparing him for slaughter, as an expression of loyalty to God. The angel halts the test. A ram is killed in the boy's stead. Generations of readers parse the words as they argue over the test results. Today, on this Day of Remembering, we turn our hearts to each other and to God. Today - and every day - I pray that we find a way to redeem this terrifying story from itself. Isaac has been released, once again. Before we consider binding him anew, allow me to share a little bit of folk wisdom from Libya about people, God, and strings. When each of us is created, we are tied to God with a string. When we sin, the string breaks. But if we repent during the Days of Awe, the angel Gabriel comes down and makes a knot in the string and we are once again to God.

**Before I continue - I want each person to check out the tallit strings of the person next to you; everybody share.** Because every one of us sins once in a while, our strings are full of knots. You'll also notice that a string with many knots ends up shorter than a string without any knots. What does this teach us? That teshuva sincerely undertaken ends up bringing ourselves closer to God and certainly to each other.

Why is this story important? Because we make mistakes all the time. We speak unwisely, we often act out of selfishness, we sometimes act or speak without enough deliberation. Our impulsiveness can injure us and those around us.

But if we make the effort to mend our ways, that desire is sufficient reason for the angel Gabriel to knot the string, to give the relationship a new lease on life. Instead of viewing a knot as a symbol of entanglement, it becomes an emblem of possibility, a reassurance that we will emerge even stronger in our ties to God and to each other.

We heard the powerful blasts of the shofar, and the Akeida story story takes us back to the ram ensnared in the thorns. But there is another text which lets us hear the shofar as a rope with which we climb a mountain of trust and community. The Israelites are standing at the foot of the Mount Sinai, which, according to the midrash, is the same hilltop where the Akeida unfolded. Amidst the trembling and anticipation, God tells Moshe: במשך היובל המה יעלו בהר - the conventional translation is: "When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, the people may go up on the mountain." Let me offer another take: למשוך means "to pull" as in pulling on a rope. במשך היובל המה יעלו בהר teaches us that the blast of the shofar was a cable connecting all of the Israelite people - even us - to God. Our ancestors heard the call and that powerful blast became a mighty rope, and the Israelites - all of us - climbed up the mountain to get closer to God.

Isaac is no longer tied to the awful altar. God doesn't desire the burnt offering or the blunt and bloody blade. Today, we stand shoulder to shoulder, acknowledging our many imperfections. We know all too well, that our own lives can be hanging by a thread. What do we possess that will pull us through? The knots in our strings, remind us of each time we've tried to make things right, and we have hope that we can all come closer together. Today, let the trumpeting message of the shofar become a lifeline to God and a thread of hope for anyone who is overwhelmed and dismayed. Let the call of the shofar remind us of the great things we will do this year; let it be a symbol of the healing words of blessing and encouragement we will share with each other, as we climb the mountain.

שנה טובה