

Rosh Hashanah 2007

Each year, on the second day of Rosh Hashana we read the Akeida - the story of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac. We read this story on Rosh Hashana to remind God of Abraham's act of loyalty in order to win for ourselves, during this period of judgment, some merit on account of our ancestors. And we remind ourselves of the kind of devotion to principles that is required of a committed Jew. The medieval Spanish Jewish philosopher Arbabanel writes in his commentary of B'reishit: "The Binding of Isaac is forever on our lips and in our prayers. For in it lies the entire strength of Israel and their merit before their Heavenly Father." Although an angel intervenes, the traditional message is that there are values worth sacrificing for; some values are worth dying for; and some values are even worth endangering and sacrificing our children for. And it is precisely our ability to sacrifice for higher values that makes us worthy, and allows us to survive as a people.

This year, as I read the text, I was struck with - what I think is - an atypical reaction; it occurred to me that while Abraham was certainly subject to a

terrible test, he no doubt clearly heard God's command to him. He knew that sacrifice was required, and although we can argue until next Rosh Hashanah about whether he responded correctly by not questioning God's words to him, the fact that God made such a demand of Abraham is not disputed.

For Abraham, God's word was direct. For us, that is no longer true. God used to speak directly through his prophets, but he does so no longer. That path of revelation is closed. We cannot look to contemporary prophets for consolation or moral guidance. Eliezer Berkovits may have been correct when he stated that God's encounters with man are, by necessity, extremely rare in history in order to leave room for doubt; this safeguards our spiritual freedom, which is the most noble quality of faith. But that leaves us in what I would suggest is an even more difficult place than Abraham - we need to make sacrifices without even being sure we are following God's commands. How difficult are **our** daily tests, when our guidance is unclear? How do we take direction in this era? How do we know we are hearing God's voice?

The Akeida tells us that there are some values that are worth sacrificing for, but does not tell us

exactly what those are. The Akeida tells us that some sacrifices are necessary, but others are clearly inappropriate. How do we know which are which? How do we know when it is God speaking to us, or when it is just our fears, insecurities, and inner demons that we hear?

While our tasks are not as profound as sacrificing our children, many of them can have an important impact. Sacrifice is not just physical martyrdom, the giving of a life, but it is all the little things we relinquish for the sake of our communal values. The adult child who spends hours caring for an aged parent; the parent who stays home to raise his or her children, at the cost of career advancement and monetary compensation, is sacrificing for values. Those who give up their time and their money to help the poor, or the day school, or this minyon, are sacrificing for values, and they are depriving their own children of that very time and money now diverted to these greater transcendent causes. And coming closer to the Akeida itself, there are those of us who have sent or will send their children to serve on behalf of the IDF or perhaps the US army.

In a time without prophets, when we make our own sacrifices, we somehow need to ascertain what it is that God wants from us. We need to get closer to God, we need to understand God. Maimonides agrees. According to Maimonides (in his Guide of the Perplexed, III, chapter 54), people strive for perfection in 4 areas: material possessions, physical shape, moral virtues, and rational attainments, but only the final area has any real value. (I would have thought it was the 3rd category, which he calls "moral virtues" and by that, he means following halacha. But he dismisses this as merely a preparation for something else and not an end in itself.) That final category, the one Maimonides calls "rational attainments," is exactly what we have been talking about: it is apprehension of God - hearing God's voice.

Maimonides explains how he thinks this can be done. He says we can achieve our need and desire to know God by learning and exhibiting loving-kindness (chesed), judgment (mishpat) and righteousness (tzedakah). Maimonides seems to suggest, although he is not clear about this, that by imitating these Godly traits, we will get closer to God - and in fact, it is our desire to imitate God that engenders our good qualities.

Aviva Zornberg takes this a bit further. In her book "The Beginning of Desire," she suggests that we can come closest to God when we recognize that we can create the world with God.

What does she mean? How can we create a world with God? One way Zornberg suggests, and this is rather hard to grasp, is that we must come to know and express the spontaneous, unforced energy in ourselves (this is what she calls chesed).

Zornberg agrees with Rambam that we shouldn't act in a world of obedience alone; that is not God-like. Instead, we should operate in the world of chesed, which for her means we act "spontaneously, naturally, of our own free will and unforced consciousness." I think Zornberg is referring to the way in which we express our gratitude for our world, for God, for our blessings and our Torah; it is the way in which we approach our obligations or mitzvot.

And in case that's difficult to understand or achieve, Zornberg suggests another related path - in order to create a world with God, in order to get closer to God and understand God, she says we must pray, we must converse about the world with

God. She relies on a passage of Rashi to make this point. In this passage, Rashi writes of the need for human communication in the creation of the world:

Before man was created, the vegetation had not emerged, even though God had declared, on the third day of Creation, 'let the earth bring forth grass.' The vegetation had stopped growing at the very surface of the earth, and had not emerged until the sixth day. Why? Because God had not sent rain. And why had God not sent rain? 'Because there was no man to work the ground' - that is, there was no one who could appreciate the goodness of rain. When man came, and knew that rain is needed by the world, he prayed for it, and it fell, and the trees and grasses grew.

This passage of Rashi suggests that our prayer actually was the cause for bringing grass into being. We knew grass stood at the very surface of the earth ---- it was absent, and yet it had potential and there was need for it. Our prayer

operated on the edge of trust and need. Out of our hunger, we found the language that touched off God's original intent. God did not send the rain initially - He restrained himself - until man came to exist - man, capable of knowing his separateness from the world, his own need, and his love for the world.

Prayer is existentially different from all other activities. When we pray, we stand in the presence of God. Prayer is an act involving body and spirit in relationship with God. The whole point of prayer is to diminish distance between ourselves and God - to create closeness. Prayer is a process where we can experience intimacy with God - Zornberg says it is a dynamic process, in which our desire confronts our alienation.

So, in this age of God's silence, in order to apprehend God and know what sacrifices He wants from us, we need to pray - and, like that passage from Rashi, we must pray with both trust and need in our hearts. We must pray despite alienation, and because of our desire. We must pray with the knowledge of what we bring to the covenant - our own creativity, our own spontaneity, our own joy, our own love for the world. Through this prayer

we hope to find God's voice and God's purpose for us.

At Kol Sasson, we have set up a community of prayer, singing, and spirituality. We pray as a community where men and women freely voice their prayers together - a whole which becomes much greater than the sum of its parts. This prayer results in a Kol Sasson - a voice of gladness. Our goal has always been meaningful engagement of everyone who participates and joins us; to experience ruach and spirituality, seriousness and enthusiasm in tefillah. This is an ambitious goal, a worthwhile goal, a goal worth sacrificing for.

Maimonides concludes his mammoth Guide of the Perplexed with the following words "God is very near to everyone who calls, If he calls truly and has no distractions; He is found by every seeker who searches for Him, If he marches toward Him and goes not astray."

I hope that this year, with each other's help, we each find the strength to seek God, and to recognize our own responsibility in fulfilling the covenant. I pray that we get divine inspiration as

to what our own individual sacrifices should be for this year.

The Akeidah begins with God calling to Abraham, and Abraham responds with the untranslatable word "Hineni." Hineni indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness. May we have the faith that we are following God's commandments, so that we can also respond "Hineni" to God when we are called.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah.