

Rosh HaShanah 1st Day

Evening Service

1 Tishri 5772 / September 29, 2011

By Steven Shankman

On the second morning of Rosh HaShanah – i.e. tomorrow morning -- we will read the truly terrifying story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. In Genesis 22, God orders Abraham to take his only legitimate son, Isaac, to the top of Mt. Moriah and to offer him there as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeys and sets out on a three-day journey. When he nears the appointed place, he orders his two young servants to stay behind, and he gathers wood for the sacrifice, taking Isaac with him. Abraham builds the altar of sacrifice with the wood he had carried with him. He binds Isaac's hands and feet, places Isaac on top of the pile of wood, and he then raises his arm to execute God's command.

Why, on Rosh HaShanah, should we be reminded of this intended act of sacrifice, this intended act of murder – let us not shy away from the grim reality of the narrative –in the name of, and indeed at the behest of, God? It all sounds like a terribly familiar story in today's world that is rife with religiously inspired terrorism. Is our beloved Torah asking us to commit murder, even the murder of our own children, in the name of religion, in the name of God? Is our Torah, our *etz chayyim*, our “tree of life,” truly telling me that, if God commands me to do so, I must murder my own child?

Tomorrow morning's reading from the Torah doesn't, thank God, end with God's command to Abraham to offer his child as a sacrifice to God. This first command, it is true, is terrifying. God tells Abraham, “Take, if you please, your son, your only [legitimate] one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall specify to you” (22.2). As Rashi notes, God in fact doesn't tell Abraham to slaughter his son. God doesn't say “slaughter him (*shechatehu*) because the Holy One, Blessed is He, did not want him to slaughter him”; but God rather says, according to Rashi, “bring him [Isaac] up” (*leha'aloto*) there, to the mountain, with the intention of making of him an offering, an *'olah*. Thus Rashi. To which I would humbly add that the word *'olah* is related to the verb *'alah*, meaning “to go up.” God's command to “offer him [Isaac] up there as an offering” – *ha'alehu sham l'olah* – can be rendered as “cause him to be raised up there as something to be raised up.” Abraham obeys God by bringing his son up to Mt. Moriah. Abraham lifts Isaac up, elevates him there. Abraham elevates his son Isaac who thus becomes, after all, an example, for Judaism, of the elevated, lofty principle that children – or any human life, for that matter -- must never be sacrificed in the name of religious devotion.

The first command, then, is, perhaps, ambiguous. There is no ambiguity, however, about the second command. Our text continues:

And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. And the LORD's messenger called out to him from the heavens and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he [Abraham] said, "Here I am" (*Hineni*) [*Hineni*, according to Rashi, "is the response of the loving or the pious, of the *chasidim*; it is an expression of humility and an expression of readiness to obey a command, to experience oneself as appointed."]. And he [the messenger from God] said, "Do not reach out your hand against the boy, do nothing to him. . ." And Abraham raised his eyes and saw and, behold, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up as a burnt offering instead of his son (10-14).

Abraham, thank God, heeds this second, unambiguous command, the command of a messenger from God who orders Abraham *not* to kill. As Rashi comments, God commands Abraham to bring Isaac up to the mountain, and once he brought him up, God said to him, "Take him down."

In the history of religion, there is nothing particularly unusual about the first command, understood – in opposition to Rashi -- as God explicitly ordering Abraham to slaughter Isaac. Religions have routinely called for murder in their name. In ancient China, during the Shang dynasty and before the time of the humanism of the sage Confucius, when the emperor died, accepted religious practice required that those in the emperor's retinue be killed in order to accompany the emperor to the next life. Confucius objected to this practice. He objected even to the burying of human-shaped artifacts with the emperor, lest this practice lead people back to the inhumanity of the earlier practice. The god Moloch, in the ancient Near East, required child sacrifice, as did the gods worshipped by the Aztecs in Mexico as late as the sixteenth century of the Common Era. Catholic priests arranged for plays to be performed that dramatized the Akedah, and Abraham's listening to the voice of the angel to spare his son, in order to discourage the Aztecs from continuing the practice of child sacrifice. As we are about to enter the Promised Land, towards the end of *Devarim*, the fifth and final book of the *Chumash*, the five books of Moses, we are told that the current inhabitants of Canaan have lost their moral authority to remain in the Land in large part because they practiced child sacrifice (*Devarim* 18. 9-10).

But what of our passage here? Who is this messenger of God who orders Abraham to desist? In the Qur'an, Isaac (or Ishmael; it isn't clear which of the two brothers it is in the Qur'an) tells his father that you must place me face down (*liljabeeni*) on the altar. Why face down? One of Islam's most famous exegetes, al-Tabari (838-923), says that the son is telling his father that unless you place me face down, you will see my face and, once you do, once you look into my eyes, you won't be able to fulfill God's command. In our Akedah, is the messenger of God perhaps none other than the very face of Isaac saying to his father – "Avraham, Avraham" ("Father of many," or, perhaps, "Father of us all," "Father of us all") -- "thou shalt not kill"? For to truly see the vulnerable face of another human being is tantamount to hearing a voice, as if sent directly from God, commanding us *not* to kill. The face is a *mal'akh Adonai*, a messenger from God singling me out and commanding me to respond to, to be responsible for, the life of another human being who is unique and irreplaceable. (Those of you familiar with the work of

philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who saw the trace of God in the face of the Other, will correctly sense Levinas's presence in my interpretation of the Akedah.)

We blow the shofar, the ram's horn, on Rosh HaShanah. Abraham, in the end, sacrificed a ram instead of his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah, thereby initiating a new era for humankind: no longer will child sacrifice be permissible, no longer will human sacrifice be granted divine sanction. Our text does not go as far as Mahatma Gandhi's claim that not only human sacrifice, but animal sacrifice, as well, belongs to the realm of unacceptable violence, but Genesis 22 goes a very long way towards separating itself from ritual violence, towards a cherishing, instead, of the holy, the *kadosh*, which consists in obeying the command that I see the image of God in every human being.

So we have a link between the ram's horn, the shofar, and the commandment that forbids child sacrifice, that forbids ritual murder. And what a strangely powerful, piercing, mournful sound the ram's horn makes! Our Reconstructionist prayer book asks, "What does it take for us to hear the shofar's call? . . . Every time you witness the suffering of any living thing, realize that your own heart is crying out in pain but that you just can't hear it" (*Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*, p. 592). The Akedah calls us to be deep listeners, as Abraham became a deep listener, finally listening to and heeding the messenger of God, the face of Isaac, who cried out to Abraham, "Father of us all, Father of us all, thou shalt not kill! Look at me! How can you, in the name of the true and living God, possibly kill me?"

Abraham was at first grimly determined to go through with his task. But he then stopped and listened, as if he had heard the Shema, Israel: Listen, Israel, listen, Abraham! To listen deeply we must break with old habits, including old religious habits that permitted child sacrifice. We must have the courage to break with the familiar, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to be broken to pieces by our encounter with another human being, to whom we must respond, for whom we are responsible. Our prayer book (p. 591) offers the following moving derash on the sound of the shofar:

Each series of shofar blasts begins with *tekiyah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means "breakings." "I started off whole," the shofar speech says, "and I became broken." Then follows *teruah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: "I was entirely smashed to pieces." But each series has to end with a new *tekiyah*, promising wholeness once more. The shofar cries out a hundred times on Rosh HaShanah: "I was whole, I was broken, even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!"

Rosh HaShanah means the beginning of the year, but this translation of "rosh" as "beginning" is too abstract. "Head" of the year is perhaps more accurate. What makes a new year truly new? How do we measure the time of one year? What *is* time, anyway? Is time to be measured merely by our recording of the movements of the heavenly bodies? But wouldn't that be to view time in the morally passive manner of the astronomer or astrologer, such as Abraham was

alleged to have been in Mesopotamia before, in obedience to God's command, he began his risky journey west towards Canaan, towards what would be Israel? The person who views time merely as something to be measured would be an idolator, such as Abraham's father was reputed to have been. Based on the position of the sun and the moon, the beginning of the Jewish year is, technically speaking, the month of Nisan, which occurs in March or April. But is time the result of merely impersonal measurement, or is the time that matters the time that is created by our responsiveness to others, to the "rosh," to the head or to the face of our neighbor or of the stranger in our midst, for whom we are responsible, whose hurt and pain we must be broken by, as we are broken by the piercing *teruah* blast of the shofar?

Our prayer book tells us that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world and "recalls for us God's creation of the world in the beginning of time." "The traditional Torah reading for [the first day of] Rosh Hashanah," we are told, "is not the story of creation (Genesis 1:1) but rather the birth of Isaac, and the *haftarah* concerns the birth of Samuel – both tales of long-desired births to barren women." Our prayer book goes on to tell us that "there is a tradition that Rosh Hashanah is *not* the day the world was created." An early midrash "states that the world was created" not on Rosh Hashanah, which is the first day of the month of Tishri, but rather on the twenty-fifth day of the previous month, Elul. Rosh Hashanah would then be five days later, that is, the sixth day of creation, the day on which humans were created . . . Rosh Hashanah thus affirms the importance of human life, even of one single birth, as equivalent to God's creating the world" (*Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*, p. 481). Ah, how the world desperately needs this extraordinary Jewish humanism!

What we celebrate as Rosh HaShanah today is not called Rosh HaShanah in the Torah. It is referred to as Yom Teruah. Yom Teruah, the day of the *teruah* blast of the shofar, our Rabbis later claimed, is Rosh HaShanah, a beginning of a year of time that, for Judaism, gives meaning to time, that gives meaning to me, to the I who is commanded to be responsive to my son, my daughter, my neighbor, to the stranger, to the other person, the "rosh" made in God's image, who is unique and irreplaceable, like Abraham's beloved son Isaac.

L'Shanah Tovah!