

## **ROSH HA'SHANAH DAY**

Aggieland is as land of traditions, and what is true of Texas A&M is also true of our Hillel. Each year on the morning of Rosh Ha'Shanah we turn to perhaps the Bible's most mysterious tale. Just as in the Talmudic legend that we explored last night, this Biblical vignette is also terse: a mere 22 verses in length. Yet just as in the legend of the four rabbis who entered the garden, we find once again a rainbow of emotions: from despair and anger to hope and renewal, from family treason to family healing. This most powerful of all biblical tales is an accounting of eternal truths and temporal lies. The tale takes us from hope to despair and back to hope. This tale is of creation and of auto-destruction. It is grand in spirit and at the same time suicidal in nature. And just as last night we when dared to enter the mystical garden of civility and barbarity, today with the sun shining and the arrival of the dawn, we see what may at first appear to be the darker side of life, and learn that in life, nothing is ever quite as dark as it seems. Life is never static but ever-dynamic, and its flow takes us to death's darkness and creation's light.

This morning we turn to the Akedah, or as it is called in its English translation, "The Binding of Isaac". And just as Miguel Cervantes in *Don Quixote* would do so many century later, we enter the garden of life through its outer door: the portals of death and madness. The Akedah, which we read in its entirety tomorrow, is the second part of a vignette that causes every parent to cringe. More than a series of family tragedies, the Akedah touches our very souls: forcing us to examine our values and reassess our reasons for living. As a pivotal point in history, the Akedah changes everything including us. Until it occurred, life was hard but perhaps not tragic, after the Akedah, life would never be the same. To be called on to die is hard, to be called to sacrifice one's child goes beyond the human scope of emotions. Yet here, within Genesis, and on this day when we speak of creation and new beginnings, we read a tale of death and life, of despair and hope. What more frightening words could anyone hear than those G'd uttered to Abraham: "Kahach na et bincha, et yididachah asher ahavata, et Yitzach: Take your son, your only one, the one whom you love, yes namely Isaac and sacrifice him."

¿How would any of us have reacted to such a demand? In just a few sentences the Torah makes us live a parent's worse nightmare. Before the Akedah death for Abraham is a theoretical concept, after the Akedah it is a meta-reality. Abraham now knows that just as life can be destroyed, so too can

love and family, bonds and caring. After the Akedah death is recognized for what it is: a frightening reality transforming the future into the past and stealing it from the hands of the present. The story of the Akedah is one that is relived by every parent as mothers and fathers bid adieu to children who go off to war or as in the case of so many of our grandparents and great grand parents, to children forced to migrate knowing they would never return. To parent is to protect, to nurture, to create life not to surrender it, to parent is to build futures and not to bury them. It is Akedah that forces us to question our very role in the divine partnership between G'd and man and to reexamine the assumptions upon which our humanity rests. The Akedah reverses these life assumptions. To whom do you believe that Abraham owed his loyalty: to his Creator or to his son? Like so many parents who have had to walk in Abraham's shoes: ¿Could you have sent your child to his death even for a noble purpose? ¿Would you, like Cain, have attempted to flee the Divine decree or have argued with G'd? ¿Can one argue with G'd or is Abraham's silence symbolic of the fact that there are realities in this world over which we have no control? Is Judaism not a religion based on arguing with G'd and even disobeying the Divine will?

Read as a single tale the Akedah is filled with awe; read within the context of Genesis, its power is staggering. Think for a moment of that terrible night when Abraham receives G'd's ultimate demand. ¿What data did Abraham have upon which to base his decision to comply or to disobey? ¿Did Abraham have a sense of history? ¿Would the knowledge of history have helped him even if he had such a record? ¿Is it not true that to predict the future does not mean that we can change the future? As Abraham sat and pondered, we wonder if he ¿Was he aware that he lived in the post-diluvium age? ¿Did Abraham know about destruction Sodom and Gomorra's destruction? To answer these questions with a "yes," is to infuse the text with a sense of history and a limitation of options; to answer it with a "no" is to condemn humanity to the role of lesser creatures, incapable of the transmission of knowledge, and continually forced to reinvent the stages of human morality. Is not one of the abiding themes or Jewish thought the ever-urgent need for human beings, to maintain their capacity for independent thought and action, to stand up for what they believe even if that belief means challenging or defying G'd? In fact, the Hebrew Bible depicts almost every one of our major heroes and heroine as independent-minded, disobedient, and even contentious. Our Bible portrays Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph's brothers, Moses and Aaron, Gideon and Samuel, prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, and famous biblical figures such as: Daniel, Mordechai and Esther as confronting authority and breaking not only the king's laws and commands, but even those of G'd.

For this ability to stand up to authority they are not censured but praised! So why was Abraham so willing to bend to G'd's will?

The Akedah is a tale that forces us to confront our freedom. In fact, we might call the Akedah the story in which the "birth of choice" was born on the day when we celebrate the birth of creation. Is there real creation without choice? Were not Adam and Eve different from all of G'd's other creatures in that they had the right to choose between right and wrong, to seek knowledge or even to revolt? We, their offspring, also must choose between self-gratification and duty, between self-fulfillment and communal responsibilities. What makes the Akedah so powerful is that it presents us with one of life's basic dilemmas: teaching us that choice is not simply the act of answering a multiple choice exam correctly. To be human is to accept the fact that in life, sometimes there are simply no good options. The Akedah is a text that teaches us, among its many lessons, that free-will means the moral imperative to choose, even when the choice is not between what is right and wrong, but instead it is between what is bad and less bad. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Akedah is called the most psychological of all Biblical tales, for it forces us to ponder such queries as: ¿Was Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac made out of free will, or fear? ¿Does any one of us really have freedom of action or are we simply the sum of our personal histories reduced to a psychic form of determinism or programmed by instinct as if we were a lower animal? Judaism's answer is that all of us are free to weigh options, to choose to obey or to disobey, to hear the Divine voice or to hear another's cries. The rabbis assumed that even in these most difficult of circumstances, Abraham still had options and thus, would have to accept the consequences of his actions. For this reason the rabbis long insisted that to be a leader is to weight one's options and then to accept the consequences of one's actions. Is this weighing of options and learning to live with the consequences in a less than perfect world the reason why we read the Akedah on this day of creation? Should we read the tale not only as the story of one man's dilemma but as a marker in humanity's collective striving toward the realization of G'd's role for us in the process of creation. By forcing Abraham to choose, the Akedah teaches us that the privilege of autonomy is not a myth, but a defining characteristic of our humanity. One lesson of the Akedah is that life is not reason versus belief, but the religious commandment to accept the notion of autonomy.

There is still another side to the Akedah – those of feelings. The Rabbis state the principal forthrightly: the price of autonomy is often loneliness – to choose is not only to reject, but also to be

rejected. To be free means that we must learn to accept not only the good, but also the bad; to accept both accolades and blame. The lesson of the Akedah is that all too often many of us fail to accept responsibility for our actions. ¿Are we fearful of guilt and unwilling to carry our shame and therefore we set ourselves apart from others and drift in a sea of selfishness and egocentricity? The Akedah challenges and teaches us that it is our role to be active participants in the ongoing act of creation. It is our task to become partners with G'd, to be willing to live with uncertainty and at the same time certain in the knowledge that ours is a world in need of continual acts of perfection.

There is no way that we will ever know what went through Abraham's mind on that night. ¿Did he wish that he had never been born? ¿Did he think through his options carefully or act out of pure emotion? Those answers will remain a mystery for all eternity, but we know the answers to our own struggles and how we react to our individual life's crises.

Perhaps Abraham and Rabbi Ben Zoma, the rabbi who entered the Pardes and went mad are one in the same? Did Ben Zoma come to understand in the garden, that there would be a time when fathers would have to make often painful decisions for their children, and that the price of freedom might be madness? Or did Ben Zoma get to the garden and realize that like the modern Middle East, it was a land filled with so much death, that madness in a land of death was the sanest of options?

As we begin 5773, may we have the courage to seek the best available answers in an ever evolving world, realizing that we all live in gardens filled with evil and filled with good, madness and sanity.  
Amen