

## ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 5770

### Defining Love given Abraham's Experience of the Akedah

#### "Love your neighbour as yourself..."

Rabbi Johanna Hershenson

As many know, in this New Year Mark and I and our daughters are embarking on a risky new adventure. Despite the bittersweet nature of moving on, realizing the life-long dream of an artist's life is an exciting endeavour.

Our journey in the coming year began right here with the very special Torah scroll from which we read weekly. Whilst following the road taken by our Czech Memorial Scroll #1220, we interviewed Jews in Europe, the United States, and New Zealand, about how they relate to Torah in their own lives. One question we asked folks repeatedly was what they thought was the most important teaching in the entire Torah. Overwhelmingly, the answer we received from connected, contemporary Jews was: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

While not surprising, I find this connection to Torah fascinating. For Jews, the strongest religious imperative seems to be related to our shared humanity, caring for one another, being what many of us would describe as a "good person."

Of course, on the surface one might fear this understanding a dilution of Judaism. Being a good person is not limited to identification with one's faith community. You can be a good person as a Jew, Christian, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, so on and so forth... Yet as people discussed their understanding of the teaching, this sort of generalized ethical monotheism never came up.

Love your neighbour as yourself is most important to Jews because it requires figuring out what it means to be commanded to love your neighbour specifically and qualitatively *as yourself*.

More highly valued than the virtuous practice of the commandment appears to be the engagement with the riddle, the puzzle, the hook, the invitation to reflect, think, consider, and imagine: what *does* it mean to love your neighbour as yourself?

What are the implications of loving your neighbour as yourself? Can love even *be* commanded? Can love be forced? Summoned? Measured? Compared? How does one love oneself? Is love like respect? Loyalty? Acceptance? Affection?

The Akedah, the story of the Binding of Isaac, from which we read in the Torah this morning, might be the moment in which our Patriarch, Abraham, discovers these questions about love in his own life.

Michael Lerner, founder and editor of Tikkun Magazine, wrote a book, now decades ago, called Jewish Renewal. It contains a chapter every Jew should read on Abraham and the significance of the moment of the Akedah, the moment in which the trial of offering his son, Isaac, for sacrifice ends.

Lerner asks us to examine the Akedah within the context of all the mythology of Abraham's life-story. Between the lines of the sparse narrative in the Torah, the rabbis infuse insight on Abraham's character, his evolving relationship with God, and the consequences of his actions and the words he failed to share with his loved ones, *Midrash*.

The rabbis tell us that Abraham's challenging ideas about monotheism were foretold in the stars and that the Chaldean emperor, Nimrod, sought to have him killed at birth. Abraham's parents hid him in a cave in order to protect him from the emperor.

In complete isolation from human touch, Abraham reasons that there must be something beyond that which can be seen and felt, heard, inhaled, and tasted that oversees and protects, brings into being and forces into extinction. He pledges loyalty to that force and refers to it by the appellation, God.

Still... imagine, the infant Abraham, alone in a cave. Never to feel the loving touch of his mother, the playful banter of his father... Brilliant and unique to be sure... Also detached and inexperienced in forming bonds with other human beings...

In his teens, Abraham rejoins his birth family and simply can't quite fit in. Tending his father's idol shop in the shoo, Abraham chastises customers for their foolish reliance on gods of stone and wood.

Unable to endure the illogical attachment his father's customers have to the etched and sculpted objects, Abraham in a perhaps hormonally driven rage of adolescence, destroys all the idols but one, the largest one.

When his father returns to find the shards and splinters of his merchandise, Abraham blames the idol seemingly holding the smoking gun, as it were. Cornered, not wanting to call Abraham's bluff and thereby prove himself a hypocrite in the eyes of his son, Abraham's father calls in the authorities and has Abraham imprisoned by the very emperor Nimrod who sought to kill him in infancy.

Can you imagine the sense of betrayal and abandonment, the hurt and resentment Abraham must feel? Perhaps it is no wonder that this severely injured man all these years later is capable of finding himself in the predicament we read about, face to face with his own son, his only son, the son he loves, bound to an altar... Knife in hand, raised and ready to strike until the angel intervenes and saves Isaac.

Michael Lerner suggests that Abraham operates in a cloud of disassociation until the moment he makes eye contact with Isaac when looking for his throat. What the Torah calls the angel of the Lord, Lerner might call Abraham's awakening.

In this moment Abraham is no longer following orders, but has stepped outside himself and looked back to see. He sees. He sees his son. He sees himself. He sees his father. He sees himself again, only as the child and not the parent. He sees his son again, only not as an extension of his own destiny, but as a child about to be cut off from the living by his own father. He feels for Isaac. He feels with Isaac. He loves Isaac. He loves Isaac as himself.

It is in this moment that the angel calls, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, nor lay a single mark upon him." And Abraham doesn't. The ram whose horns are stuck in the thicket replaces Isaac for the sacrificial slaughter.

The angel continues, "Now I know you stand in awe of God, since you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me." *Lo chasachta et bincha, et ychidcha, mimeni*. What if we read *mimeni* not, from Me, but *mimeni*, in contrast to Me.

In several midrashic variations of this story, Abraham is resentful about working up the courage and bravado necessary to do this horrid deed and then have it called off in the last minute. He's not sure that the voice calling him to stop is God's at all. Perhaps it is the adversary trying to lead him astray.

It seems as though Abraham, in the moment of truth in which he turns to the ram rather than his son, experiences an awakening. The lesson is not merely that God does not require human sacrifice, but that fearing God, standing in awe of God implies stepping outside obedient service to see the humanity in the other. It is when Abraham feels with Isaac, when Abraham loves Isaac as himself, that we the audience to the drama re-enacted year after year, breathe a sigh of relief.

Still, son and father emerge from the incident forever estranged. They don't exchange words or lock eyes ever again. Sarah, Abraham's wife, dies of grief

when she hears what Abraham has done, or at least set out to do.

Abraham's awakening doesn't bring about a return to normalcy. There are consequences for his actions that don't disappear just because he wakes up from his stupor of obedience or ambition, or whatever it was that allowed him to find himself in his predicament in the first place.

And still, Abraham learns from the experience and becomes a better person, now that he can access love for his neighbour as himself. He settles in Beersheva. After he appropriately and respectfully buries Sarah, Abraham remarries, has a new family, and becomes a good father. Albeit from a safe distance, Abraham continues to reach out to Isaac, eventually securing him a good wife and his own shot at learning to love others as himself.

*V'ahavta l'ra'echa kamocho...* Love your neighbour as yourself. This teaching, so many Jews elevate above all the other lessons in the Torah, is ultimately about compassion. Not pity, but compassion.

It is about stepping into the shoes of the other. It is about feeling *with* the other what the other is feeling. Imagining ourselves in the situation of the other and acting accordingly, *this* is what it means to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Abraham figures it out late in life. He can't win Sarah or Isaac back. Still he atones and quietly lives a peaceful life for the rest of his days.

Abraham is not too hard for us to understand. We, too, have failed in ways that we can't ever correct. We, too, have made mistakes that we could not undo.

Sometimes we employ great discipline and never repeat those errors. Other times we don't even recognize our own wrongdoing or that we've contributed to the suffering we experience and inflict on others altogether.

We are, after all, easily distracted. Despite all the information constantly coming at us, we often don't have enough of the information we need when we need it. Accidents happen. Unintended consequences of our conduct come back and bite us... and hard.

"Love your neighbour as yourself," is a religious imperative. It transcends reason and rational thought.

#### **FIRST**

We employ our imaginations: what would I do if I were that person? We leave the safety of distance and privacy and enter the terrain of relationship.

#### **SECOND**

We process the information via our emotional intelligence: How would I feel? Now we take pause and experience what it would feel like to be the other, our

neighbour in a given situation. This is an act of love, compassion, empathy, sympathy...

### **THIRD**

We associate the feeling with our memory banks: When have I felt that before? What did I do? How did people respond? How did I feel then? Do I know of this happening to somebody else? Did the story inspire me or disappoint me? What ending might be even better?

Now we've taken a real interest. We've partnered. We've engaged. Whether for a fleeting moment or a long journey, we've narrowed the distance between us. Our neighbour's problem is our problem. Our neighbour's celebration is our celebration.

We see eye to eye and in this moment, the angel calls out, "Do not hurt the boy..." Our shared humanity makes us responsible, one for the other. We are partners. We are one and the same. "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the rest is commentary. Go and learn.

Shanah tovah.