

Rosh Hashanah Shacharit 5767

Real Faith

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It's an old Jewish joke...nonetheless it is one that reminds me about the reality of the work of religion.

There's a rabbi and a taxi driver waiting in line to enter the pearly gates. The angels ask the rabbi to step aside a minute, there's an issue with his application for entry. While the rabbi waits, he notices the angels quickly and graciously usher the taxi driver through the gates and into heaven.

"Excuse me," says the rabbi. "How is it possible that I, a rabbi, stand here waiting...after all my years of study, observing the mitzvot, and giving counsel, judging difficult cases between neighbors and keeping Judaism alive in our time?" "Hmmm... yes, responds one of the angels. Yes, many people came to your shul and learned from you a great deal about Judaism. But you must consider many people sat in this man's taxi and they prayed to God as if their lives depended on it."

I know it's a bad joke. I know you've heard it before. So why tell it this morning? I want us to face the reality of our time and our religious practice. Let's be honest...

Last night we began to explore the meaning of religious quest. I attempted to make the case that there exists in us, as a species, a longing to unite with others, to experience connection, so as to transcend the harsh sense that we are ultimately alone.

This morning, it is my intention for us to consider the notion of faith, given our expansion of the notion of religious quest.

This morning's Torah reading presents Abraham in an exemplary affirmation of faith as a model for our own spiritual exercise. All too often we draw conclusions from these stories that are neat and tidy, even nice and comforting, but wildly divergent from our experience in the world.

Abraham is tested with a most cruel trial. Is he willing to take his son to an undisclosed location and slaughter the boy in the name of this God whom only he hears? The rabbis and religious scholars as well as philosophers and early rationalists tell us that God is not merely testing Abraham's faith, but making an example of him, demonstrating that faith to the other nations of the world.

On the one hand, our sages bend over backwards to excuse Abraham's willingness to slaughter his son. They tell us that the event is necessary for establishing an enlightened case against child sacrifice of the time. But at the same time, our tradition appears to celebrate Abraham's capacity to commit an unspeakable crime.

The philosopher, Kierkegaard, is perhaps the most articulate in developing a defense for of Abraham's so-called act of faith. He tells us that Abraham finds himself in the very lonely and therefore courageous position of believing in two truths which reason tells us cannot simultaneously be. Abraham believes that he will father a multitudinous nation through his beloved son, Isaac, AND Abraham believes that he will slaughter his beloved son, Isaac, on the top of Mt. Moriah. We, who cannot possibly understand Abraham's willingness to accept the impossible coexistence of these two

realities, put our intellect at ease by relying on rabbinic commentaries that suggest Abraham knew that God would do something at the last minute to save the day.

With all due respect, this is exactly the kind of reasoning that makes the joke with which I began this lesson so pertinent to our discussion about true religious quest. If Abraham's leap of faith is that this supernatural force will transform the impossible into the possible, then we have defined religious quest as a yearning for magic and miracles and out-of-this-world experiences.

I would suggest that, for us, there can only exist an intellectual dissonance with this sort of faith. Is it any wonder that pray, pray as if our lives depended on it, only in times of fear and danger...like the back of the driver's taxi, or as my grandfather described his experience in WW2, in fox-holes.

No, I don't accept the teaching that Abraham's act of faith had anything to do with his belief that there would be some magical divine intervention that would allow two impossible realities to coexist. In fact, I would suggest that this is the theology of people either whose lives are ruled by fear or worse, who cultivate fear in others so as to assert power over them.

Of course the truth of the matter is that most of us fit into these two categories. We experience cruelty in our world. We experience it in our homes and we witness it in the gratuitous violence that permeates our newspaper headlines and television and movie screens.

It is a reasonable and honest mistake to think faith is something that links us to the supernatural fantasies we create to cope with problems we don't know how to solve.

But Judaism and Torah, provide another framework within which we might reconsider the nature of faith.

Michael Lerner writes in his book, Jewish Renewal:

The world we inherit is deeply flawed. Yet, according to Judaism, its flaws are not part of its essence. God according to the creation story in Genesis, looked at the world, "and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Michael Lerner suggests that God's declaration that the creation is good means that:

The distortions, the evil, the cruelty, the class structures, the imperialism, the murder, the rape, the anger and hatred – these are not built into the fundamental structure of reality, and they are not inevitable. (p.23)

If they are not inevitable, they can be worked out. And herein, lies a foundation for optimism.

It seems to me faith in magical divine intervention is child's play in contrast to the possibility of cultivating a faith that evil, pain and suffering are not necessary. Rather, there is an innate value and equality that pervades the very physical and imperfect reality we call the here and now.

The fact that God calls the creation "very good," despite the apparent *tohu vavohu*, chaos, makes possible the belief that evil, while it may exist, is not a part of the fabric of being. It is not inevitable. It is not necessary. And, it can be undone.

We do not deny our experience of evil, of pain and suffering. But by making it clear that pain and suffering, that evil, is not an ontological

necessity, Judaism puts forth a concept of transcendence that can occur in this world, rather than in some realm we can't know until we die.

You see, rather than transcend this world as a reward for faith, that something better exists somewhere else; we are called to recognize something better here and now. A mature faith is one that affirms God's reaction to the creation, "and behold, it was very good." Within the framework of this faith, transcendence becomes a psychological, political, ethical, and spiritual continuum, a practical means by which we empower ourselves through contemplation and subsequent deeds, to heal and transform the suffering, injustice, and cruelty we inflict on one another. We transcend our childhood fantasies of escaping a world we believe to be fundamentally flawed and therefore not within our ability or responsibility to heal. We grow up, spiritually.

Let's consider Abraham's journey in life, up until the moment of this morning's Torah reading. While in his mother's womb, an adviser of Nimrod the Chaldean emperor, predicts that Abraham will have ideas that will endanger the throne. Nimrod decides that Abraham must be killed as soon as he is born. Instead his parents in an effort to save his life put him in a cave. He spends the first eight years of his life in complete isolation from human contact, and touch. In this isolation he cultivates the very ideas Nimrod's adviser predicted, that there is value in life itself as a reflection of a shared source of being beyond the gods worshipped in Chaldea, and beyond the purview of Nimrod the emperor of Chaldea.

After being re-united with his family, Abraham in adolescence works for his father who sells idols in the marketplace. Abraham, conflicted by his understanding that there is a God more powerful than wood and stone carvings, smashes the idols in his father's shop and challenges his father to admit that the family business is just that, business and not religious truth. His father turns him over to Nimrod to be executed.

Wow, and I thought I had a difficult and painful childhood!

Despite Abraham's rightful fame for recognizing this intangible God, he is raised in the same world we know. It is a world in which cruelty to others is far more common than a mutual recognition of value in every person and a subsequent nurture and love response. Abraham's experience with God is clearly flawed by his reality, his upbringing.

Abraham has no problem prostituting his wife to local kings in order to accumulate wealth to get him started in this new land to which God has led him. Abraham seems heartless in his willingness to send Hagar and his first son, Ishma'el, off into the wilderness quite possibly to die, in response to Sarah's jealousy. Abraham does not say a single word in rebuke to God about the command to slaughter Isaac, his beloved son, even after we see he had no problem arguing with God on behalf of the ever diminishing prospect of there being innocent people, strangers, in Sodom and Gomorrah.

While in many ways, Abraham is revolutionary and exemplary in his conception of God's presence in the universe; he often fails to recognize the divine in the people around him.

And so we return to our moment of truth...the climactic point of our narrative this morning. Abraham has bound Isaac to the wood. He has lifted the knife. Presumably he looks at Isaac so as to see where to pierce the knife, and he is frozen.

“Don’t do it,” he hears. “Don’t make a single mark on the boy,” he hears.

I return to Michael Lerner’s suggestion that faith is about believing that the creation is good and that there are no necessary evils except as a consequence of the fear and greed we manufacture, even for the purpose of protecting ourselves in this cruel world. It is possible, Lerner teaches, that we find in Genesis a biblical theory about the origins of violence:

Cruelty is made possible when human beings do not recognize in one another the image of God that is the essence of their own being – and hence turn away from others; do not hear their pain. Once this process begins, it builds upon itself, becomes a powerful force that is transferred from generation to generation...

As generations and centuries pass, the habit of cruelty becomes embodied in social institutions...

Eventually people begin to forget that it could ever be another way. The cruel rule the world, and those with the greatest ease in acting cruelly seem to have the greatest power and greatest success...

And, herein, lies Abraham’s great act of faith. In the world that shaped him, slaughtering a child in the name of a god, not to mention using other people, as means for achieving one’s aspirations, was a reasonable thing to do.

Nevertheless Abraham recognized something in Isaac at the crucial moment. Abraham’s act of faith was his decision to be guided by his belief that there is some force or presence that ascribes value to our very being. He witnessed divinity in Isaac, and therefore he recognized Isaac’s humanity. And he dropped the knife.

Abraham teaches us not to accommodate ourselves to a world that accepts cruelty as a painful reality. Abraham’s act of faith lies in his conscious choice to reject that the cruelty internalized in him, was necessary or an innate component of his being. He demonstrates for us, each Rosh Hashanah, the possibility of transcendence in the here and now, the possibility of liberating ourselves from habit and history.

What better model for the possibilities we seek during this season of introspection and renewal? As we make the effort to transform our own failures into wisdom and opportunities for growth, Abraham calls us to pay attention to the true fabric of our being, the value of each and every one of us because of the fact that we are.

It’s like the pilot who flies a plane according to a specific flight plan. Weather and air traffic require the pilot often to detour from the predetermined flight plan. But a skilled pilot returns to the course. The flight plan, even though it appears to be null and void due to physical realities in the moment, remains the flight plan nonetheless.

Religious quest, connection and experience of our interrelatedness, is our flight plan. Pain, suffering, and cruelty are physical realities that force us to retreat from one another, to protect ourselves or those for whom we feel responsible in a given moment, to detour from our flight plan.

Acts of faith are gestures in which we remember the innate value and therefore equality of all parts of the creation. We remember that God saw, and “behold it was very good.”

Ken y'hi ratzon... May it be God's will that faith demands of us no abdication of the mind, but the possibility instead of a here and now liberated from anger, fear, greed, hatred, and violence. May it be our will to manifest our potential as God's partners in an ongoing process of creation, or evolution of our species. Amen.