

a d'var: Akedah  
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By the day of the Akedah Abraham and Sarah have almost completed their  
prophetic missions:

They have twice walked new paths to which they have been called.

Abraham has fathered Ishmael. Sarah, heeding her call, has sent him out,  
to his destiny.

In old age, with laughter, Abraham and Sarah, have conceived a child, Isaac,  
whom they love.

To the names Abram and Sara a letter's breath has been added.

Abraham and Sarah.

A gentle sigh/sign of life has ennobled their identity.

They are now who they were born to become.

So why this Akedah?? This Binding? This agonizing so-called 'trial'?  
And why is the retelling of this binding central to our celebration of the New Year,  
and the birth of the world?

I suggest: The Akedah is not merely Abraham's trial.

The Akedah is for the sake of Isaac, the one who is bound, and freed.

And Isaac's Akedah is for our sake, to be comfort in times of our binding,  
and aid in our freeing from both identifiable and ineffable bonds.

Oliver Sacks, as the number of his years approached wrote:

'I am now face to face with dying, but I am not finished with living.'

Isaac is granted the challenging realization of mortality at an early age,  
that death, 'a necessary end', as the bard reminds us, 'will come when it will come'.

Yet Isaac understands and accepts that he is not finished with living,

so long as living remains his choice:

his choice to be intensely alive:

to live with a sense of eternity tempered by knowledge of transience.

The Akedah offers Isaac as our guide in this delicate, necessary lesson.

Ta-Nahisi Coates might well have been addressing Isaac, bound,

a knife in his father's hand hovering above him, writing:

"Your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life"

When are we more vulnerable than at the view from the edge of life.

Nobel laureate Imre Kertesz, remembering the walls of Auschwitz confesses:

'I experienced my most radical moments of happiness

in the concentration camp...To be very close to death is a kind of happiness.

Surviving becomes the greatest freedom of all.'

The first time in Biblical discourse that we hear the word 'love',  
is in Abraham's relationship to Isaac: as a voice calls:  
'Take your son, your only son, whom you love'  
And Abraham does.  
Action is meaningful when it stems from the urging of a voice within:  
a covenant of conscience.

Why ask a father to constrict his beloved son ISAAC,  
a name given by GOD,  
on a rock, seemingly for the inexplicable tragedy of sacrifice?  
ISAAC, meaning: he shall laugh - emblem of his laughter,  
of Sarah his mother's, when his birth in her old age was promised...  
Laughter must be an essential elixir, even on this rock of Mt Moriah,  
bursting forth, opening to the world, engendering, affirming, and sustaining life.  
The psalmist reminds us: make a joyful sound.  
At Isaac's conception a COVENANT is sealed in joy.  
JOY: the core of humanity, the crux of holiness.

Judaism offers us three generations of Patriarchs,  
each a prismatic refraction of human potential.  
The prophet MICAH (6:8) might reflect their roles thus when he proposes:  
What does the LORD require of you:  
To do justice: ABRAHAM  
To love kindness: JACOB  
To walk humbly with your God: ISAAC

Isaac, central in our ritual recitations of Patriarchs. offers us a breath  
between the voices of his father and his son.  
Language is the synthesis of sound and space.  
Communion is incomprehensible without both.  
Isaac's wisdom is easily underestimated, as he neither shouts nor shines.  
Prophecy, that which is true for all time, is manifest in deed, as well as in word.

Abraham and Jacob wander far, to learn, and to lead.  
Isaac, the private Patriarch, has no need to roam.  
By his binding, Isaac is aware of the fragility of the dream of life,  
By knowing he is loved, he is strengthened in that dream.  
Love sustains trust in the meaning of life.

Isaac's wondrous birth has shaped his spirit: unexpected delight happens.  
His imminent death has shaped his perspective: unexpected pain happens.  
Isaac knows that life involves risk. And yet, and yet,  
Isaac's Akedah, his trial, does not gainsay joy.  
It is his transformative catalyst to acceptance, and contentment.

Acceptance is not indifference, which Elie Wiesel defines the opposite of love, Acceptance signifies respect, awareness that both sides can be right, or, at least, have the right: a willingness to see the other as equal. Such wisdom is the hand of humility, and the reach of compassion. Isaac knows that, despite all challenge, 'love is reality infused with the idea of God'.

Isaac's first recorded words form a question to Abraham - or to God: 'Father, where is the animal to be sacrificed?'

Isaac questions, but does not judge.

A question makes room for the other, acknowledges his value, welds a generative bond between I and Thou - wherein philosopher Martin Buber discovers the nature of God.

At the moment of crisis, the moment between life and death, Isaac's attention is heightened, intensified.

He stirs at the slight sense of the breath of a ram in the thicket.

At Isaac's stirring, his father turns aside.

Abraham sees the ram. The bonds are loosened. Isaac lives.

Jewish prayer tradition is expressed in binding head and arm:

with t'fillin, phylacteries. Deuteronomy (6:8)

'YOU SHALL BIND THEM AS A SIGN' a concentration of mind and might, a symbolic experience of bondage.....and release from bondage.

ELIE WIESEL: of the binding of Isaac, and the miraculous happenstance of the presence of the animal to be sacrificed in Isaac's stead pleads:

'can the saving of a child happen again.'

With communal release from bondage in Egypt Judaism is born.

Isaac's Akedah prefigures that release, with prophetic urgency.

His release from bondage is as great a birth: the promise of a people,

and an image of personal freeing from physical, social, and psychological bonds.

Isaac's mother, Sarah, is the first example of a seemingly barren woman who eventually bears a son - later we learn of the delayed fertility

of Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah. These wives beseech God for a child - but:

Isaac is the only husband who prays for a child and whose prayer is answered.

Does Isaac also signify the female, the SHECHINA of human nature - of God's...

Isaac does not need to see to perceive. He is blind in old age.

We do not need to see the face of God. Therefore, we cannot see the face of God.

Isaiah (60) tells us: Inner light is not extinguishable.

We are called to LISTEN, SHMA,

at waking and at the moment of eternal sleep,  
to sense that God is one. And God is here, with us.  
Today we are aided in emulating Isaac's awareness,  
stirred, not a by a whisper of breath, but by the haunting cry of the shofar,  
horn of another ram, calling us to attention.  
Attention, as poet Mary Oliver measures, is the beginning of devotion.

Isaiah declares that God assures us 'YAD V'SHEM'. a hand and a name..  
God proclaims the name: Isaac.  
Unlike those of other patriarchs, Isaac's name does not change. –  
It persists, immutable.  
Isaac's identity is secure even, as in today's parsha,  
his existence seems most precarious.

Adam's, man's, first power is naming of the animals,  
identifying, respecting, individuality among community.  
Traditionally, one of the four reasons Jews were freed from Egyptian slavery  
is that we maintained our names.

An alternate translation of God's promise of 'YAD/hand -and - SHEM/ name' is,  
'MONUMENT' and name.  
The ancient temple, monument and metaphor of Jewish substance and essence,  
was built on Mt Moriah,  
the site of Isaac's binding, and of his release.  
With inhumane carnage, Shoah perpetrators injected numbers into arms -  
in futile effort to obliterate our names, delegitimize our humanity.  
Yad v'Shem is the memorial monument, perpetuating in stone  
the honoured names of those who released Jews from the Shoah's murderous grip.

Genesis (24-25) limns Isaac's later life:  
His wife, Rebekah, is chosen for him by the servant Eliezar.  
Yet Isaac is the only monogamous patriarch, assuming not even a concubine.  
His favored son, Esau, is usurped by twin brother, Jacob.  
Isaac does not seem to know, or doubt, God's plan for his sons (Gen27)  
and of Rebekah's conspiracy to switch his blessing.  
Isaac's prosperous life (26:1-33), the longest of the patriarchs,  
closes at 180 years, attended by his now reconciled sons (35:27-29).

Sustained by the confluence of joy, vulnerability, and love,  
Isaac offers us the blessing of trust.  
He senses to make what IS, this now, this life, MATTER.  
Isaac shows us as much about GOD as it is possible to know.

This Rosh Hashana may we be attentive to Isaac's laughter in the call of the shofar.  
May we find solace in the divine paradox of the Akedah:  
Mortality is life's precious gift: the only infinite bond is love.

l'shana tova