

R”H Morning 2019/20 - 5780 - How Will We Be Judged?

We humans are natural storytellers. We create stories about our lives to understand ourselves, we explain ourselves to others through stories, and we make sense of the world through stories. We Jews have a few “master stories:” for example, the Exodus from Egypt, how an enslaved people, under the most degrading conditions, were ultimately redeemed by God and restored to their homeland to build a model community for all of mankind. Or the one we will read in a few minutes, the *Akedat Yizhak*, the story of the binding and the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. of God’s unbearable demand on Abraham to kill his son, his favored one, the son he loves. It is a story of an incomprehensible request and, at the same time, a story of profound and abiding faith, for, as Maimonides writes in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, it “belongs to the class of actions which are believed to be contrary to human feelings,” and yet Abraham hastens to do God’s will.

This story, as unbearable as it is, contains within it, on the positive side, the promise of a future fulfilled, of keeping hope alive when everything seems hopeless, of the power and sanctity of faith in something greater than ourselves and, on the negative side, of the dangers of blind faith and fanaticism, or valuing belief over humanity. We Jews exist between these two stories: between the poles of an incomprehensibly cruel fate, slavery and degradation, the command to kill our children, those we love most, our future, and the pole of redemption, of a future fulfilled, liberation from slavery, a ram found in a thicket, to be sacrificed in place of the beloved child. We live within these stories of blind hopelessness of the present and the promise of better future

Last night I spoke about Rosh Hashanah as *Yom Ha Din* the Day of Judgement when we are all judged for our actions. It too is a story that God has recorded in the *Sefer Zichronot*, the great book of remembrance where all our deeds are recorded, and all of us pass before God for judgement. The High Holy Days too, establish these two poles: today Rosh Hashanah, when our shortcomings are so apparent and Yom Kippur when we are forgiven, despite our shortcomings.

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I mention all this because, to me at this time, I feel our nation is way over on the side of unbearable cruelty. On this morning, when we read the Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac, I feel in my heart that I would not be doing justice to our Torah or to this Rosh Hashanah, this Yom ha Din, this Day of Judgment if I did not point out the parallel between God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his only son Isaac and the separation of the children of immigrants and refugees from their parents at the border, and the imprisonment of these children in camps.

Now I want to be clear, I am not talking about immigration policy. I happen to believe that liberal immigration policies are good for this country. That most immigrants contribute far more to this country than they receive and are far less likely to commit crimes than native born citizens. But, I am biased. I am the child of immigrants. I am also biased because, as a Jew and a child of parents who fled Europe for their lives and only survived because they found safe haven in England, I know that if the United States had not passed its draconian and restrictive immigration law of 1924 - that was specifically written to keep Jews out of the United States, among other undesirable groups like Italians and Slavs - perhaps millions of Jews might have avoided annihilation during the Second World War. We will never know of course, but it was a possibility that never came to pass... because there was no room for us here at that time. Just like there is no room here now for those seeking a safe haven, whether for a better life, or to escape political instability, or fleeing crime and gangs.

Despite my biases and my point of view. I also know there is another point of view. That large numbers of immigrants are not good for the country. That they take jobs from Americans who are already here, they water-down our culture, they do not assimilate. I disagree with this point of view but I understand it and I am happy to engage in a debate about what is best for our country.

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But, and this is the critical point, there is a difference between a legitimate disagreement over what is best for the country and a government policy that is cruel and immoral. And on this, we cannot equivocate, nor can we cannot debate, because we cannot justify separating children from their parents and imprisoning them. Isaac turns to his father and asks, “Father! Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” We are touched to our core by this question because we feel Isaac’s confusion and pain, as a helpless child who does not understand what is happening to him, and turns to the person he trusts most in the world for an answer. I know we feel his suffering. Now, imagine that helplessness, that confusion, and that fear multiplied by thousands. By every child that our government has separated from their parents...

This policy of child separation, on its own, negates the entire anti-immigration argument. A political point of view that employs immoral policies loses its legitimacy as does the government that carries out that policy. In a healthy democracy we can debate differences of opinion over what is best for our country. But we cannot debate cruelty, because cruelty is unacceptable, period. This is sadism and it is being done in our name.

By the way, family separations have not stopped, as the government claims. They are continuing, despite our government’s denials. According to the Texas Tribune of July 19, 2019 as many as five children a day are still being separated from their parents at the border. Even our government knows what they are doing is wrong, so they lie to cover it up. Or perhaps they lie because they fear our anger. That we might turn them out. So they lie, or they deny, or they are silent. Our Congress is silent, the press is silent, and we are silent. Our silence is deafening.

If Isaac’s pain moves you, if Abraham’s willingness to kill his son troubles you, then please do not be silent. I have written letters to our president. I am trying to get a meeting with Mark DeSalnier, our congressional representative to ask him - to his face -

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what he is doing to end this policy. I give money to HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Carla, my wife, has led a group of volunteers to Tijuana to provide medical and acupuncture services to the refugees that are stuck there. I am not telling you this to brag, *has v'shalom*. I am sharing this with you because there are things that we can all do to try to bring this to a stop. I know you will vote in the next election and hopefully this bad government will be turned out of office. But that is not sufficient. I have learned from experience that it often doesn't matter what we do, as long as we do something to make our voice heard to end a policy we know is wrong. Citizens coming together have changed this country for the better. That is what ended segregation. That is what ended the VietNam War. That is what can end this too. The truth is, I don't know what to do. But I just know I must do something and I imagine if we harnessed the power of our congregation we could come up with some good ideas.

Today is the day of judgement. This is a dark time in our land. When Abraham stood over Isaac, can you imagine how hopeless he must have felt, how torn? At that moment, he did not see the ram caught in the thicket, his vision was blinded, it took an angel calling out to stay his hand. No angel is going to save us now. One thing Jewish history has taught us, is that the time of divine intervention, of miracles, is past. If we see something that we know is wrong it is up to us to stop it. Here is what Jeremiah told us 2,500 years ago, “Thus said the LORD: Do what is just and right; rescue the exploited from their oppressor; do not wrong the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; commit no lawless act, and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place.” We know what we must do. Our tradition tells us. Hillel said, “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” In other words, do the right thing, be a mensch. If there is going to be a happy ending to this current story we will have to write it.

Today may be the divine day of Judgement according to Jewish tradition. But there will be a different day of judgement in the future, when our children or our grandchildren, or God willing our great grandchildren, ask us what we did when our country took this very

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wrong turn down this road of cruelty, when our government victimized children and helpless refugees. We tell stories to make sense of ourselves and to make sense of the world. What story will we tell them, to help them make sense of the world, to help them understand us? How will we be judged?