

Rosh Hashanah Morning 2022 - Remembering Who We Are

By Rabbi Dean Kertesz

One of the names of Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaZikaron, memorial day, or the day of remembrance. Our Sages of blessed memory give two reasons. One, because God “remembered” Sarah and she became pregnant in her old age and gave birth to Isaac. The second reason is that God remembers us, and our actions, on Rosh Hashanah. As we all heard in Cantor Margules lovely *Unetaneh Tokef*, on this day God opens the *Sefer Zichronot*, the book in which all our deeds for the past year are recorded and holds us accountable for our actions.

This Torah portion that we will read in a few minutes, is simultaneously awe inspiring and terrifying. Awe inspiring because Abraham demonstrates a faith and trust in God that few, if any of us, have. I know I don't. He is willing to risk everything: the son he loves, his family, and their destiny on a belief that if God commands he must obey. It is terrifying for the same reason. Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son for a belief, for an ideal. The good news in this story we read today is that everything comes out fine in the end. Isaac is spared. God is merciful; God never wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham passes (or doesn't pass) his final test.

Last night I spoke about embracing imperfection as the necessary first condition for *teshuvah* or repentance; understanding that we are flawed, imperfect, that we never get it “right.” That is what the Hebrew sense of sin or *chet* is closest to: missing the mark, falling short. This is the spiritual “beginner's mind”. An understanding that we are always in the process of becoming, of getting closer to our authentic selves. Life is a constant state of unfolding. Our rabbis believed it was not random. That life had a direction toward positive change and growth. This is the purpose of *teshuvah*. Its meaning is closer to returning or recalibrating

than it is to penitence, which means regret for doing wrong. If we have fallen short, then our goal is to refocus ourselves and our actions and can become people. This then begs the question: what or who is our “authentic” self? Who are we really? What makes us, us? I would add one more complication to that question, what does being here, in synagogue, on Rosh Hashanah have to do with who we are? Why are we here?

I will pause for a moment and let that question sink in and return to our Torah portion. We see Abraham for who he is, in all his strengths and imperfections: his deep and abiding faith and his seeming indifference to the impact his actions have on his son and his wife. He is simultaneously a man of absolute connection to God while seemingly indifferent to those closest to him.

We also don't have to ask why Abraham is on Mt. Moriah. God has commanded him and so Abraham obeys. He suffers from no existential doubt. As products of modernity I don't think that condition of certainty applies to us. How many of us here today, believe in God? And, if you do, does God speak to you? And, if God does, do you act on what God tells you to do? I am not being ironic here; I am being completely serious. We live in a time when it is difficult, or impossible to discern our own inner voice, let alone God's voice. There is too much chatter. Too much information. Too many distractions. We also live in an age when science or (God forbid) politics seems to grapple more seriously with the most important questions of human existence, while some, even many, religious leaders reduce religion to intolerance, fascism, theocratic rule, and violence, all in God's name. Complex moral questions, like abortion rights, support for the poor, building an inclusive society are reduced to simple slogans that fit on bumperstickers..

Abraham had none of these problems. As our Torah portion makes clear, Abraham spoke directly to God. He based his life on it. Abraham, Sarah and

Isaac brought meaning, morality, and wisdom into the world, but they each paid a high price: Sarah, emotionally shattered and physically broken over the near death of Isaac, alienated from Abraham, who in turn abandons his family. Isaac, traumatized by his near death and incapable of seeing clearly. The traumas passed on to the next generations.

So we know why Abraham was up on Mt. Moriah, but why are we here? Let me suggest a few reasons. First, memory: some of us are here because we have always been here. Our parents brought us to synagogue on these holy days, even if as a family we did little else. Even if, as a family we didn't believe. Perhaps they did it to honor the memory of their own parents or the generations that have come before. Or to ensure that we too would continue to be part of Jewish life. We brought our own children here. For many of the same reasons. Even if our parents are gone from this world, even when our children have moved on with their lives and live away from us they (all the generations) are present here with us, in spirit if not in body.

Another reason some of us come is because this is one of the ways we signify who we are; because coming to services on Rosh Hashanah is what Jews do, whether we believe or not. Whether we are religious or not. It is just what we do. Let's pause for a moment here and think about this, because I think it's critical: this is what Jews do. Which begs another question: What makes us Jews? What are the components of our Jewish identity? What makes us the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah? It cannot be just an accident of birth. Because many who have been born into our people have left it and many others, out of positive choice, have joined. So birth is one, but not the only or even the most critical possibility.

I think one of the most powerful factors that can make us Jews is our sense of a shared, collective memory: the stories we tell... like this one. The meaning that we make out of these stories. Much of Jewish sacred literature is a two-thousand year old conversation interpreting these very stories. I have done that here frequently, with this story of the Akedah. As the darshan and you as the listeners, with your own thoughts and ideas, agreements and disagreements, we are now part of that ancient, on-going conversation.

Yet another factor that makes us Jews is a broader history that we all share, with its glories and its tragedies. A collective history that transcends differing citizenships or nationalities. Whether we are deeply versed in this history or not, these too help form our identity.

This summer Carla and I spent some time in Europe and Israel. The trip was built around Carla's work commitments, working now with Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion and war. We spent four days in Prague and a week in Germany. For us, the burden of history lies heavily on these places. It permeates the way I see the world. Prague, was the city from which my father fled in January 1939, when the Germans marched in. We came there to walk the streets my father had walked once. On our last morning there, Carla and I decided to visit the old Jewish section of Prague. There are five synagogues (four of which have been desacralized and are now museums or monuments) the most famous being the Alte Neue Schul. The most moving (or problematic) place for me was the Pinkas Synagogue, the second oldest synagogue in Prague, dating back to the early 16th Century. After its restoration in the 1990's, 80,000 names of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia who were murdered by the Nazis were calligraphed on its walls, covering almost the entire structure. Eighty-thousand people, gone and all their numberless descendents too, an uncountable multitude, as God promises to Abraham at the end of this Torah portion, "I will

multiply your seed like the stars in the sky and the sand by the sea.” Five hundred years of Jewish life in Czech lands disappeared in 1942 never to return. All gone from this one small corner of Europe. To go back to Prague for me was an opportunity to enjoy its beauty punctuated with the deep pain of history and loss; an incalculable suffering that bore down on me. My father’s name could have been on that wall too. All our parents, or grandparents’ names, if not for a fatal choice made differently here or there at an earlier time and then none of us would be sitting here now. The same was true for me in Germany, which is so strikingly beautiful physically and, for me at least, populated by ghosts who peer at me from around corners, their shadows following behind the footsteps of the living. Ghosts of victims and ghosts of perpetrators, like the stumble stones placed in front of the houses where they once lived, from which they were deported and killed.

I am not suggesting that you must see (or more accurately, feel) history the way I do, but I believe that our familiarity with and knowledge of our people’s stories, our mythos, and our shared history impacts how we think of ourselves, as Jews and as human beings.

By the way, If you haven’t noticed I am studiously avoiding the terms Jewish religion and Jewish faith. I find them completely inadequate to describe what it means to be a Jew. These are not Jewish terms, but have been imposed on us by a society that tries to make us fit into and by some of our own who want to fit in. We are not a faith... even though we have ancient and complex beliefs, and we are not a religion, even though as a people we have an ancient and sophisticated religious practice. We are, as I have hinted at, first and foremost a people.

Another important difference is that the Jewish vision, for a properly lived life, for a moral society, and for ultimate redemption, is collective not individual. So our religious stories, our history, and the stories we tell each other about ourselves are collective, not individual. Yes, this story of the binding of Isaac, like all the stories of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, is the story of a particular family's struggle. But it has meaning only because they are the founders of the Israelite nation. Yes, individual Israelites were freed from slavery and went out of Egypt. But the story we tell is of the collective enslavement of our people, and the collective liberation of our people. Our Jewish identity is a collective identity, a national identity. That is why we Jews do not fit neatly into the religious categories of the Western world. That is why the angel offers this blessing to Abraham for his faithfulness: "By Myself I swear, יהוה declares: Because you have done this and would not deny Me your son, your favored one, I will bless you greatly; and I will multiply your seed like the stars in the sky and the sand by the sea; your seed shall possess the gate of its foes. All the earth's nations shall be blessed through your seed, because you hearkened to my voice." (Genesis 22:15-18) This is a blessing of peoplehood, of demographics and national destiny, not a promise of individual salvation.

Finally, I'm guessing, or I am hoping, that some of us are here because we are seeking a way in: a way to connect, with God or with our Jewish identities, or Jewish practice, or Jewish tradition. Or trying to find a sense of transcendence, meaning, and purpose to our lives beyond physical existence. I think we all ask ourselves in quiet moments, when we are alone: is this physical existence all there is? Is there something greater? As a society we seem to be growing more and more obsessed with coming up with a metric, a number, for everything. It doesn't matter whether a film transports us emotionally. What is important is how well it did at the box office. The first quality cannot be measured, the second can... so it has greater value. We measure our heart rates with our Apple

watches. We measure our sleep. We have credit ratings. BMI scores. A misery index and a consumer confidence index. We use statistics to predict outcomes of ball games and elections. But despite this desire for mathematical certainty we know that something is missing. I believe we all long for meaning and mystery, beyond the quantifiable. That is not just a biochemical quirk but the basis of things that matter most in life: connection, love, creativity, art, beauty. The things that make us human. We know these things exist, we have felt them, although we can't see them; we know them to be true, even if they cannot be demonstrated or measured.

Abraham and Isaac did not have this problem. They had the opposite one. Their connection to the transcendent was visceral and immediate; a matter of life and death. They were called, by name, by God. For us, it is not so simple. Yet, Rosh Hashanah is a call. It is Yom Zikaron and reminds us that we have been remembered. We are being called. We count to God and our actions do as well. In the end it does not really matter why we came here. Whether for memory, or tradition, or obligation, or to do what Jews do, or to engage with our shared stories or our shared history. What matters is what we do when we leave here. Will we engage more deeply with our people's stories? Will we explore our people's history more seriously? Will we find a way to dig into our Jewish identity: what makes us, us? Will we find a way to pursue our search for meaning on a daily, weekly or monthly basis? We can, if we think it is important enough; if we choose to. Today is Yom HaZikaron; we are being called. How will we answer that call?