

## ראש השנה יום ב תשפ"ד

Why do we read this challenging story of the binding of Isaac every year on Rosh HaShanah? What does this say about Judaism? What does this say about our holy day of Rosh HaShanah that we are here to observe together?

These questions have been addressed in more sermons than can be counted. Yet, today, I will try to offer a response which is a little of my own and grounded in the wisdom of generations of rabbis before me.

To ground our exploration I will direct us towards a prayer we will say in a few minutes

- the Musaf Amidah - . The Amidah makes use of the akeidah in the first of the special blessings we add in honor of Rosh HaShanah. When we look closely at the way the story is cited, however, it is not entirely clear how we are meant to relate to the actual events of the story.

We pray, on page 274 of our machzor,

May the binding of Isaac be seen before you that Abraham our father tied down Isaac his son on top of the altar -

יְכַבֵּשׁ רַחֲמָיו לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנְךָ בְּלִבְבִי שְׁלָם

his mercy conquered to do your will with a full heart-

כִּן יִכְבֹּשׁוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ אֶת כַּעֲסְךָ מֵעַלֵינוּ

so too may your mercy conquer your anger from upon us

His Mercy conquered to do your will -

וכבש רחמיו

This Hebrew phrase is ambiguous.

Was his mercy conquered or did his mercy do the conquering?

In the translation we have before us, they render this phrase “subduing his fatherly compassion so that he might do Your will

Wholeheartedly” -

Clearly, the translator understood the prayer to be celebrating Abraham’s ability to overcome his natural love and compassion for his son.

However, when we look at the next few lines of the siddur, we see that our appeal to G-d seems to be opposite:

כִּן יִכְבֹּשׁוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ אֶת כַּעֲסְךָ מֵעַלֵינוּ

In the translation of Machzor Hadash,

“So may your compassion subdue for us your wrath”

But, the word Ken “yes” or “so too” implies that we want G-d to act in the same way that Avraham behaved on the mountain in the story and we clearly want G-d’s love and mercy to conquer and subdue G-d’s anger.

We want to be spared like Isaac was on the mountain. I think we can all clearly agree that we want to live. We want G-d to be governed by an overpowering love and compassion for us. Yet, it is not clear how this desire for life and the triumph of compassion is to be invoked by remembering the binding of Isaac.

Perhaps, we are simply celebrating the ability to subdue one’s feelings. In Abraham’s case we celebrate his ability to subdue compassion while in G-d’s case we celebrate the Divine ability to subdue anger with compassion. This is a perfectly tenable reading of the text of the tefillah and it even accords with some strands of Jewish and general thought.

We can see in our society that people can be celebrated for subduing their feelings. When we are connected to our emotions, we are inherently made vulnerable for better or for worse. When we open our hearts, we can have our heart broken or we can fall in love. Therefore, tragically, we are often encouraged to suppress our sentiments, to subdue our feelings, to conquer our natural love and sympathy for others.

Perhaps, this is the ideal that is being celebrated in our Tefillah - the ability to set aside sentiment and do what is necessary. There is a time and place for this kind of behavior - But - I want to argue - this is not what is being called for in our Rosh HaShanah!

Rather than being called to overcome our emotions, we are called by the words of our prayer to cultivate our sense of Rahamim - of compassion and love.

In our prayer, we celebrate that Abraham's compassion for his son conquered his desire to give everything back to G-d. And - we pray that G-d can also connect with this innate human compassion that we associate with parental love and forgive us for our wrongdoings.

This reading might seem like a stretch in the context of the words of our prayer. I mean - weren't the editors of the Machzor more learned and experienced rabbis than I am and they translated the prayer the other way!

This is true - however - when we survey a few Jewish traditions about love, anger, and subduing feeling, I believe you will agree with me that the overwhelming trend in our tradition is to see love as the strongest of feelings. Rahamim is not to be subdued or conquered, but rather cultivated while anger is to be subdued.

Let's look at a couple of statements from Pirkei Avos - an ancient rabbinic collection of teachings and sayings about ethics and wisdom.

We see there in 5:11, there are four dispositions among people:

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בַּדַּעוֹת. נוֹחַ לְכַעַס וְנוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת, יֵצֵא שְׂכָרוֹ בְּהַפְסָדוֹ. קָשָׁה לְכַעַס וְקָשָׁה לְרִצּוֹת,  
 יֵצֵא הַפְסָדוֹ בְּשְׂכָרוֹ. קָשָׁה לְכַעַס וְנוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת, חֲסִיד. נוֹחַ לְכַעַס וְקָשָׁה לְרִצּוֹת, רָשָׁע

There are four kinds of temperaments: Easy to become angry, and easy to be appeased: his gain disappears in his loss; Hard to become angry, and hard to be appeased: his loss disappears in his gain; Hard to become angry and easy to be appeased: this is a pious person; Easy to become angry and hard to be appeased: a wicked person.

We see clearly here that becoming angry, and not being able to be appeased can lead someone to wickedness and harmful behavior. On the other hand, if you are not easily angered, and once angered become easily appeased, this will lead you to be a good, pious and compassionate person.

We similarly see in Pirkei Avos 4:1 -

Who is rightfully considered strong or heroic?

The one who conquers their inclination to act harmfully, from a place of anger.

It takes more strength and heroism to overcome anger than to act with force and to punish!

This same belief is reflected in a prayer of Moshe in a biblical scene where G-d was furious with the people of Israel. After 10 spies return from scouting out the land of Israel with a pessimistic report and the rest of the people cry out to return to Egypt, Moses says

יגדל נא כח ה'

Please, G-d, grow stronger.

As you have said to us:

יְהוָה אֶרְךָ אֲפַיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד נִשְׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשָׁע

‘יה! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression

Moses states clearly that in order for G-d to be compassionate and forgiving it will require more strength than it would to lash out in anger. This appeal of Moshe serves as an inspiration for much of the tefillot we offer today. We pray that G-d will overcome anger with love, and we lift this up as an ideal for ourselves - that we can cultivate love as the most powerful force in our hearts.

Now, I don't want to pretend like anger is not a healthy and even useful part of life. It is perfectly natural to feel angry and, according to the Torah, even G-d experiences anger. Without anger, we would not be able to learn from our mistakes and harmful actions. When I have not acted in a considerate way, I depend on the anger of the person I have harmed to let me know that I messed up. In this way, anger is a necessary intervention to teshuva. While we pray for more love than anger on these days of teshuva, we know that without anger, both human and Divine anger at what is wrong and unjust in the world, we would be left without a roadmap for growth. This is how I would like to suggest we read the narratives in the Torah in which Hashem grows angry with the people - these stories of Divine anger teach

us about bad behavior to avoid - pessimistic groupthink, idolatrous worship of gold, oppressing the vulnerable. Anger is a part of life, so the Torah reflects this back to us.

Yet, at the same time, our oral Torah urges us not to give in to our anger. In the Talmud in Shabbat, Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar says in the name of Hilfa bar Agra who taught in the name of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Nuri:

One who tears their clothes in anger, or breaks their tools in anger, or scatters their coins in anger - they should seem to you like Idol worshippers. Because this is the craftiness of the inclination to harm - the yetzer hara - today it leads you to break this, and tomorrow it leads you to break more.

Allowing anger to lead us to destructive behavior is likened to idolatry - which is to say - if we allow anger to conquer us and to bring us to act in destructive and harmful ways, this is a corruption of values. Yes, we all inevitably feel angry - we get mad - at others, at our children and our parents, at our siblings and our coworkers, at our political opponents and at ourselves. This is inevitable. And, each of us is inclined to express this anger in different ways. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each of us to engage in the inner work that will enable our love to subdue our anger,

שיכבשו רחמינו את כעסנו

How can we do this work? Of course, there is an element of personal trial and error involved for each of us. Some may move through anger by physical exertion or exercise. Others may turn to music or art.

In addition to whatever personal strategies we adopt, Judaism offers us a profound example in the way that we appeal to G-d for mercy to conquer anger:

We call Yhvh ארך אפיים

Long of breath - breathe deeply - move slowly - perhaps, like avraham you will hear a Divine message calling to you - telling you to stop before you hurt someone - and instead to pass on a legacy of love.

This, I believe, is at least one way of understanding why we return to the awful story of the Akeidah each year on the second day of Rosh HaShanah. We remember that we each have our better and worse moments, and we hope to follow in the Divine and Abrahamic tradition of getting stronger - and loving more - showing forgiveness and compassion even in moments of great intensity.

In this spirit, we prepare now to pray together.