
Children's Story Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and the Ram

Reading

In honor of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which begins at sundown this Wednesday, we will read from the Jewish Scriptures. Today's reading is from 1 Samuel chapter 2, verses 1 – 10. If you were to attend synagogue at Rosh Hashanah, this would be the second scripture that is read on the 1st day of the holiday. It is called "Hannah's Prayer"

Here is a bit of context for this piece of scripture, to help you understand what is happening. Hannah is one of Elkanah's wives. The other is Peninah. It is clear that Elkanah's favorite is Hannah even though she cannot have children. In Ancient Israel, where women are valued primarily for their ability to have children, this is always seen as a tragedy and it is clearly a burden for Hannah. She frequently goes to the temple and silently prays and weeps. One day, Eli, the temple priest, sees her there, and assumes that because she is mumbling she is drunk. Eli tells her to stop making a spectacle of herself. When she tells Eli that she is praying for a child, Eli tells her that G-d⁽¹⁾ will give her what she asks for. Shortly after, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Samuel. She tells her husband that because this child was given to them by G-d, they should give it back to G-d. When it is time to wean Samuel, she will bring him to the temple and give him to Eli.

Our scripture is the prayer that Hannah offers on the day she gives her son away:

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my G-d.

My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

²"There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our G-d.

³Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a G-d of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.

⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

⁹"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.

¹⁰The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

Sermon

If you were raised in a Jewish or Christian home, you probably learned the story of Abraham and Isaac. Children often love the story because they can identify with Abraham. Just like Abraham, they face the situation of being told by their parents, or their teachers, or their caregivers, just about every day, to do things that they don't want to do. “Brush your teeth.” “Get dressed for school.” “Give your sister a turn.” “Sit at your desk and wait.” “Raise your hand.” “Go to bed.” “Stand in line.” Their days are often filled with a series of commands, many of which they don't quite understand. So when they hear G-d tell Abraham that he has to sacrifice Isaac, they know the deal! They're told something, they don't quite understand why they have to do it, and they're just expected to do it.

This is why kids relate to the story. They understand being in that position, and they understand their options. They can throw a hissy fit. Probably won't work, even if it feels great in the moment. They can argue. That might work for a while, but in the end the adult still has the final word. I imagine every one of you parents have experienced your child sizing you up to see whether an act of resistance is going to get them what they want. Sometimes, they just figure it's easier to do what you have asked. Sometimes, in those rare precious moments, they trust you even if they don't completely understand why you are asking them to do that particular thing. So when Abraham starts to gather wood, they understand which choice he is making. Just like Abraham is asked to completely trust G-d, they too are asked to completely trust the adults in their life, and are rewarded when they do. Sometimes they are allowed to question, to ask why, and sometimes the adults in their lives will take the time to explain, and sometimes the adults might even change course, as G-d changed course and told Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead, but it's still the adults' call.

This is why the story of Abraham and Isaac hits so close to home. Children know what it is like to have less power than just about everybody else, and they have learned to be extremely aware of what may be required of them at any moment.

When I learned that the Abraham and Isaac story is one of the primary stories told during Rosh Hashannah, the Jewish New Year, I wondered why. Why would you usher in the New Year by telling the story of a man who almost sacrificed his son, and was then rewarded for the fact that he was willing to do it? Why should anyone be encouraged to trust so blindly, and be willing to go against their deepest instincts to please G-d? Many of us grew up in religious traditions where we were told to cultivate this kind of unconditional trust, and for many of us, we just couldn't, and we weren't sure if you ever really should. That's how we ended up here, in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. And when we hear a story like this, we wonder, is blind trust a healthy kind of trust?

I'll be honest and say my gut instinct was to find another Bible Story, any other Bible story but this one because I didn't know how I could take this story and make it work in a Unitarian Universalist context. Many of us come to our churches because we have rejected the kind of blind trust that we were asked to offer to God or a faith tradition.

But on the other hand, we also believe that there is truth in all world religions. Sometimes the way UUs recognize other religions is to take the parts that they find comfortable and hold those up as truths about the religion. But all you've done is forced the religion to say what you want to say, to reinforce what you already believe. It's not very respectful. If you're going to honor a religion, at least have the respect to take it on its own terms. So I decided to stick with the story. If this is the core Biblical story of Rosh Hashanah, then that's what we're going to work with.

The other scripture that is read in synagogue on the first night of Rosh Hashanah is the story of Hannah and Samuel. Just like Sarah, Hannah is getting older and it seems like she's not going to be able to have a child. And then she gets pregnant. You would think that after years of desperately wanting a child, she wouldn't allow anything to come between her and her baby boy. But that's not what happens at all! She decides to give Samuel away to the temple. Here we have two scriptures, with two barren women, each miraculously has a son, and then G-d demands the death of one, and Hannah gives her son away. How is this supposed to usher in the New Year?

If you've known me for a while, and even if you've just started coming to Emerson, you may know that I love this kind of theological challenge. We have 2 stories that in our modern world with our modern sensibilities, seem barbaric, cruel, dated, and morally questionable. The traditional interpretation of these stories feels like a betrayal of so many values that we hold dear – like the ability to question, the right to make our own decisions, and the imperative to put the well being of our children before anything else. Is it possible to see these stories another way?

Yes, it absolutely is.

In order to understand why the story of Abraham and Isaac is so significant, you have to understand something about the Ancient Middle East. Human sacrifices were an extremely common practice in many ancient religions. It was the highest gift you could give to your G-d. For a G-d to come to a human and say, "Sacrifice your only son for me," was not at all uncommon. It was considered a reasonable request to prove your loyalty. Loyalty was everything. In the harsh desert environment you had to know who you could count on. It was a matter of survival, and the ancients projected that need on their G-ds.

The religion of the ancient Israelites was one of the first to stop the practice of human sacrifice. We don't exactly know why. But scholars do know it was part of a significant paradigm shift in the understanding and valuing of human life, and what we know about paradigm shifts, we're in one right now, is that there are those who want to move forward, and those who resist. Sometimes that tensions plays out not just between groups of people, with within the people themselves; there will be a part of us that resists and a part of us that tries to move into the new emerging way. That tension is what causes culture wars.

It is possible that the Israelites were the ones moving forward, and many of their neighbors were the ones resisting. Perhaps the Israelites were ridiculed as cowards for not begin able to complete the ultimate sacrifice, and judged for worshipping a weak G-d who stupidly turned down that ultimate gift.

It's possible that the story of Abraham and Isaac was a cultural counter-move against those who criticized the Ancient Israelites. In this story G-d has no qualms asking for the ultimate sacrifice, and Abraham is completely willing to offer it. He could have thrown a hissy fit. He could have argued. He could have asked for explanations. He didn't. He simply began to do what was asked of him. In the Ancient World, this was the most honorable thing to do because it proved your loyalty and trust. So much for either Abraham or his G-d being weak and cowardly. And then, in a remarkable reversal, G-d says, "This is not necessary. Obviously you trust me, obviously you are loyal, obviously you are brave and strong. I don't need Isaac. Get that ram and finish the job. And by the way, your trust and loyalty is so complete that your descendents will rule over all the nations."

This story was a way for the Ancient Israelites to challenge those who criticized them, and score some major points. Their G-d was stronger BECAUSE he didn't require animal sacrifices, and their people were stronger BECAUSE they worshipped this G-d and this G-d would reward them by making them a nation above all nations!

The shift away from human sacrifices not only indicated a shift in the value of human life, but also a shift in the understanding of the divine. Their G-d was changing from a blood thirsty tyrant to a compassionate father. It was still a hierarchical relationship, but this was a very different G-d asking for their trust and loyalty. In Ancient times, this new G-d was downright countercultural. It was a reversal of values.

So was the story of Hannah and Samuel. In the Ancient World, women had no power. They were belongings, vessels for childbirth, and the children they bore were the property of their husbands. If you were infertile, you were worthless. Given this reality, can you imagine how countercultural it was, first of all, for Hannah's husband to love her, and then, for Hannah to say to her husband, "I am giving our child to G-d." She made a decision that was her husband's to make. And then, when she gave her son away, she proclaimed the prayer that we find in 1 Samuel chapter 2. Another reversal. Women don't proclaim things in the ancient world. It's not usually their place. That's the role of men! And then, her prayer is about more reversals. The bows of the mighty are broken and the feeble are strong. Those who were full are hungry, and the hungry are full. The barren woman has 7 children and the one with many children is miserable. The poor are rich, the lowly are exalted. The needy sit with princes and the powerful are brought down. Not by might does one prevail.

We live in a society where far too often these scriptures are used to maintain and justify the status quo, when their real purpose was to challenge the status quo, to challenge injustice, to challenge accepted norms. These scriptures were never supposed to make the comfortable feel rewarded for being comfortable. They were intended to keep us on our toes, to keep us honest, and to keep us humble.

Traditionally, the central message of Rosh Hashanah is that the New Year is supposed to be a time to reorient yourself back to G-d. The high point of Rosh Hashanah is when a ram's horn, called the shofar, is blown. The sound is supposed to pierce your heart. It is a warning call, to turn back to what is right and true. Like many modern religions, sometimes this concept of turning back to G-d has been used to reinforce the status quo, to make observance of the holidays the measure of your faithfulness, to make right belief the measure of your faithfulness.

In more progressive understandings within Judaism, reorienting yourself back to G-d is much more. The purpose of the holidays is not the observance; it's what the observance points us toward. We live in a culture where we are constantly pressured from within and without to conform to and promote values that intellectually and spiritually we know are deeply unfair, values that measure human worth in superficial, unethical and dehumanizing ways. We don't do human sacrifices any more, but we sacrifice life in many other ways. We know this is a deeply wounded world and that we are often not in right relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the earth. Reorienting yourself to G-d is about reorienting your life so that you are, like Hannah and Abraham, ready to give up what you most love so that others may simply live.

Reorienting ourselves is about having the courage and the wisdom to see the ram in the bushes. What if Abraham was so hell bent on doing what he believed G-d asked him to do that he stopped listening? How often have we ended up sacrificing Isaac because we stopped listening? All we had to do was stop, look up, listen, and see the ram in the bushes!

In this more progressive approach, reorienting to G-d is not about blind trust in some supernatural being. It is about being willing to give up understandings of ourselves that we might think we would die without, so that we sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac. It may ask us to bring Samuel to the Temple, to risk ridicule, to step back from our assumptions about what is enough, what is comfort, what is security, what is loyalty, what is trust, what is hope, what is joy. When the shofar blows, do we have enough love in our hearts to let its cry pierce it? It is this invitation that is implicit in all the celebrations and observances of this time.

At Rosh Hashanah, we are asked to reflect on this:

In today's world, with today's paradigm changes, changes that are happening around us and within us, what is the honorable way to live? Where should we place our trust? We are called to be extremely aware of what may be required of us at any moment, so that we are faithful to the values that we believe make this life so precious and beautiful.

May the spirit be with you and yours. Amen and blessed be.

(1) In the Jewish faith, one does not write, nor speak, the word "God", so it is written in this manner, "G-d".