

Rosh Hashannah D'var – The Akedah – 09/11/2018

Maggid Melvin Metelits

09/11! What an amazing confluence of events!

Today marks the 17th anniversary of the day that three men, believing that they heard the voice of God, acted on impulse and sacrificed the lives of 3,000 innocent souls. Coincidentally, our d'var today, The Akedah, tells the story of Abraham, who, believing he heard the voice of God, acted on impulse to bind his son, Isaac to the altar, to sacrifice him in the name of The Holy One.

So, here is the question: Can we believe in, much more love, a God who orders a devoted servant to sacrifice a beloved son as a test of his devotion?

Yet, this is the plain meaning of the parsha before us today. It has become a mainstream, conventional interpretation of what is known as The Akedah, the binding of Isaac. The story is familiar: Abraham ties Isaac to the altar and is about to bring the knife down on him when he hears a voice calling him, "ABRAHAM, ABRAHAM!!!. Do not slaughter your son!

The story continues with God saying to Abraham, "Now I see that you have not withheld your son from Me." Once again, conventionally, this has meant, "You have passed the test by being WILLING to sacrifice Isaac.

Fortunately, Judaism is a religion that has no dogma. 2,000 years ago a passage, by Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, was collected and recorded in Pirke Avot of the Talmud. It reads, "Delve into it, and delve into it again, grow old with it, for it contains everything." The IT referred to is, of course, Torah. Now, if Torah contains EVERYTHING, it must contain alternative, and even contradictory interpretations. And so, we not only have PERMISSION but even a DUTY to reveal and bring down new and fitting versions of our time-honored Torah. So, today I would like to offer a Kabbalist inspired, Hasidic version of The Akedah..

Let's take a look at some events in the life of Abraham:

He loved God so deeply, to the point of near fanaticism, that upon IMPULSE he would jump and rush to do anything he thought he heard God command, and even some things he didn't hear. For instance:

- He suddenly packed up and left home with his family and workers;

- He asks his wife, Sarah to pose as his sister;
- He gathers his workers as an army to rescue his nephew Lot;
- He bargains with God over the fate of Sodom and Gemorrah;
- He circumcises himself at the age of 99 along with his entire camp;

And now, acting on this familiar IMPULSE he prepares to bind his son, Isaac, to the altar and sacrifice him!

Clearly, as good and decent as Abraham is, his impulses lack RESTRAINT. We get a hint of this when previously God says, “Don’t worry, Abraham, I will be your shield. That is, your protection against your own impulses. We hear this in the Amidah as “Magein Avraham.”

Perhaps now we are beginning to see that God’s test of Abraham might not be his WILLINGNESS to sacrifice his son, rather – will he have the strength to RESTRAIN himself from doing so.

This is also the test for the perilous times we live in today. All around us we can observe the horrific results of actions driven by IMPULSE undertaken by those who believe blindly in their absolute rectitude, as though ordered by the very voice of GOD.

The contemporary author, Eliot Kamenitz, asked Rabbi Obermann, “How can we know when we are hearing the voice of God?”

The answer: “ It cannot be the voice of God if:

- It disparages Torah; Torah says,
- It is harmful to self and/or others;
- It runs radically counter to the existing ethos of the community;
- It stems from ego.”

Each of these criteria disqualify that which Abraham understood as the voice of God.

Can we now understand that what Abraham heard was not the *full* voice of God, which must – like Torah – include all possibilities and contradictions. The full voice of God encompasses godly RESTRAINT fully as much as godly IMPULSE.

With this in mind we can now hear those ancient words of Torah with new meaning. Let’s now hear, “Well done, Abraham, I see that you have not withheld your son from me. Slaughtering Isaac would have withheld him from continuing to serve Me.”