

High Holy Days 5781/2020
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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The World As It Is, The World As It Should be

Every year, in the months leading up to Rosh HaShanah, I have to decide which Torah portion we'll read tomorrow morning. Will it be the aqeda, the sacrifice of Isaac, or Bereshit, the creation of the world? Will it be a story about the destruction of all that is holy, or a story about creation?

Most years, I ask: are we living in a moment of despair? Do we need hope? The sense that we can shape the world? Or reshape it? Well then, we'll read about the creation of the world. Other years, I ask – are we living in a time of destruction and regret - have we made mistakes and are struggling with how to change course? Well, then, perhaps it's a year for the near sacrifice of Isaac.

But 2020 is unprecedented. This year, I couldn't decide which Torah portion we needed, because right now, we stand poised between both stories – and both have something to tell us.

So let's start chronologically. According to our tradition, when God created the world, 5781 years ago tonight, it was created with great optimism and energy, but incomplete. It was full of potentiality: sun and earth, seeds and animals, water and sky – so much energy and beauty, but without anything – or anyone – to look after it, care for the animals, grow the plants – and turn the world as it was into the world as it ought to be. So God created humans. And what happened next? We ate the apple, screwed everything up, and were thrown out of paradise.

But that's by design. Because just as the universe is perpetually expanding, our mystics believed that the world was constantly becoming, and that God – holiness - is a verb, something we make happen. Paradise was nice, but it was boring, and stagnant – a world frozen in time. Nothing meaningful or unpredictable ever happens in paradise. Nothing *interesting* ever happens. Everyone looks great in their fig leaves (after all, they're vegans), but there's nothing to talk about, to solve or fix or build, nothing ever *happens*.

2020, on the other hand, has been too interesting. 2020 has made us long for the Garden of Eden, the world as it once was, before Covid. Because 2020 has been, in many ways, the opposite of the creation story – the opposite of a world moving closer to perfection. Instead, the pandemic has even more starkly revealed the faultlines and vulnerabilities of a society in which there are glaring inequities, societal pathologies like violent racism and a partisanism so vicious, that scratching its surface has revealed currents of antisemitism, misogyny and xenophobia. 2020 has revealed all of this. It has revealed the dangers of having a healthcare system – set up for profit instead of healing – and how such a system means that the uninsured or unemployed, end up bankrupt because of medical bills, or homeless after losing just a

minimum wage few paychecks. This is the broken world we have created, and inherited, the opposite of the garden of Eden. This is the world we are meant to be stewards of. And we are failing.

So, perhaps the story of the aqeda can help us.

Most of us think of the aqeda as the story of the sacrifice of Isaac -- but it's not, not really. It's really a story about Abraham's conscience – and Abraham's choices. It's a test – to see if when Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac, he would be able to distinguish the voice of authority from from the voice of his conscience - the one that insists that sacrifice – of any human being, is a desecration. Abraham's choice – to defy the highest power - makes it clear not just that Abraham *is* the first Jew, but *why* he is the first Jew – because he values human life above all else, and can disregard even God in the service of pikuach nefesh - saving a life. In it's historical context - this was utterly revolutionary. Child sacrifice was a standard – even required way of relating to and appeasing God(s) at the time, and thousands of years later, Christian theology was premised on the idea that God would sacrifice the life of his son – Jesus – for something greater.

And so Judaism did something theologically radical and societally revolutionary when it rejected human sacrifice, and a few hundred years later, when the temple was destroyed, abandoned animal sacrifice. And yet. Despite the fact that on Rosh HaShanah, we tell the story of how Jews rejected sacrifice - on Yom Kippur, a scapegoat was traditionally sacrificed - and sent out into the wilderness to die with the people's sins on it's back. But after the destruction of the temple – even this came to an end. The only absolution, the only forgiveness, would no longer come at someone else's expense, but at our own. The only sacrifices, the Rabbis decreed, would now be sacrifices of the heart. But what is a sacrifice of the heart? On the simplest level, meant that prayer would now replace sacrifice as the way Jews connected with God. And so today, the prayerbook of the Israeli Reform Movement is called Avodah Sh'ba'lev – the sacrifice of the heart.

But what is a sacrifice of the heart, really? Especially if we are not given to regular prayer – what does sacrifice mean in this day and age? What would we sacrifice to redeem the world, or redeem ourselves? What would we give up for the sake of the world?

This is the question we are meant to contemplate on Rosh HaShanah – what is our sacrifice? What would we give up for the sake of creation? Would we give up our comfort? The profit we make off of those with less than us? Or, perhaps, some of our luxuries to feed strangers? Would we take a paycut so our employees can make a living wage? Or tell your kids not to go that party, because it could imperil the health of older and immunocompromised strangers they may never meet? Or, would you pick up the phone to call someone you know is lonely or needy, even if it means giving up some of your time? And especially this year, would you protest injustice by, voting, or registering other people to vote? Would you vote not just in favor of your own self-interest, but to protect the oppressed, the homeless, the vulnerable, the immigrant, the refugee.

THOSE are the real sacrifices of the heart our Rabbis had in mind. And that is how we participate in the work of creation – by working to build the kind of world we want to live in.

Or, spun another way, sacrifice is so 50 BCE. Doing your own work – on yourself – and work on the world, is so 5781.

Several weeks ago, in our weekly Torah portion, as Moses was reminding the Israelites of their journey out of Egypt – he tells them: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey from Egypt.” Amalek – long considered the uber-enemy of the Jews – and the archetype for all the villains and murderers that would come after – from Haman to Hitler, has long been considered by the Rabbis the greatest enemy of the Jewish people. But not for the reasons you might think. Amalek did not kill more Israelites than other generals, or cause the Israelites more suffering. He certainly wasn’t the Pharaoh. No, Amalek was considered so terrible precisely because he – and his people – the Amalekites - did not go after the able bodied Israelites, or those of military or strategic importance. Instead, as the Jews are fleeing Egypt, Amalek pursues the rear, where he picks off the elderly, the weak, the orphans, the widows, those least likely to survive. It was an extraordinarily cruel strategy – and one in which the weakest became collateral damage.

The Rabbis were disgusted by this – and to this day, Amalek is treated as the worst enemy of the Jewish people. But why? Because Jews don’t sacrifice anyone for the greater good – especially the most vulnerable. It’s why we believe that nothing – not the economy, not even our own comfort – is more important than preserving life – any life – even those that might be deemed of less value. Right now, this means doing everything possible not just to keep ourselves safe, but to keep others safe. It means: Wear a mask, stay home, and don’t do things that will endanger others – whether they’re immunocompromised or elderly strangers, or the physicians and EMTs who put their lives on the line to care for them. It means don’t flout regulations because you’re young and healthy, and don’t gather for prayer in person even if the state technically allows it. Don’t sit inside restaurants with your mask off, and endanger the lives of the minimum wage waitstaff, or remove your mask at the pharmacy or the grocery store because you’re temporarily uncomfortable. The minimum wage workers are the ones whose health will be sacrificed. And finally don’t believe – not for a second – that any measure of wealth or privilege will protect you from a virus that has killed – at last count – 175,000 Americans.

Sacrifice - of Jesus or other martyrs – is an inextricable part of the Christian theology that undergirds the thinking of many of our current leaders. It is a theology that says that the weakest or oldest or may be sacrificed for the “greater good”. But this is not Jewish theology, or ethics – and on today of all days, today -- when an angel comes down from heaven to scream at Abraham to stop his hand - we are most meant to remember this. Because if there is any message the Torah wants us to learn this year it is this: the world was created beautiful, and perfect, but still unfinished – and we were kicked out of the garden to finish creating, or destroying it. As the children of Abraham, we know what we are meant to do. Protect life at all cost – by defying even the highest powers, making healthcare accessible and affordable for all americans, and protecting the most vulnerable.

It is a tall order to add this work to our plates after such a wrenching and exhausting year. It is hard to work for justice when the world feels irredeemably broken, difficult to insist on empathy when you're tired. But as the children of Abraham, who are only here because of the voice of an angel, who screamed out a protest against sacrifice, there is no other choice. This is our legacy - and our responsibility. In this new year, let us get back to the work of creating, and perfecting, our broken and beautiful world.

Shanah tovah umetukah – a sweet, happy and healthy new year to you and yours.