

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5778
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Shir Tikvah

Never Fail to Protest

When I was in kindergarten at Sunny Hollow Elementary in New Hope, Mrs. Peterson (z"l), our teacher, asked what we wanted to be when we grew up. Most of the kids in the class gave the typical answers you would expect from six year olds: Doctors. Firefighters. Astronauts. Baseball players. The President.

All the kids.

Except me. On my little orange star, I wrote three letters about what I wanted to be when I grew up: D-A-D.

Since I can remember, I wanted to be a dad.

So when I came out at age 20, I grieved what I thought was the end of my dream. Almost 30 years ago, there weren't many GLBT people who had children—at least that I knew—and my imagination was limited...

I distinctly remember sitting in a huge lecture hall during my senior year in Madison. A professor was discussing the "American dream: Life after graduation, when we all got married and had kids." I have no idea what else she said in that final lecture as I sat there and cried.

Yet, I was blessed—that phase of my life was pretty brief (the failure to believe I could parent, not the gay part). I realized I could be a dad—that we would parent. Best decisions we ever made.

As someone for whom parenting was not a given, whose road to have our beautiful children was complicated, steep, and at times—heart-wrenching—the story we are about to hear of Avraham binding Isaac is, at first glance, infuriating, absurd, and theologically outrageous.

A quick review: God calls to Avraham to bring Isaac, his beloved son, to a mountain, in order to sacrifice the boy as a sign of Avraham's ultimate faith in the Divine. Avraham and Isaac ascend the mountain; the father binds the son upon the altar and lifts his knife into the air...

The story of the Akeida—the binding of Isaac—makes many of us—most of us—morally queasy; what parent in their right mind would ever agree to sacrifice their child?

So today, I'd like to do something a little bit different. And I give credit for helping me to see this story anew to my dear Shir Tikvah colleagues Rabbis Rappaport and Rosenberg and to my beloved hevruta study partner at Hartman, Rabbi Lisa Gruscow, and my dear friends, Rabbi Sharon Brous and Pastor Jason Chesnut.

I invite us to take a look at the context of the story, to understand what was happening in Avraham's life up to this point.

The Akeida takes place in the days following of the story of Sodom and Gemorra.

You recall that God decides to destroy the Twin Cities of Sodom and Gemorra because of their great wickedness. (Or was it because they didn't have a joint Jewish Federation?).

Avraham protested. "What if there are 50 righteous people?" he inquired of God. "Certainly *YOU* won't sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?"

With that question, Avraham the Activist was born.

Avraham, despite being a novice, was an agile protestor: Challenging the God of the Universe to reject collective punishment; negotiating to save Sodom and Gemorra for even 10 righteous souls; appealing to God's good qualities as a fair judge; pleading with the Divine to be known to the world as Creator—not as Destroyer.

Avraham the Activist. The first Jew so intoxicated with human dignity that he was willing to challenge anyone who assaulted humanity—even God.

What a powerful legacy for all of us, to live as the descendants of Avraham—inheritors of a relentless commitment to human dignity as our core moral responsibility.

Now, I could leave the story right here, we could bask with pride. We've got protest in our blood; we are called to be activists, to change the world.

But we all know that isn't quite honest. That's not how the story ends. What happens?

As the sun rose, we read in Genesis, God rained upon Sodom and Gemorra a rain of sulfurous fire. God annihilated those cities and all the people and the entire plane around them. All of it, obliterated. [Gen 19: 23-25].

Avraham Avinu we call him: Father of the Jewish people, first Jew, our model of faith.

And.

Avraham's protest failed. He failed.

But it wasn't merely just Sodom and Gemorra that preceded the Akeida: It is the entire parsha of Vayera. It is important to remember that today—Rosh HaShanah—our sages

call, “Yom HaZikaron.” A day to remember. A day to remember the past year. What was Avraham’s year leading up to the Akeidah?

1. God appears at the Tents of Mamre; Avraham and Sarah welcome strangers, who inform Sarah she will get pregnant and have a son at 90.
2. Sodom and Gemorra are destroyed despite Avraham’s protest.
3. Lot is unable to protect his guests in Sodom.
4. On the journey out of Sodom, Lot’s wife turns back after God says, “Don’t!” and is turned into a pillar of salt.
5. Lot and his daughters believe they are the last people on earth following the destruction and, in a drunken stupor, decide it is up to them to repopulate the planet.
6. Avraham and Sarah encounter King Abimalek, and they pass off Sarah as Avraham’s sister...
7. Sarah, in fact, does conceive as God had promised and gives birth to Isaac.
8. Hagar and Ishmael—Avraham’s firstborn son—are banished by Avraham at Sarah’s insistence.

Avraham’s “Vayera Year” seems a lot like the year we’ve just had: Hurricanes in the South, wildfires in the West, unnatural disasters in Washington, D.C.; the assault on DACA, the relentless challenge to our health care; the president fanning flames of white supremacy, sexism, racism, transphobia, and anti-Semitism—much of this encapsulated in the Nazi-White Supremacists march in Charlottesville, Virginia where Heather Heyer (ז”ל) was murdered, 20 others were seriously wounded, and we—many for the first time—we in this room had to look at our children and tell them that Nazis were not simply in history books. Vayera. What a year we’ve witnessed and experienced.

So at the end of this year, when God asks Avraham to do the unthinkable, he numbly concedes. It’s as if he doesn’t have any capacity left to resist. It doesn’t excuse his behavior. But it does help us to understand him.

So how did Avraham the Activist—the one so committed to justice and human dignity—become the submissive Avraham of the Akeida?

“Hey—I tried,” we can imagine Avraham defending himself. “I cried out to the God of the Universe. I argued and debated and cajoled the Eternal One down to 10 righteous people in Sodom. And you know what? God said they didn’t exist.”

“What do you people want from me? I led history’s first protest movement. And I was defeated.”

We know what it likes to feel defeated you and I: to show up and organize and mobilize and protest with everything we’ve got. And these days, we know what it is like to lose... to feel that rain of fire, to collapse on the streets, to weep in despair.

It's exhausting. It's exhausting because we know that every march, every rally, every protest is ultimately pastoral. It's personal.

At the Vigil for Charlottesville where so many of us joined together in the rain as a sign of unity in the face of such ugly hatred, I met a woman named Chelsea. She was there with her fiancé and she came up after the vigil to thank me for including transpeople in my remarks. Her son is trans, she told me.

Mazal tov! I responded.

She burst into tears. We talked some more. We spoke of God creating every human being with wisdom and *kavannah*—holy intention. We wept and hugged.

At the vigils for Jamar (z"l), Philando (z"l), and Justine (z"l), people were rightfully outraged by police brutality—AND: there were hundreds of people weeping in each other's arms, devastated by violence, reaching out for hope, clarity, and comfort.

A number of people showed up, not merely in solidarity for an ideal. They showed up because they didn't want to be alone.

Every protest is pastoral.

People show up because yes, we want justice and because we're willing to be vulnerable, to bring the busted pieces of our hearts into the public square so together, we might redeem the world.

Justice, Dr. Cornell West teaches, is what love looks like in public.

We protest not merely to stand up to injustice. We protest to show our love in public. Marching, protesting, as Rabbi Heschel (z"l) taught, is "praying with our feet."

Yes, Avraham's protest failed.

Yes, a defeated Avraham was willing to sacrifice his child to God.

And yes, the story demands our insight, our compassion, and our commitment to spiritual resistance.

We will fail.

We will get knocked down.

We will be asked to participate in activities that offend the deepest promptings of our conscience.

And, still, like Isaac on the altar, we get back up.

Untie the fetters that bind us.

Reach out for one another's hands.

Rise like Avraham in protest.
 We Jews are the world's oldest protest movement.
 Avraham lost.
 But his descendants came back and challenged Pharaoh.
 Yes—we won that one.

We keep marching, we keep protesting, we keep showing up. Because this work is ultimately theological. John Halstead wrote in the Huffington Post a few weeks ago, “There’s four different ways that marches and other political demonstrations can transform our consciousness:

1. They help us own our pain for the world.
2. They help us see the truth of our interconnectedness.
3. They help us feel our power to change and heal.
4. And they call us to go forth into action.

[John Halstead, HuffingtonPost:
http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/us_59748067e4b06b511b02c414/amp?section=us_religion&utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=dlvr.it
]

Protests, he argues, are inherently spiritual.

Halstead seemed to be channeling Elie Wiesel (*z”l*) who was asked shortly before he died why he kept protesting and marching. “I don’t march because I believe I will change them. I march—I protest—so they don’t change me.”

Protesting, showing up, is a religious response, an Abrahamic response, to injustice in the world. Rising up, engaging in moral resistance is a dynamic act of faith, **a theological expression of hope: that our holy Jewish purpose is to close the gap between the way the world exists now from the way the world must be:** Overflowing with Divine love and compassion.

Showing up is the expression of our pain in public, it creates holy energy to give us strength, to believe that even as we hold agonizing pain and suffering:

we believe in redemption,

we believe in the possibility of transformation,

we believe in a world of justice, equality, and human dignity.

Protesting brings to life Jewish Theologian Martin Buber’s (*z”l*) understanding that God dwells in the space between people; vulnerable people who bring their broken, grieving, justice seeking hearts into the public square. Surely the Divine is present in those encounters!

There are three times in the Akeidah that Avraham says, “Hineini,” Here I am.

The first, when God calls him to sacrifice Isaac, he answers, “Hineini.” Avraham is isolated, lonely, despairing and consents to epic brutality.

The second Hineini, along their journey, when Isaac inquires about the wood for the burnt offering, Avraham answers, “Hineini b’nei” Here I am, my son. We feel the heart break in the moment when Avraham’s response foreshadows Isaac’s sacrifice.

The third and most urgent Hineini moment is as Avraham lifts the knife to slay his son and the holy messenger—the Malakh, the angel—cries out, “Avraham, Avraham,” V’yomer, “Hineini.” As the knife falls to the earth, Isaac’s life is spared. Avraham’s life is saved.

On the altar of despair. Collapsed. Broken. It is at that moment that Avraham lifts his eyes and sees that the story must continue, that he must rise.

Elie Wiesel proclaimed: **“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”**

We have marched and stood in vigil and protested, we put our bodies on the line for justice and human dignity—we who have collapsed in non-violent spiritual resistance, we who have proclaimed that dignity must be the cornerstone of our social policy, we who have marched and organized and mobilized for myriad of our Jewish values, we who have felt the oppressive weight of denigration and dehumanization whether it be for the first time or a lifetime, we now find ourselves bent over in grief. I understand in my *kishkes*—my guts—the pain of feeling defeated.

I can’t help but wonder if the story of the Akeida isn’t a powerful theological warning: If we protest on our own, if we “go it alone,” as Avraham did, if we allow ourselves to become isolated, it is all too easy to be defeated. And, once defeated, such overwhelming despair creates the possibility for participating in the unthinkable...

This story is hyperbole. But we know it. We read it. We soak in it. Perhaps it is a cautionary tale, an admonition that just like with prayer where a minyan is required—the 10 elusive and righteous people Avraham fought for in Sodom—so, too, a minyan is required for our justice work. In these sacred encounters, God’s presence is illuminated.

We will be called—you and I—in the days ahead, amidst the binding of our democracy upon an altar of callousness, to rise in spiritual resistance to segregation and humiliation and despair. We are called to step into that breach with love and commitment: with faith and resolute discernment about how we rise in ethical opposition to tyranny—to stand up to those craven leaders who bind our democracy upon an altar of racist despair. This requires sacrifice to leave the comfort of the sanctuary and join with fellow travelers in the streets, to share a message of relentless love: that we will not stand idly by as you bind the Isaacs of our generation to hopelessness and suffering. If God dwells high on a mountain top and in our sanctuary, certainly the Divine is present on the streets, in our cries for justice and human dignity.

V’yeishkem Avraham BaBoker: Avraham awoke and lifted his eyes.

The poet Maya Angelou (z"l), wrote in her remarkable poem, **Still I Rise**:

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise...

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise...
I rise
I rise
I rise.”

This morning, the first of our new year, we are called to engage in the creative moral resistance of re-imagining the story we must tell: a dynamic tale of human commitment, sacrifice for the common good, reclaiming our time and place in a society reverent for decency and compassion and justice. A shared community where every one of us comes before the public altar and like, Avraham, drops to our knees in humility, with an open heart, broken, hands lifted to the air: Hineini. Here I am.

What happens when we give it all we've got and still, we lose?

We are called to protest as Avraham did for the people of Sodom and Gemorra. We might fail. We probably will fail. We will fall. And we will rise. And we keep showing up.

Hineinu. Here we are.

Shanah Tovah.