

Saying What is Not Heard and Hearing What is Not Said
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5775
September 25, 2014

Once again we come to a troubled tale, seemingly out of place with the world we inhabit, and the values we cherish. The Binding of Isaac, known as the *Akedah* in Hebrew, is not to be explained away as every parent's folly, or every child's nightmare. It is dismissed too lightly – we get off too easily – if we just turn this into a metaphor of how one generation sometimes puts its ideology ahead of the real needs of their children, or we say that oh, well, the real story here is that, in being willing to give up what is precious, look, hey, we get to keep it in the end! A kind of “set it free to get it back” morality play.

No, let's face it head on. What Abraham does here is a travesty. It is incomprehensible. It borders on the inexcusable.

Worse, still, is the degree to which Abraham's obedience is held up as a virtue. Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, notes that “Abraham's surrender to God in the *akedah* (the binding of Isaac) has become the model of genuine religiosity. Abraham's ability to violate his deepest ethical values and bring his son as a sacrifice to God exemplified for traditional Jews the need to reject their deepest moral principles when they seem to contradict the halakhah (Jewish law).”

He cites, as an example, the case of an *agunah*, a woman whose husband refuses to grant her a religious divorce. Jewish law states that a man gives a woman a bill of divorce – and against a man unwilling to do so there is no Jewish legal recourse. She is, thus, “chained.” Even if divorced by the laws of the state, she cannot remarry in an Orthodox setting. (Acceptance of civil divorce, and the rejection of this coercive and one-side procedure, was, by the way, one of the very first “reforms” of our Reform movement of Judaism.) Hartman notes that, while Orthodox Jews may feel sympathy for an *agunah*, “nevertheless they surrender their moral outrage to halakhic authority. Yet,” he concludes “when halakha violates essential principles of justice, moral outrage is a far more appropriate response than passive acceptance of the authority of tradition.” And here, commanded to kill his own son, Abraham should have stood firm and screamed. He should have argued. He should have refused. Where is the outrage? Where is the protective parent? Where are the words of protest?

And yet... I am reminded of the fact, for a moment, that this is not, actually, the traditional reading for the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. Actually, it comes, in Orthodox and Conservative synagogues...on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah. It is preceded, in fact, by the preceding chapter. In it, Sarah is distressed when she sees Isaac and his half-brother Ishmael playing together, and she contrives to have Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar thrown out, presumably to simply die in the desert. (Where do we get the idea that our Biblical ancestors were such heroes?) Abraham complies, Hagar and Ishmael leave with minimal supplies, and when their water runs out Hagar separates herself from her son, and sits a distance apart, wanting to not look on as the child dies. And she cries.

She does not cry out. She does not protest. She just cries.

And then, in the next verse: "*Vayishma Elohim et Kol HaNa'ar...* in an obvious play on the name of the boy, we read that God *heard* the cry of the boy... whose name, Yishma'el, means "God will hear."

But what if it was not the cry of the boy that God heard? What if it was the protest of Hagar, the anger, the outrage... which she did not say out loud? What if the story comes to teach us that God heard that... which was not said?

As with Hagar, perhaps, so, too, here, with Abraham. He obeys. He goes along. But maybe the protest is there. He just didn't say it... out loud.

If so, then the lesson of these two readings is a different one indeed. That it is up to us, to read between the lines, to see beneath the surface, to care enough to hear even what is not being said.