

Passion

Shanah Tovah to everyone! May we all be blessed in the year 5779 with joy and peace. May it truly be a happy new year. Not a happy new year like the secular new year, of course, which usually means heavy drinking, shouting, and blowing noisemakers at midnight.

We also blow a noisemaker. But not at the moment the year changes. Our new year begins when we light the candles on Erev Rosh Hashanah, last night. We commemorate the new year with prayer, with t'shuvah, with tzedakah, and with a sincere desire to become better people in the coming year.

I am not sure why the secular new year is celebrated as it is. It may just be that people like staying up late, drinking heavily, and making a lot of noise. Or perhaps they are trying to cover up the fact that time is passing, that they have a sense of desperation. Perhaps some people go to loud parties because they feel a lack of meaning, a lack of purpose in their lives. While we commit to making meaning in ours.

And so we come to synagogue to hear the ancient prayers, the beautiful music, and read the Torah that our parents heard, our parents and our grandparents, and so on back thousands of years. We are the heirs of a great tradition of learning, of prayer, and of making meaning out of this difficult and beautiful world.

Traditionally Jews read from Genesis chapter 21 on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. The first rabbis chose that Torah for many reasons. The reading begins with the birth of Isaac, the first person born Jewish. Rosh Hashanah is a time of birth, a time of creation, and some felt that the birth of Isaac was the moment of creation of the Jewish people. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah the rabbis chose our reading today, the Binding of Isaac, because that was the Torah that followed immediately after the previous day's reading.

Reform Judaism decided, only semi-successfully, to get rid of the second day of Rosh Hashanah. When we did, the Reform rabbis decided that the Binding of Isaac would be better to read than the birth of Isaac, and so we came to do that reading on the first day.

The Binding of Isaac is an odd story. Gd does not behave like Gd in this story. We know Gd as the Creator, as the Gd of love, the Gd who builds up. Yes, we also hear of Gd who punishes, who destroys in righteous wrath. But always with reason, always when the punishment is deserved. In the verses Rachel read today so beautifully, we hear

of Gd the capricious. Gd the mean. A Gd who calls for human sacrifice.

Abraham is told not only to sacrifice his son, Isaac, whom he loves. Abraham is also asked to void the promise that Gd made to him. Abraham has been promised that his descendants will be like the stars of the sky and the sands of the shore. He has been promised that kings will come from him, that his childrens' children will rise up and inherit the land on which he dwells. And now he is asked to kill the son from whom all these blessings are to come.

And just as he is about to do it, just as he takes the knife in his hand and lifts it up, Gd says 'Just kidding. I didn't mean it.' What are we to make of this?

What is Gd after? What does Gd want from Abraham? Gd says: I was testing you, and "now I know that that you fear Gd..."¹ עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶתָּה | Now I know that you fear Gd.

Abraham has already done everything Gd has told him to do. He left his home. He changed his name. He has made a covenant with Gd, he has argued (cautiously) with Gd, he has waited patiently until he was 99 years old and his wife was 91 for Gd to give him a son. He circumcised himself with a rock. And *now* the Holy One knows that he fears Gd?

There may be some here who do not like the phrase 'to fear Gd.' I understand that. We fear things that are bad, or destructive, or dangerous. Doesn't Gd love us? Doesn't Gd take care of us? Why should we fear Gd?

In the old days, a religious person was described as 'Gdfearing.' It doesn't mean that he or she would go around scared all the time. It meant that person kept Gd's commandments, and viewed the world through a lens of Torah. It meant that person was passionate about Gd.

And the word יִרָא, which was translated above as 'fear,' can also be translated as 'to be in awe of,' 'to revere,' or 'to honor.'² To be יִרָא, then, was to be a person who thought of Gd, who honored Gd, who loved Gd. And perhaps more. Perhaps the person who is יִרָא, who is Gdfearing, is someone who is passionate about Gd.

We Reform Jews pride ourselves on our rationality, and certainly rationality is a wonderful thing. We embraced science and history. We are known for a love of culture.

1. Genesis 22:12

2. Brown, Driver, Briggs p. 431

But it may be the case that, in embracing rationality, we lost our passion for Gd.

After all, who is Gd? We Reform Jews denied the primitive notion that Gd was an old man with a beard sitting on a throne in the clouds, sending good or bad fortune to those who obeyed and disobeyed. That is not Gd, that is Santa Claus. With the great philosophers we defined Gd as a thought, as a notion, as a vibration. Gd was the unknowable Prime Cause, the Unmoved Mover. Our religion is clear that Gd has no form. These ideas of Gd are far removed from primitive beliefs, from superstition, from the self delusion we saw in others. We have a right to be proud of ourselves for how we think of Gd. Except for one thing.

How can you be in awe of a vibration? How can you love a Prime Cause? Where is the passion?

We miss it. We've lost it. We need it. Why do we love the Psalms so much? Why do we tell Hasidic stories? Because we see passion there, the passion that is often lacking in Reform prayer. The thing that made Judaism a great religion, the thing that led others to base their religions of Christianity and Islam on Judaism, was the tremendous connection between Jews and the Holy One, blessed be He. Over 50% of the people in the world are followers of Judaism or a religion that is based on Judaism. This is not trivial.

The power of our religion is that it is a great love story, a love story between the smallest of peoples and the greatest of Gds. Our covenant is not a contract, it is a ketubah, a love letter, a record of our joy and awe as we exult in Gd's love.

The psalm says "Elohim, you are my Gd! I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You like a parched and thirsty land that has no water."³

Because it is not enough that Abraham obeys Gd. It is not enough that he does what he is told. Gd wants to know if Abraham loves Him. Gd wants to know if Abraham is so in awe of Gd, so afraid, so joyous and so in love, that Abraham will do anything, anything for Him! Abraham is made blind and foolish by his passion for Gd, and therefore he is willing to sacrifice the son he loves. If Gd had asked Abraham to kill himself it would have been easier. But Abraham was willing to do this thing, the most difficult thing he could possibly have been asked to do.

We Reform Jews need to get that passion back. We need to feel that deep deep attachment to the holiness of this world. When people first fall in love, the one they love is all they can think about. When people get married, there is an incredible depth of emo-

3. Psalm 63:1

tion. When your children are born, you are deeply moved. Later, we take some of it for granted.

Yes, of course we love our children, we love our husbands and wives. But we take them for granted. We love them...theoretically. If, Gd forbid, one of them should have a life threatening illness, if one of them should be taken from us, then we remember how much we love them. Then the burning passion comes back. Then we find our prayer voice again, begging Gd to do something, to save the life we hold so precious.

Which is exactly what happens to Abraham.

Abraham is at the moment of loosing his son, the son he loves. He is also at the moment of loosing his Gd, the Gd he loves. Because how could Abraham make that sacrifice and still love Gd? Because if Gd said kill your son, Gd would not be the person that Abraham thought He was. Abraham believes that Gd is just, that Gd is love, that Gd is the One who binds up wounds and lifts up the righteous. Abraham will perform this awful deed, he lifts up the knife with the tears running down his face, and Gd says Abraham, do not stretch out your hand to the boy, do not bring any harm to him, because now I know that you are יִי אֱלֹהִים, now I know that your passion for Me is so great that even this thing you would do.

That is why we read the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah when the Jewish people renew our vows to Gd, when we remember that great love we shared when the covenant was written, when the world was new.

We cannot take this world for granted. We cannot take our families for granted. We cannot take our religion for granted. If we do, we lose the meaning, the passion, the depth that we are here on this earth to feel. If we do not grab the holiness of this world and hold on for dear life, we are missing what we are here for. Yes, we are rational, yes, we are free of an anthropomorphic and simplistic view of Gd, but sometimes we need to cast our rationality to the side and love Gd like an irrational child.

Marriage without passion is a pale imitation of marriage. If a parent does not love a child, the child will know it and it will always be a burden for the child to carry. And life without a passion for Gd, without a passion for holiness, without a passion for truth and meaning? It is a mere shadow of the life we were born to lead.

Oh Gd, beloved Father, loving Mother, wake us up! Let us feel that love in our hearts, for You, for your beautiful world, for our families and friends! Renew in us that burning passion that makes our lives meaningful, חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כַּקֶּדֶם, renew our days, oh renew our days oh Mighty Gd, as you did so long ago. Renew our days, renew our hearts,

renew our passion, so we can love you as Abraham did. So we can love you and your world as we were meant to do.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of beginnings. Let us begin to live our lives with passion. With true emotion. With fire. Let us remember the love we felt at the beginning, and renew our days as they were then. May the Blessed Holy One write you in the book for a life of joy, a life of health, a life of meaning, and above all, a life of true passion and commitment. Shana Tovah.