

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5746 - Take Your Child

You may have been wondering – knowing that my wife Renee and I welcomed our first child only two months ago – that somewhere, somehow the event would make it into at least one of my High Holyday sermons. Well, for those of you who had Erev Rosh Hashanah in the Addison sermon pool – you win. One of the moments that is still fresh in my mind from the past two months, and probably will be for a very long time to come, happened just a few moments after Addison entered our lives.

The doctor and one of the nurses was attending to Renee, and a couple of the other nurses were weighing, measuring, testing and cleaning Addie up for her first meeting with one of her parents. The nurse, with Addison in her arms, turned to me and said, ‘Take your child.’ It was a simple little phrase, but it carried a lot of punch. I took her, found myself lost in her eyes. At that moment when I held Addison in my arms and met her for the very first time I was filled with awe – plain, old, basic knock you socks off, simultaneous thrill and terrify you – awe. ‘Take your child’ -- For me those words mark the sacred moment when the idea of having a child, being a parent and everything in between became a reality.

As I said, the reality filled me with joy and a bit of terror. Why both? I think that the joy part is pretty well understood ... I mean the first time that your child smiles at you, responds to you and not to some gastronomic event ... well, that should be in the dictionary next to the word joy. I imagine that the joyous moments only build on that one. The terror, maybe not as talked about, but it is there too ... from the everyday things: how to manage the change in time and energy, how to pay for all of the things that the little one needs and eventually wants; how to keep him or her safe in this wonderful, but crazy world in which we live.

There is another aspect of this whole parenting thing that, upon hearing, ‘Take Your Child’, continues to excite and intimidate me. Parents are given the charge of nurturing this new soul in the world. It is this way that we can shape the world and leave our mark on it. It is a parent’s job to offer enough guidance for this soul to understand how the world works AND offering not too much guidance so that this soul can learn what it needs to learn and realize its own potential. A parent has to be smart enough to teach their child about good decision making and what paths are worth pursuing in life. But, a parent also has to be strong enough to at certain times in their lives let their child do the opposite of what the parent thinks is good decision making and what paths are worth pursuing in life.. The moments I love and appreciate my parents most are the moments that I am grateful for who I am and the freedom I have had to become who I am. The moments that I am most frustrated with them have been the moments that I have felt that my freedom got in the way of their wishes and desires for me.

‘Take your child.’ As I reflect on these words I heard two months ago, I realize they speak to me about the newest relationship in my life. These thoughts about how to balance guiding her and not surrendering her freedom are thoughts I have about all the relationships in my life. Tonight, on Rosh Hashanah, we begin the difficult but important road towards repairing, caring and cultivating the relationships in our lives.

So, tonight, these words speak to me about the potential and potency of each of our relationships -- especially in the dramatically different context that we will hear them tomorrow morning. 'Take your child' – these are the words that we will hear God command Abraham tomorrow morning. 'Take your child, your only child, your precious one ... these are the words that the Torah uses as it describes how God asks and Abraham acts to offer his child, Isaac, as a sacrifice on Mount Mariah.

We read these words a couple times during each calendar year, including each Rosh Hashanah. However, this year, more than any other year, these words challenge me, outrage me and compel me to make sense of this request and more significantly, Abraham's response. As a parent, Abraham's actions have the same impact upon Isaac that mine will have upon Addison. As a parent Abraham's actions serve to help or hinder Isaac realize his potential. As human beings, every relationship we know possesses the capacity to lift us, exalt us and define us ...and limit us, instill fear in us and even annihilate us. At the heart of our Teshuvah is understanding how we may act to realize the potential in our relationships with our children, our parents, our partners and our friends.

First let's examine the story. In the book of Genesis/Breishit, Abraham has heeded God's command to leave his homeland and take his family to a new place. Abraham and God have agreed to enter into a unique covenant – prescribing that God will take care of Abraham and his offspring, they will grow as many as the sands in the sea and the stars in the sky. Abraham promises to walk solely in God's path and bring others into the fold. One of the ways that God keeps the divine end of the bargain is to aid Abraham and his wife Sarah, who are both beyond the age of producing, in miraculously have a child, Isaac.

At the end of a series of tests that God has for Abraham, God saves the ultimate one for last – Abraham is commanded, "Take your child, your only child, your precious child and offer him as a sacrifice at a place that I will show you." Abraham, saddles his donkey, takes Isaac and two of his servants and travels with them for three days, until God indeed shows Abraham the place. Abraham and Isaac ascend Mt. Mariah. Abraham and Isaac build the altar together. Then Abraham binds Isaac to the altar. Abraham lifts his sword to kill his son ... and in swoops an angel of God and cries, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not hurt the boy." Abraham complies and finds an ram in the thicket to offer in Isaac's place. The angel, on behalf of God, reaffirms the terms of the covenant between Abraham and God, and Abraham goes on to Beer Sheva.

Scores of rabbis, commentators, biblical scholars, philosophers, theologians, and most urgently, parents and children have attempted to understand this horrific vignette. Some portray this story as medium to convey God's abhorrence for human sacrifice ... with Abraham as a willing partner in this dramatic presentation. Mostly the interpreters attribute the tale as a testimony of the immeasurable faith of Abraham – perhaps part of the rationale of choosing this portion to be read on Rosh Hashanah. The midrash tells us this event was the last in a series of ten tests which God put Abraham through, I would imagine that after number 6 or 7 the matter of Abraham's faith was fairly secure. This event is not a matter of faith. When Abraham took the rope and bound Isaac to be sacrificed, he bound more than his hands and feet, but he bound up, he tied up, and he began to suffocate Isaac's soul. In following what he truly believed in his heart of hearts, he inevitably would tragically,

painfully take away something precious from Isaac -- his freedom. From the moment that God says to Abraham, Take Your Child - this event becomes a matter of what is at the core of the Jewish religion – how we treat other human beings, particularly those closest to us. After all, is there any relationship as close or intense as that between parent and child?

We are very similar to Abraham. Yes, God does not call us in the manner that Abraham was called; we do not hear “Abraham, Abraham”, or “Adam, Adam.” Nor do we take our loved ones to an altar to take a knife to them to kill them. But, on a more basic level our lives, our values, and our dreams do not diverge so dramatically from Abraham and his family. Abraham and Sarah struggled to create a world that would be better for themselves and their children and their children’s children - as do we. Abraham’s struggle incorporated a need to find meaning and order in his universe – as does ours. Abraham enters into a covenant with God to secure the strength and vitality for his future generations -- an agreement which he hopes will allow his family to find peace. A hope that we share, as well.

Within the potential of relationship lay the perils of relationship -- that those we love with the highest intensity, the deepest passion, and most delicate intimacy are those whom we hold the greatest potential to harm. The Torah narrative goes to great lengths to tell us about the precious nature of Abraham and Isaac’s relationship. To the point of absurdity the text states 9 times (as if we were not sure already) that Abraham is Isaac’s father and Isaac is Abraham’s son; and noting not one, not two, but three times (Vayaylchu Sh-nay-haym yach-dav) that Abraham and Isaac walked together – as if to make special note about the closeness of Abraham’s and Isaac’s relationship. The text is saying to us, this test involves the relationship between a parent and a child, is there one more precious? Abraham loved Isaac, in fact this point is the most difficult to realize -- and perhaps it is the point of this story. Abraham loved Isaac more than anything -- he was his son given to him miraculously at an old age; Isaac was so loved BUT Abraham still almost killed him. The Torah is reminding us of a difficult truth - we hurt our loved ones, and they hurt us.

One of the most terrible things that we can do to one individual is to take away their being, their sense of freedom. In the mid 1990s an interesting situation found its way into the public eye. Bennie Agrelo was a 12 year old boy who knew about freedom. He suffered from kidney failure and the anti-rejection medicine that he had ingested after his kidney transplant filled his existence with excruciating pain. He knew pain better than any adult he knew. He knew pain better than the doctors knew medicine. He knew pain better than the social workers knew about the value of life. Benny always believed that he had the freedom to be whoever and heal however he saw fit. He thought that on account of his pain, his knowledge, his experience, his feelings gave he and only he the right, to decide about his life. His faulty kidneys had taken away a great deal, but they had not taken away his freedom. The doctors, the social workers, and the appropriate authorities did not believe that he deserved this freedom. They did everything in their power to take it away and force him to endure more pain for a chance to live longer. Their intentions were true – the preservation of his life was their sole intention. This belief inspired them to fight for this boy’s life even if he chose not to fight. It is a tragic example of how we bind the souls of others in attempting to fulfill our own beliefs. Ironically while they were trying to preserve his body, they actually were murdering/suffocating his soul.

May it never be as tragic as the case of Benny Agrelo, but sometimes in our relationships we do not allow our loved ones, our children, our parents, our partners to be who they are, to believe as they choose -- it is a peril of being human. We simply cannot always see beyond what we believe, what we think is important, to allow our loved ones the freedom to do the same.

What a spine chilling suggestion, that sometimes when we pursue our most cherished values and beliefs -- that our loved ones become casualties to our vision. It is a paradox because it is this pursuit of meaning, which makes us human. We strive to make order in our universe, to relish in those moments when we encounter divinity. Abraham's struggle, his potentially horrific act was encased in this struggle for meaning, for order, and for God. Did he actually believe that he would find a more meaningful association with God on the heels of the death of his son? Abraham believed that this was what he needed to do to reach the next plateau of relationship. The truth is ... *He never did* – If you examine the text of the Torah you will find that God never speaks directly with Abraham for the remainder of his Biblical life. Note, when we read tomorrow morning that it is God's angel who orders Abraham to stop the slaughter on behalf of God. And also note that the angel did not promise anything that God had not already promised Abraham before, nothing less and assuredly nothing MORE. What if Abraham actually FAILED this test? What if he was supposed to see the true ramifications of binding his son? What if he was supposed to know that taking away the freedom of his son's soul was the most undivine, unholy, aspiritual way one human being can at toward another? What if Abraham was supposed to say, NO!?

One of my favorite storytellers is the late, great Harry Chapin. One of his stories, which is actually in the form of a song, he tells the story of a young boy in art class at his elementary school. The assignment: draw a garden of flowers. So he asks himself, 'What color are flowers?' He thought and thought and realized that -- "There are so many colors in the rainbow, there are so many colors in the morning sun, there are so many colors in the flowers, and I see every one." So he drew flowers in a variety of traditional and not-so-traditional colors. Upon review of his work, his teacher scolded him -- "Flowers are red young man, and green leaves are green. There is no need to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen." After a few attempts at proper flower coloring ... the young man acquiesced and gave up on his ideas of the many and varied colors of flowers and dutifully made his flowers red and the leaves, green. After a while, this young man eventually found his way to another school system. In this school system when faced with a similar assignment ... he attempted to paint his flowers the way he was taught by the last teacher, remembering, "Flowers are red young man, green leaves are green, there is no reason to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen." His new teacher, recognizing the gift that had been taken away from the young man, hopefully and encouragingly began to return this precious gift to him and told him, "There are so many colors in the rainbow, so many colors in the morning sun, so many colors in the flowers and I see every one."

In the context of our relationships we all respond at times like that of the little boy and of both teachers. We are like the young boy, asking what color are flowers, when we ask ourselves what kind of people do we want to be and how to accomplish that end. We respond like the first teacher in the story, at the times we inhibit the people we care about when they strive to respond to the same questions. Sometimes our loved ones see many

colors in their flowers, but our own beliefs do not allow them to do so and we respond with fear or anxiety. As that teacher's beliefs squelched the boy's freedom to respond to his question; we squelch the freedom of our loved ones when we bind their souls by our beliefs. And sometimes, we are able to strive to respond as the second teacher did – recognizing the gift of freedom of self of each person and courageously celebrating that gift and helping it to grow.

Take your child. At this New Year, may these words remind us that the nature of relationship is filled with pitfalls and potential. As parents, children, and partners in relationships the most holy, godlike act we can perform is to acknowledge and nurture the soul in each other. This time of year, these ten days of repentance, Abraham and Isaac bid us to return to this value. They bid us to examine our relationships and see how we have bound the ones we love and seek forgiveness in their eyes, they bid us to remove our own bonds and forgive those who placed them upon us, they bid us to try once again as we embark upon another year to encounter the divine through our freedom and the freedom of others. My prayer for us in this new year is that our forgiveness be limitless, our love be endless, and our relationships be boundless and that somehow we find the freedom to see every color in our flowers and grant others the freedom to do the same.