

## “On Faith”

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This morning we read again this very wonderful story of a father and son. Abraham is told to sacrifice his son, Isaac willingly goes along and then something magical happens. Father and son walk together. Bound by an implicit understanding that what they are doing and where they are going will be shown to them by God. Father and son bound by what it means to have faith; in each other, in their destiny, in our connection to them through our reading of this beautiful story, and in God.

This story is beautiful? Rabbi Keller and I always teach our Chevrah Torah group, whom we consider friends and partners in bringing us closer to the text, the Torah, like life, is not as prosaic as we think. It is the poetry, the complexity and the color of the text where we can find meaning. For us, this is a story about the complexities of faith and the healing power of understanding that we cannot always understand the ways of the universe.

### **The Virtues of Faith**

In our increasingly complex and harsh world where we seek the easy and quick answers to even the most daunting of questions, we must also realize the virtue of faith. Faith is antithetical to the immediate gratification we seek in the world around us. It is opposite the “stuff” of a society that enables us to act with the worst possible behaviors and conflicting ideas of what is true and real.

Where society teaches us that our existence should ultimately be about what we can get, when we can get it and if we can't get it who we need to go to in order to get it, faith teaches us patience. Where society teaches us to rush through our daily tasks in order to run to the next task; to busy ourselves in the mundane in order to get more, make more and find more of whatever it is we are looking for, faith teaches us to slow down and soothe ourselves. Where society burdens us with material pressures, artificial signs of what it believes to be important, faith teaches us perspective.

We are taught that King Solomon, on his deathbed, wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes in which he exhorts us by stating, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has humanity from all the work they do? That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done and there is nothing new under the sun.”

Perhaps then, there is no greater virtue than faith. Faith instructs us, as did Solomon, that vanity is its enemy. We become so self possessed, self indulgent and self focused that we forget the virtues of faith; the faith of our fathers and

mothers – the faith of Abraham and Isaac which we are reminded today in the story we are about to read.

It is an amazing thing, to sit on the floor of the classrooms in our preschool and speak about God with our children. They do not think about God in the ways of their parents. No, children seek to understand God in profound ways. “Why did God create us?” they ask, “Who created God?” they wonder and their curiosity takes them to great heights and their faith gives them comfort. I wonder, when does it all break down for them? When do they begin to lose their faith? When do they begin to seek questions with definitive answers and seek to understand God in the black and white questions and answers of their parents?

I guess they lose their faith when it no longer seems feasible, when the false virtues of immediate gratification “trump,” the delayed gratification of a life of faith. Our children know patience, believe it or not, and perspective in ways their parents and grandparents no longer hold as virtuous.

### **Faith Takes Discipline**

So, how do we instill the innocence of our youth and the kind of faith we learn from Abraham and Isaac? The sound of the shofar rings in our ears, “Wake up!” “Focus!” “Stop thinking about yourself for just a moment!” “It’s not just about you, it’s about the world! The world is broken and God needs your help!” “Wake up!”

Once we wake up we realize faith takes work and discipline and a lot of patience. Becoming a person of faith takes the kind of “stuff” that can make our minds, bodies and spirits very messy!

In his wonderful book, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us

“Faith in the living God, is not easily attained. Had it been possible to prove God’s existence beyond dispute, atheism would have been refuted as an error long ago. Had it been possible to awaken in every person the power to answer God’s ultimate question, the great prophets would have achieved it long ago.... There is no faith at first sight. A faith that comes into being like a butterfly is ephemeral. The one who is swift to believe is swift to forget. Faith is preceded by awe, by acts of amazement at things that we apprehend but cannot comprehend.”<sup>1</sup>

When we speak of living a disciplined life in seeking faith we do not speak of it in the ways of those fundamentalists or of those who are strict “constructionists” of biblical theology. For them faith is over simplified into “right” and “wrong” behaviors, acts and deeds. For them, faith means there is one question and one answer with neither complexity nor nuance.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1959). Page 199.

Heschel continues, “He who seeks a God to suit his astuteness, to appease his vanity, to satisfy his curiosity, will find at the end a figment of his imagination. He who goes out to seek God on a bridge of abstract demonstrations will arrive at a castle in the air. Only a bridge made of life itself, of deeds of compassion, of instants of wonder, of moments of reverence, will lead us to an understanding of what faith has to say.”<sup>2</sup>

My guess is that you are a lot like me insofar as many of us have a great deal to do in this “department” of our lives. To seek opportunities for deeds of compassion, to look at the world around us and acknowledge instants of wonder, to find within our souls moments of reverence all leading to faith. Meanwhile, we sit and wait and wait, and God waits seeking us at any opportunity when we may reach out. “Wake up!” Our ancestors have bequeathed this faith to us.

### **Faith Can Heal Us**

Every Friday and Saturday we celebrate Shabbat together. Our community is a wonderful place to find the healing power of faith through prayer. Those who worship with us find, as our Prayerbook states, that “Prayer invites God to let the Divine Presence suffuse our spirits, to let the Divine will prevail in our lives. (That) prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will.”<sup>3</sup>

I am amazed each time someone approaches me after a Shabbat evening Service. They tell me that they leave the Sanctuary feeling better than they did all week; that they should really commit to coming more often; that they “miss it.” I agree with them whole heartedly. I understand that it is not one thing in particular which makes our Services so spirited but rather a culmination of prayer, song, thought and even the silence which is harnessed by a community joining together which brings us closer to God.

It is not only these experiences which bind us to God and to each other, but the experiences we feel and sense all around us. These are the prayers of our hearts and souls which can be found in the quiet moments when no one else is around. These are the prayers which link us to our ancestors who are no longer with us, when we speak to God through them. These are the prayers which enable us to keep faith even in the darkness of our broken hearts and the sadness of loss.

Thus prayer, in all types, forms and means can become THE vehicle of our faith. It represents our willingness and desire for connection with God. And when we pray with full hearts and the intention is to seek God we can find and understand that the healing power of the words of our hearts and the meditations of our minds will also bring us closer to each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., page 67.

<sup>3</sup> Chaim Stern (ed.), Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook. (CCAR Press, New York, 1975).

## **Conclusion**

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg posits the following response to the fundamental nature of Judaism:

“Judaism’s fundamental assertion is that human life and history are rooted in the divine, an infinite source of life and goodness. History, therefore, is moving toward a final perfection. At the end, human life will be redeemed and every human will attain his or her fullest expression as a creature created in the image of God. In that age, the infinite vale, equality and uniqueness of every human being will be upheld by the realities of the world; there will be no oppression or exploitation, there will be adequate resources to take care of every single life appropriately. The physical, emotional and relational aspects of the individual’s life will be perfected.”<sup>4</sup>

This is what our covenant of faith means. Not faith for the sake of faith, but a faith as strong as Abraham’s which represents our ability to believe in God even in the darkest and most challenging times of our lives. A faith which represents our desire to partner with God in the ongoing perfection of the world. A faith which will bring us closer to each other and enable the will of God for love and peace to prevail.

This is what the Akedah represents on all levels. This morning we recall the “trial of Abraham.” It is not a story about a crazy God asking our even crazier ancestor to take his son’s life. It is a story, however, about the balance we must make each day between the reality of the world around us and the unwavering passion of a faith which reminds us that we are not alone.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Iriving (Yitz) Greenberg, “The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History,” in Perspectives: A Clal Thesis. (CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, New York 1981). Page 1.