

"THE AKEDAH -- AGAIN"

My theme this morning is the Akedah, which I shall treat subjectively, even autobiographically.

I confess that for a long time I have had difficulties with the Akedah story, the command of God to Abraham to bind Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice, saving him only at the last minute. The Akedah has always both fascinated and troubled me.

The disturbing element has not been the philosophical one, namely, how can God demand of man that he be prepared for such a horrendous sacrifice? I am satisfied that some causes are worthy of the greatest sacrifice. I think it is the glory of man that he cherishes some things more than life itself, more than the greatest human love.

The imperative for such ultimate sacrifice is innate in man. At every stage of creation, the divine reaction was ki tov, "behold, it is good." But after man was created, which according to tradition took place on Rosh Hashanah, we read that the Creator beheld his creation, Ve'hineh tov me'od, "and behold, it was very good." Whereupon the Midrash records a rather startling comment of Rabbi Meir: Hineh tov me'od -- hineh tov mavet, "it is very good" refers to -- death!

What could Rabbi Meir have meant by identifying the "very good" of man as death? A dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, has interpreted this to mean that only that for which you are willing to die, is it worth living. Only when there is something that is worth giving you life for, is life itself "very good." In his words, "For what shall a man live? For that for which he would die."

So I have no problems with the concept of the Akedah as such. It is human to sacrifice.

My difficulties with the Akedah are far different, and far simpler. I am frightened by how small it makes me feel. The demands it places on me are too great. When I measure myself against Abraham and Isaac, I feel inadequate, shallow, trivial. My ancestor Abraham gave more than his own life -- the life of his precious son; but what about me? What have I ever done for Yiddishkeit? What have any of us ever done that approaches the Akedah even remotely?

Of course, the mind spins out its rationalizations, some primitive, some sophisticated. I told myself that Abraham was remote,

both chronologically and in cultural ambience, and that a man of ancient Mesopotamia cannot really serve as a model for twentieth century man. I agreed avidly with the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who applied to Abraham the title of, "the Knight of Faith." That placed Abraham in an altogether different category. He could make such sacrifices. I, however, an ordinary mortal, beset by the usual weaknesses and perhaps a few more -- I am certainly not a hero. I therefore cannot aspire to the knighthood of faith. That remains the super-human vocation of an Abraham.

But I must tell you that all my rationalizations are empty, all my excuses lame, all my sophisticated explanations ring hollow, and all my self-serving illusions are shattered and lie in ashes. Why so? Deep down, I knew all along that I was evading the Akedah. But something I read this summer forced it into my consciousness. Now I have no choice but to confront it directly.

In the course of preparing a series of lectures on "The Holocaust and The Halakhah," which I hope to deliver on Saturday afternoons beginning in several weeks, I chanced upon a teshuvah (responsum) written by a Rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Hirsh Meisels, who died in Chicago this past year.

^{Sixteen} The author was in Auschwitz in the 1940's. The question presented to him concerned something that happened on a Rosh Hashanah day in that death camp. In that section of Auschwitz there were sixteen hundred boys, aged fourteen to eighteen. The Nazi commandant of the camp decided that he needed a number of them for slave labour, and the rest would be put to death. And so he ordered one of those infamous "selections." He set up what looked like a wooden gallows, a vertical pole with a horizontal pole extending from it. He then had the boys walk past it. Whoever was tall enough, so that his head touched the horizontal pole, was considered strong enough to work, and would be kept alive. All those who were too short were sent to a special bunker where they were denied food or water, and prepared for the crematorium that night -- the eve of the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The children quickly realized what was going on. Those who were too short stood tiptoe in order to reach the wooden beam. But when they did, Nazi guards with rubber truncheons would bludgeon them to death. And so, fourteen hundred children were sent to the bunker, there to await death that night. ^{bar}

When this became known, panic gripped the Jewish inmates of Auschwitz. Many had their children, their only children, or relatives or friends in that group of fourteen hundred. The children were guarded by the Kapos, the Jewish police, who were usually the lowest of the low. They would not and could not release any of the children, because they had to produce the exact number of

children for the S.S.; were any missing, the kapos themselves would be put to death. However, they were willing to accept bribes and exchange children! Some of the inmates had some money tucked away in an article of clothing, or some jewels between their toes, and so parents and relatives rushed to the kapos in an attempt to redeem their children. However, before taking a child out, the kapos would hunt for a child not condemned to death and pull him into the bunker so that the total number of condemned youngsters would remain the same. In other words, in order to save one child, you knew that another Jewish lad would surely be put to death.

And so, a simple Jew from Oberland came to Rabbi Meisels and said to him: "According to the Torah, am I permitted to redeem my only child, whom I love more than life itself, who is now in that bloc? I have the means to ransom him. I know that if I do, some other hapless Jewish child will be killed in his place. Am I permitted to do so or not?"

The Rabbi attempted every which way to evade the responsibility of having to give an answer. "I can't," he said, "I can't give you an answer! It is the sort of question which is worthy of a Sanhedrin. I don't even have any books to consult here in Auschwitz." But the Jew would accept no evasion. In his book ("מקדשי השם"), Rabbi Meisels quotes verbatim the remarks of this Jew in the Yiddish in which they were spoken:

רבי איך האב געטאהן דאס
מייניגע וואס דא תורה איז מיר מחייב צי א טאהן.
איך האב געפרעגט א שאלה ביי א רב אין קיין אנדערער
רב איז דא נישט דא. אין אז איהר קענט מיר נישט
ענטפערן, דאס איך מעג אויסלייזן מיין קינד, איז
דאך א סימן אז איהר זענט ביא אייך נישט פערטיג
אין דא הלכה מתיר צי זיין. ווארין ווען עס וואלט
געוועהן מותר, בלי שום פקפוק, וואלט איהר דאך מיר
זיכער געענטפערט, אז עס איז מותר. הייבט דאס ביא
מיר וויא א פסק דין, אז איך טאהר נישט על פי ההלכה.
אין דאס איז ביא מיר געניג, אין ממילא וועט מיין
איינציג קינד פארברענט ווערן עס"י התורה וההלכה
בין איך דאס מקבל באהבה ובשמחה, אין איך טיט
גאר נישט. איהם אויס צי לייזן ווייל דא תורה האט
אזוי געהייסן. עכ"ל.

Rabbi, I have fulfilled my duty to which the Torah obligates me. I asked a question of a Rabbi, and there is no other Rabbi here. And if you cannot answer me that it is permitted for me to ransom my child, that is a sign that you are not at

all certain that the Halakhah permits me to do so; for if it would be permitted without any doubt, you of course would immediately tell me that I am allowed to save my only son. I therefore accept this as your halakhic verdict, that according to the Halakhah I may not save my child at the expense of some other. That is sufficient for me. Therefore my only child will be burnt to death according to the Torah and the Halakhah. And I accept that with love and with joy, and I do nothing to redeem him, because that is what the Torah has told me.

Rabbi Meisels adds his own postscript:

That entire day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jew walked back and forth, talking to himself, in euphoria, telling himself that he had the privilege to offer up his only son to the Lord even though he was able to redeem him; but nevertheless, he did not redeem him because he saw that the Torah would not permit him to do this, and therefore, let this act be accepted before God like the Akedah of our Father Isaac, which also occurred on Rosh Hashanah day.

So, never mind the complexities of the Halakhah and the subtleties of the legal decision. The moral and halakhic issues were clear enough -- and so was the compelling love of this poor man for his only son, and his sublime commitment to Torah and God and morality. And this happened not to a Knight of Faith four thousand years ago in ancient Canaan or Mesopotamia, but -- surprise of surprises! -- on this very planet, in Europe, just thirty years ago! The Akedah -- all over again!

This is only one example of the Akedah during the Holocaust. But it happened not only then. It happens now too. It happened last year. It happened this year.

Just eight days ago, on Tuesday September 10th, we had a Sofer (scribe) here at The Jewish Center. You may recall that we announced that on that day a scribe would be here to examine and correct your Tefillin and Mezzuzot. A number of you brought

these articles here for such examination. The scribe is Mr. Mechaber, a Sephardic Jew. He did not look well, and I inquired after the reason. His composure suddenly melted, and he broke down and told me: "The High Holidays are approaching, and that means the first Yahrzeit of my only son who was eighteen years old when he was killed on the Bar Lev line on Yom Kippur day." He raised his eyes to Heaven, picked up his hands, and said, Et hakol natati lamedinah. "Everything have I given for the State"!

That was his Akedah. Multiply that by twenty five hundred and you have the evidence of the Akedah this past year alone.

This is what shatters me, what makes me feel so trivial and petty and unworthy and insignificant. Because the Akedah is a recurring theme, be'khol dor va-dor, in every generation. I am expected to be ready for it, and you are expected to be ready for it. The Torah considers that I am capable of it, and that you are capable of it. And it therefore embarasses me. And you. All of us! Because I look around me, and I look at myself, and I see how we live, and how tenuous are our convictions, and how our Avodat ha-Shem is done without simchah, how we practice our Jewishness so begrudgingly, as if we are doing God a great favor!

And what, after all, is it that we are asked to do on this Rosh Hashanah? To sacrifice our oldest sons, as did Abraham? No, not in America. In Israel, yes! But not in America. All we are asked to do is to be serious Jews, be better Jews, sacrifice just a bit -- and don't chafe and wear a martyr complex on your lapel because of it!

What are all those demands and restraints and sacrifices that we American Jews in 1974 consider so onerous and so taxing?--

- That we continue to support Israel through the UJA and bonds and travel even when it is not safe?

- That we support the synagogue both financially and by using it?

- That in times of recession and inflation we do not cut off charity as the first item in the budget to go?

- That occasionally we attend a rally for Russian Jews and invite a Russian Jewish family to our home?

- That men who, despite all their busy schedules, find time religiously for tennis or bridge, should also find a little time religiously to attend a She'ur?

- That women not use their continuing education and career, after having children, as an excuse for abandoning the Jewish community, from Sisterhood to Mizrahi Women, from Hadassah to Federation to Yeshiva University?

- That we send our children to Jewish schools and Jewish camps?

- That we observe Kashrut and Shabbat, despite the ridicule of ignorant and self-hating Jews?

- That we abide by principles, instead of losing ourselves in our perpetual status-seeking, and our indulgence in a hedonistic frenzy?

Are these the things that we do as great acts of sacrifice on behalf of God and Torah and Israel and Judaism? -- or, worse, that we fail to do on their behalf?

How distressing when we measure such concerns against the Akedah which is being lived and relived and re-lived by so many others!

So, the whole point of the Akedah story is that we are the children of Abraham and Isaac, that we are capable of genuine greatness, that the capacity for ultimate sacrifice is in our genes and chromosomes, in our blood and in the very marrow of our bones. And it is therefore a scandal if we let ourselves become petty, if we undersell and underestimate ourselves.

One of the great luminaries in the dynasty of the Rabbi of Ger, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger, author of Hidushei Ha-Rim, and known by the name of that work, was once asked by ^{some} one of his Hasidim: "Why is it that Jews cry (in the days when Jews would shed a tear during prayer...) when they recite the words of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayer, Adam yesodo me'afer ve'sofu le'afar, Man's origin is dust and his end is in dust. If, they ask, man's origin were gold or silver or platinum, and his end in dust, then we could understand weeping and wailing. But if he begins in dust and ends in dust, then the books balance, and there is no total loss. Why weep?"

The Rabbi answered: "It is true, man's origin is in dust and he ends in dust. However, although his origin is in dust, he is endowed by his Creator with the capacity to raise the dust ad lev ha-shamayim, to the very heart of the Heavens. And when he fails in this mission, when he is born in dust and grovels in dust, and barely ever raises his head above the dust, and spends his life building his castles and palaces all in the dust, and forgets

to reach upwards, and fails to try to raise the dust of the earth to the heart of the Heavens, then indeed there is something to cry about!"

That is why I am so troubled by the Akedah, which is the central message of Rosh Hashanah, and the Shofar which symbolizes the Akedah as the horn of the ram that was offered in place of Isaac. It is precisely what Rosh Hashanah and Akedah and Shofar must do for us: it must accusingly remind us of the greatness that is within our grasp, of the heroism and the knighthood of faith, of the fierce loves and the sublime commitments which are our historic graces, our ethnic endowments, our individual gifts -- whether on Mount Moriah or in Auschwitz, whether on the Bar-Lev line or on the West Side of Manhattan. It is a symbol of the Heavens to which we can raise this paltry dust which is our body and our life -- a symbol as long and as great as the distance between the heart of the Heavens and the dust of the earth.

And even as it is disturbing and accusing in pointing out the difference between our capacities and our realities, it is also an inspiration. It summons us to remember that, as the Rabbis put it, Shofar is related to the Hebrew Shefer, "beautiful." Shapru ma'aseikhem, the Rabbis said, is the message of Shofar: be good Jews, be better Jews, be serious Jews, above all: be beautiful Jews -- what once used to be called "Sheine Yidden."

And just as the Shofar and the Akedah are a double symbol that speaks to us in accents of both accusation and inspiration, so is the Shofar a message that we send to God -- a prayer, perhaps even a kind of accusation, and, yes, an inspiration. It is an inspiration: behold, O Lord, how Abraham and the Akedah still live! Behold your Jews so ready to sacrifice for You, for Your Torah, for Your people! Behold how this people of the Shofar are a people of Shefer! They are beautiful.

And it is prayer: God Almighty, enough! No more Akedahs! No more Holocausts! No more Yom Kippur Wars or any other wars! Even if You are worth it, even if we are ready for it, don't ask for it!

So the sound of the Shofar is a wordless summons to us and a wordless prayer to God. It is the ultimate dialogue, though a word is not spoken. It is wordless, and speaks volumes; it says all there is to say -- and much more.

Let us therefore listen most attentively to what the Shofar says to us, and in our minds let us, with that same sound of

Shofar, send back our message to our Father in Heaven.

Alah Elokim bi'teruah. When such a message is sent to God, He rises, as it were. And when such a message is sent to us, let us, in awe and reverence, in fear and trembling, in love and devotion, rise for the sound of the Shofar.