

But I'm Not Wrong (Akedah)

Second Day Rosh

Hashanah 5775

Rabbi Sarah Bassin

It's Rosh Hashanah. We all know that between now and Yom Kippur, there's spiritual work that we have to do. But there's spiritual work... and then there's spiritual work.

We know the basics of what this high holiday season requires of us. Take stock of ourselves... reflect on what we did wrong, ponder through what we need to do to fix it... and come up with our list of who deserves an apology along the way. The basics aren't always easy. For starters, we have to actually remember what we did.... And a year is a lot of territory to cover. Then once we remember, we have our pride to overcome in getting the apology out. It's hard work.

But there's an even deeper level of spiritual work to be done on the high holidays. Because there are times when we're not wrong... when even after a year of reflection, we look back and know that what we were in the right. What do we do then? What do we do when there's a lingering brokenness and we know we are not at fault. What do we do when no admission of guilt is warranted? When no apology is owed?

The story of Abraham forces us to face this exact question at this time each year. When Abraham “takes his son, his only son, the one that he loves, Isaac” up to Mount Moriah – ready to sacrifice him to God... we see a principled man – a man doing what he KNEW to be right. After all, God told him to. We don’t get more certain than that. Yet, I would imagine for most of us, we feel squeamish at his action. Willingness to murder one’s own child does not feel right. It feels wrong to celebrate his rightness – to admire his stand on principle.

I looked to the Jewish sages to offer a different interpretation – a way out – a way not to affirm his action. But they all left me wanting. At most, they express discomfort – they hint to the inner struggle Abraham faced when God asked him to kill his son. None of our core commentators... not Rashi, not Nachmanides... not one of them condemns Abraham for the zealotry of his principles. Not one of them calls Abraham’s rightness into question.

So I looked deeper into the text itself for answers. After the episode is over, “vayashav Avraham el na’arav vayakumu v yelchu yachdav el beer sheva.” Abraham returned to his servants and they left for beer sheva together. Abraham returned to his servants... but not with Isaac. If I were Isaac, I would also have been too upset to travel back with the parent who just tried to kill me. But it’s not only Isaac. It’s Abraham’s wife Sarah too. In the Torah, after Abraham returns from the episode of attempted murder, we never see Sarah speak to him again. Ever. Right after Abraham returns, the next thing we know... Sarah dies. Sarah dies of shock... of a broken heart... The last image in her mind is of her beloved husband with his hand raised against her only child.

Abraham comes back without Isaac. Sarah has nothing to say to her husband before she dies. And even God never speaks to Abraham again. After this episode, that direct line of communication they had with the covenants and the promises – it's done. Abraham may have been principled, but his principles destroyed his most central relationships. How confused Abraham must have been by all of this – to feel so certain and so right in his principle of faith only to be met with rejection by those he loved most.

And we're left confused too. On one of the holiest days of the year, we're given this story of a zealously principled man willing to go to absurd extremes? I didn't get it. It bothered me for years trying to massage out the moral discomfort of the text. But this year I realized maybe we've been focusing on the wrong part of the story. Maybe this is not a story about Abraham's faith as much as it is about his brokenness at the end. Maybe our take away is that there is something more important than being right.

Resting on principle cannot be the only thing that determines how we live our lives. Our principles are meant to get us to a particular end. But when being right becomes an end in and of itself, our actions become misguided. Abraham's faith in God is to be admired. His zealotry... not so much. When we stand on principle, we risk blinding ourselves to the collateral damage left in our wake. We risk not seeing ourselves cross that invisible line from being right to being unreasonable. We risk becoming destructive like Abraham.

We can't live in a world in which we see being right a kind of achievement in and of itself. It's not. An Orthodox thinker – Blu Greenberg reminds us that flexibility is essential to the integrity of our tradition. “Where there is a rabbinic will, there is a halakhic way,” she says. When rabbis want to respond to the needs of people, even within the confines of Orthodoxy, we have that room. And American philosopher John Herman Randall Jr. captured what he called “The importance of being unprincipled.”

“Now anybody who is at all capable of learning anything from experience knows that the only way to get along with people, the only way to do anything together with anybody else, is through [bending our principles]. You don't need exceptional brains to realize that; you need only to be married or to have a friend. Cooperation between human beings is possible only if you are willing to compromise principles.”

In his essay, Randall draws the analogy from the personal to the political. He seems to say that we all know that being right in our relationships isn't the entire story... so it can't be true in our political system either. But I wonder if we really internalize this message in our personal lives as deeply as he imagines. Have we really mastered this skill of choosing those whom we love over being right?

I came across a self-help column with this woman lamenting a falling out that she had with a friend. “Since this incident, we have not spoken even once,” she wrote. “I know I am biased but I really feel that I was not at fault. I had assumed all along that she would call to apologize and until recently, I wasn’t even sure I was ready to forgive her. Now I am but she hasn’t contacted me and I’m starting to think that she won’t. I am finally ready to forgive her and I don’t even have that opportunity.”

As the columnist wrote back to the woman, she needs to decide whether to hold out and wait for the apology on principle or save the relationship.

“Forgiveness means that you have reached a point where you will forgive her, whether or not she asks, and whether or not she feels she is wrong. Furthermore, there is another step you can and should take—and this may be the hardest of all: you approaching her... Often, when there is a fight, both people end up feeling hurt, and it is rarely one hundred percent one person’s fault, perhaps you too need to ask for forgiveness. But even if this is a situation where you truly did nothing wrong and therefore have nothing to ask forgiveness for, you can still approach her and open that door. When you make the first move, you show her that you forgive her without needing to directly say it. And more importantly, without making her ask.”¹

¹ http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/426530/jewish/Waiting-for-an-Apology.htm Accessed August 19, 2014.

Her story may feel familiar for some of us. It does for me. I picture my aunts who didn't speak for a decade because of a tiff after their mother died. I picture the friends who actively hated each other and pit me in the middle for a few years. I picture the ex I wrote out of my own life because he was wrong, I was hurt, and I wasn't going to let him forget it... until the past was so distant and foggy, I could barely remember the sting of the pain he caused. What I remembered was how much I missed him. In all of these cases, it takes enough time to forget – not forget what happened, but forget that initial anger. It takes the past becoming so distant and foggy that you can barely remember why the moral high ground was so important.

But why do we have to wait?

The truth is, we don't. It may seem like time is a necessary ingredient to our healing. But the deep spiritual work that we have to do these high holidays is to take seriously the theme we are exploring these 10 days. If not now, when? What is gained by holding onto the knowledge that we're right. What did it get Abraham? What does it get us? As relentless as time is, we have no control over its progress. We can only choose what we do with it.

We have the power to choose to make this the year when we're not held hostage by our principles. When we put "being right" in perspective. Because really... if not now, when?