

## ROSH HASHANAH DAY SPEECH – 2014

### Rabbi Brad Bloom

This year when I read the story of the Binding of Isaac I am drawn to the moment when Abraham is standing over his son Isaac bound by rope onto a wooden altar holding the knife in his hand and is about to stab or, god forbid, decapitate his beloved son. Still I am incredulous at the thought that any man would commit such an act especially out of duty to God. After all these years of interpreting this story, I still cannot fathom the depth of faith it took for Abraham to summon up inside himself the courage to slay his son.

At the same time what is bothering me is an optic of the videos of the two American journalists and the one British aid worker who were, in fact, decapitated by the crazed and cruel representative of ISIL. I can't get out of my mind that knife used to end their lives before the entire world. It was a despicable act beyond words to capture the depth of revulsion that I hope most of the world felt when they either watched the video or heard about it.

I do not want us to think that I see them as equal with the binding of Isaac story. What I am looking at, however, is the emotion and the moral conviction to a belief system and not necessarily a religion that inspires a person to do things entirely contrary to the basic norms of society. Does it not make us question whether human beings are basically good at heart? Does it also not cause us to think about the dangers of religion and validate what atheists are saying, namely that religion is the cause of more suffering than any other form of belief?

The High Holy Days are all about questioning humankind's merit. Are human beings in general programmed to fail morally and spiritually? Are we worth God's time and anguish when we think about what we do to ourselves, to others and to this world? The Psalmist said, "What is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you take note of him." Yet no matter what we do we find out that there are times when humans are capable of unspeakable acts of cruelty, as there are others who demonstrate saintly behavior.

Main Points: Judaism teaches us even though God may have had doubts and faced as much pressure to create as to not create humankind, God went with his gut intuition to create us anyway. Despite our being structured to fail morally and spiritually, God saw that the potential for good outweighed our inclination to do wrong. Second, the success of terrorism does not teach that God gave up on man, rather, it was humankind who gave up on themselves. Finally, God created repentance to give us all a second chance to make a positive difference in the world today. My experience has taught me that people can change for the better. Most terrorists, however, will not change for the better and hardened criminals are the same. Yet, there are moments when someone sees the light and makes a turn for the better. Too often I hear people always blaming others for their problems and rarely looking into themselves. This is the tension for practicing Judaism and living life. We need God and the strength to have a second chance to make a positive difference in the world. The frustration is that most people, let alone terrorists or hardened criminals) do not want to do it.

Yes in Judaism there are stories which make it clear that at the dawn of creation the jury was out about whether or not human beings should be created. The sages of Judaism knew full well that

human beings were a mixed blessing back then as they are today. In fact in the Midrash one sage Rabbi Simon told a story that just as God was about to create the first human being, the ministering angels on high were completely divided; some were supportive and others totally opposed to God creating human beings.

One of the angels called Love said, "Let him be created, because he will perform deeds of loving kindness."

Truth said, "Let him not be created, because he will be full of lies."

Righteousness said, "Let him be created, because he will act in righteousness."

Peace said, "Let him not be created, because he will be full of strife."

What did God do?

He took Truth and cast her down to earth. All the ministering angels challenged God by saying, "How could you do this? Truth is your seal. How could you put her to shame? Let Truth ascend again from the earth!"

At that point Rabbi Huna the Elder of Sepphoris, added: while the ministering angels were still arguing about it, God said to them, Stop this jabbering. Man has already been made!" I love this story because God essentially knew just how flawed we are and despite that ignored the best advice of his ministering angels and pushed truth aside and created human beings.

Some would say that human beings are simply structured to fail by our very nature which is to do things that are nasty and sometimes downright evil. Yet God appears to be able to overlook that side of our character. Was it because God saw the potential goodness of human beings and that we are good at heart despite our darker side? God made the decision and the world has had to live with the volatility and blessings of humankind every day since creation.

God teaches us through the Torah how to behave and makes promises when we follow the commandments. Then, inexplicably bad things happen to us and we end up protesting to God who we accuse of abandoning us. Who failed whom? We need to be able to yell at God even when what is happening to us is not God's fault. There is just nowhere else to go with our anger. But let's think about it. Aren't there times when God is unfairly accused of having abandoned human beings when human beings, in fact, have abandoned each other? That is why God stayed the hand of Abraham because the unspoken message was; "I will not abandon you and ask you to do anything contrary to my laws that sanctify life. Yes I want to see your loyalty but faith is about testing oneself as well as me." God and Abraham passed the test. In real life, admittedly, it is not usually that clear.

I believe that there are too many people who call themselves religious and, yet, who abandon Godlike behavior in the name of God. The fanatics and thugs who belong to ISIL and decapitate American journalists, a British aid worker, butcher Iraqi prisoners of war and innocent civilians to inspire fear in their new conquest have abandoned their religion and God. We ourselves are

not immune to those charges, for some in Israel have taken the lives of innocents. The assassination of Yitzchak Rabin by a religious Jew in Tel Aviv or the recent murder of a Muslim teenager outside of Jerusalem are examples of people on our side who abandon their faith and the teachings of Judaism. Thankfully they are few and far between as compared to the heinous myriads of terrorists in the Middle East.

In our country when we have seen extremist Christian sects who claim to be holding the mantle of their faith burn churches and synagogues and federal office buildings leading to the deaths of innocents then they too have abandoned their faith and humankind too. Frankly it is these kinds of people not only of these faiths who not only tarnish themselves and their respective religions but also lead many to the belief that religion is not something we need anymore and reject all faith systems altogether. This is not God abandoning humanity but it is humanity abandoning God. This is where fundamentalism fails God and the beauty of the religious systems that have served humanity well over the centuries.

Repentance is a tricky thing. Saying I am sorry and meaning it can be two different things and worlds apart from each other. For a person to really understand how they have harmed another and demonstrate a commitment to not repeat the action which hurt another requires great strength. Repentance is the ultimate opportunity to give humanity a second chance and the individuals who commit transgressions an opportunity to right the wrongs.

The Rabbis said that Great is repentance which preceded the creation of the world. (yalkut shimoni) Obviously God knew this so that he would create humankind despite the protests of the ministering angels. There is a wonderful story in the Talmud about the wife Beruriah of Rabbi Meir. In their neighborhood there were a group of thugs who were causing distress and annoying him daily so that he started to pray for them to die. Beruriah said to him, “why would God listen to your prayer?” Remember what the psalmist said, “Let the sinners be consumed and let the wicked be no more.” (Psalms 104:35). The word sinners should be read as sins. In other words “my dear husband please pray for them and beseech mercy for them that they may turn from their ways so that that their sins will be gone and they will not be wicked anymore.” Rabbi Meir listened to his wife and prayed for the hooligans to stop their wicked behavior and they eventually turned in penitence.

Will the slayers of the Journalists in Iraq ever repent? Should we pray that they do? When we read and watch stories on cable news of men, especially professional athletes, beating their wives without any regard to human decency should we pray for these men to change their ways? Will there be someone praying for the fanatics across the world that enslave young girls in human trafficking rings that they change their ways? Would these prayers be empty or foolhardy? Is this the price humanity must pay for the blessing of all the saintly and wonderful people who inhabit this planet? My view is that if we take the moral high ground then no prayer is empty or worthless if it is a prayer for someone to repent whether it happens or not. Yet, I confess I cannot pray for those of such an evil character but I will pray that someone they know who is close to them will pray for them. That I would do. Yes I will pray for the innocent mothers and fathers, spouses and children, brothers and sisters of these criminals that they will pray and do what they can to move their loved ones from evil to goodness.

## Conclusion

I believe that Abraham struggled in his heart praying to God for himself and Isaac for direction to be faithful to God even though he could not fathom this divine command to bring Isaac up for a burnt offering. He didn't want to do it and had faith that somehow, even at the last minute, God would find a way out of this situation. The story is still no less harrowing but commentaries abound about how Abraham reeled from the thought of sacrificing his beloved son.

Obviously we know that ISIL fanatics who would bring a knife and sacrifice Americans on their altar of death and give homage to a theology of murder have no problem in their conscience with performing heinous acts. This is the difference between the context of the act when it is fueled with hatred, arrogance, and delusion versus when in Abraham's case the potential slaughter of his son Isaac was a torture in the heart and soul of Abraham.

We are not terrorists or Patriarchs like Abraham or Sarah. Repentance is the basis of why we are here on these days and it is part of the pathway of alleviating the unsettled feelings that many of us live with year after year when the slate of our spiritual books continues to carry deficits of the spirit from year to year. Is it true that part of being human means that we are inherently structured to fail? Even if the answer is yes, God gave us the ability to change and to make ourselves better and wiser when we really examine and struggle within and then on the outside with those around us. Only then can we rise up to the standards that God set when he created us and love said, "Let him be created because he will perform deeds of loving-kindness," and that love will override his flaws, even with the heavy price humanity pays for God's choices.