

Rosh Hashana Drasha 5781

Leah Justin – 19th September 2020

SACRIFICE

The Akedah: An aged father and his son are making their way up the slopes of an isolated mountain. The father carries the implements of ritual destruction – fire and knife – and the son shoulders the material for building, but also for burning. The father stooped under the burden of age and the weight of sacred duty, proceeds in silence. He patiently answers the son's questions, which pierce the air and for a moment perhaps, just perhaps, the father's conscience. Then the silence again takes over.

Bereshit/ Genesis 22... the binding of Isaac *'take if you will your son, the only one whom you love ...Isaac... make unto him a burnt offering'* – God's ultimate testing of Abraham.

Bereshit/ Genesis 22... that fraught shocking and troubling text we read on Rosh Hashonah in the month of Tishrei, in the midst of a period of atonement and personal sacrifice where Abraham is tested and we are led to ask:

What is worth sacrificing... and what is worth sacrificing for?

Questions that continue to echo through the ages.

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It is 1949.

The woman giving birth, is a concentration camp survivor. She and her husband have reunited in Poland after the war and have finally arrived in Australia. He too has survived Auschwitz and a new life awaits, the blessings of family with the soon-to-be born twins.

But with no more tragedy imaginable, the mother dies in childbirth. What vessel can contain that grief. How many tears must have been shed. What renting of clothes. A moment of jubilation rendered grotesque.

Does the new father wonder what test he has been put to? What test did he fail?

What is it he could possibly be atoning for?

That woman who made the ultimate and untimely sacrifice was my birth mother. So many unanswerable and futile questions still hang in the air.

What sort of sacrifice was she - powerless and having survived so much, to die so young and so pointlessly? What end was served?

Could my father ever think her sacrifice was worth it. Questions I could never ask him haunt me to this day ... would he have sacrificed **her** for **us**.

But of course he wasn't given that impossible choice and had to face the randomness of his cruel fate.

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1949.

A DP camp in Ostia near Rome. Survivors of the Shoah waiting to restart their shattered lives. Waiting to enter a promised land as far away as possible from the graveyard that is Europe. The brother of the bereaved father receives a telegram. The brother is due to emigrate from Italy to Mexico in the next month. His new wife reads the telegram and says ... *we must now go to Australia*. She has never met the brother in law who is the widower father, knows not a soul in Melbourne, knows no English, and is herself the sole survivor of her own family from Vilna. She is just 23 years old and newly married. A future that lies ahead of her is now again altered and even more unknown.

What she does know is the value of gathering up the shards of family even that which is not her own and whilst her own husband must wait another 6 months before he can get an entry to Australia, she arrives alone in a strange land to take care of the *tsvilling*, the twins of her husband's brother.

What sacrifices did she make to stabilise the young motherless children in that far flung land of Australia. Not compelled to, she simply owned the choice that wasn't hers to make and she became our mother.

And in doing so she tried to ensure that a broken family could heal. She made the decision that we were worth sacrificing her life for.

Instinctively hers was a binding of a parent to a child that was triumphant and life affirming.

Choosing family over everything.

Abraham are you listening? You too chose What was the price of your binding?

Can deeply held beliefs ever justify such a sacrifice?

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It is Acland St. St. Kilda on a Sunday morning in the 1950s. The pavements are filled with Yidden. Jews from Eastern Europe who gravitate around the café called Scheherezade, immortalised in Arnold Zable's wonderful book.

Here Jews find a home away from home. Familiar food – borscht, cholent and kneidlach, gefilte fish and schnitzel. For many young single and shattered survivors this was as close to replicating their life from back home as they could get. For others, on Sunday morning especially it was where they came to "daven" ... that is argue in Yiddish about the politics of the day and the big issues in the world.

Sunday morning there had a vibrant pulsating energy as they spilled out onto the footpaths. Cigarette smoke filled the air and voices were loud as they discussed and argued in Yiddish.

Like so many survivors, the jobs that absorbed many of these people during the week were pedestrian survival jobs. Perhaps a shoemaker, a dressmaker, a butcher or a milkbar owner struggling to fit in with the Aussie way of life and struggling to make a living through the week.

On Sunday here in Acland St they could give voice to who they really were.

Avreml Zeleznikov never expected to become a café owner, a latter day barista... this was a man who had survived the Vilna ghetto and was an idealistic intellectual and great Yiddishist.

Sunday was the busiest day of the week and it was the day you would find Avreml not at Scherezade but at the Sholem Aleichem Sunday school, teaching Yiddish from 10am to 1pm to ingrates like me who simply resented being there.

What sacrifices had his wife Masha made in understanding that her husband was making a living but not making a life from what he was doing all week in the café. A lover of literature, especially Yiddish and of ideas, he came alive in those musty old class rooms on Sunday mornings.

What I appreciate now is that urgent need he and his generation had to rebuild community and to restore some of the richness of the life that was lost... so that all was not in vain, so that the next generation could build on strength and not on shattered shards.

The burnt offerings of their lives enabled the next generation to live their dreams. It enabled continuity. And they did it with an embrace of life, that perhaps for a time suppressed the bottomless pit of their grief and losses.

Abraham, you sought continuity through your blind obedience and yet your family life was destroyed ... your son blinded and your wife Sarah... where was Sarah? What did she know? How did she feel? Why do we not hear her voice?

Genesis 22 is silent. We don't know what she thought. We can only imagine her anguish and hear her voice that screams in pain for her beloved and much longed for son.

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The wars that Israel has endured in its all too brief existence have taken a huge toll.

So many young lives sacrificed, so much loss.

The jubilation of the Six Day War was followed by great mourning and bereavement wrapped in a sense of great achievement. But once social consciousness was turned to the issue of price, it was mothers who questioned the level of sacrifice and took up the banner of protest, with a growing awareness that the victims - their sons - were too high a price to pay in war.

Today Israeli women poets give voice to Sarah. Written after the Lebanese war, Israeli poet and writer Raya Harnick wrote after her son was killed in Lebanon in 1982

I will not bring

My first born sacrifice

Not I.

No longer 1942

No longer Treblinka

No longer sheep for slaughter.

Now proudly

Like Masada

Now sheep for sacrifice.

God

In his mercy builds

Jerusalem.

And every stone he built

In his mercy

In Jerusalem

Is sodden

With blood and tears.

I'll give to God

In his mercy

Jerusalem

And take

My son

In return.

The Akedah has become a symbol in Israeli literature and thought for those who die fighting in the army, especially when the cause is thought to be unnecessary. This bitter angry poem is every mother's lament - every Sarah's angst.

The question that keeps on reverberating – what is worth sacrificing and what is worth sacrificing for?

Abraham, oh Abraham again I ask you. Is there not a price we pay that is sometimes just too high?

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I often wonder why the Akedah story is read at Rosh Hashonah, the beginning of that 10-day period of reflection that culminates in Yom Kippur.

In the Akedah we have a story filled with mythic themes that transcend time. A human story of a parent striving for himself and his dreams, no matter the cost. A story of a child's trust in his parent to protect, instruct him. A tale of the differing expectations that mothers and fathers have for their children. A tale of trust and faith. A tale of testing. A tale of promises.

What is it that you were promised Abraham? You will be a great and numerous nation and your descendants will be scattered all over the world...what an irresistible lure.

How much strength of character does it take to resist or question the price of faith or of a promise.

My parents' generation were ultimately not given choices or promises.

They had to make unthinkable sacrifices. The cost was incalculable...but they survived. Given the opportunity to live they determined their own choices to not just survive but to thrive and they built lives that honoured their traditions but they also created new ones and forged a foundation for ongoing generations to build on.

I honour their extraordinary sacrifice in offering us a future of surety and safety.

Perhaps during these next 10 days we can give pause to recognise our unique humanness and imperfections and the strength and yes sometimes the futility of our dreams and consider the question:

Can anything worthwhile be accomplished without the willingness to sacrifice?

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This has been a most strange and difficult year.

So much is simply out of our control and continues to be.

This year unlike any other we have all had to make sacrifices that are not of our choosing.

But **the way** we respond **is** our choice.

So let's look forward to a new year, celebrating our parents' and grandparents' lives, as we look back and learn from the past but also look forward with hope to a saner and securer future .

In circumstances that would have made that optimism unthinkable our parents did just that after the Shoah and look what they achieved.

Perhaps we can consider what sacrifices we need to make to build a better world for our children, their descendants and the many generations to come.

We can only regret what we don't do so let this year ahead be one where our actions are committed to speaking to our values and our dreams of a juster fairer and perhaps even a healthier world.

Let that promise to ourselves, be our binding as individuals and community.

With that sentiment I wish you all a shabbat shalom and a shana tova umetukah.