

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5780
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Breaking Out of the Mold

This is the sermon I didn't want to give! This year I feel that the world has been too much with me! I am tired of it! There is so much to worry about! I want to forget it all and just see funny dog and cat videos and memes. So I would like to avoid anything that has to do with duty or responsibility in my sermons. But... you know I can't do that. Judaism won't let me. Yesterday's sermon focused on how we might nurture ourselves; today we are on to caring about the world!

The Akeidah story AMAZES me! How can one story have so many different facets? So many ways to understand it!? Some years I am disgusted with it. Other times I notice the foundational values embedded in it. This tale has great drama and high stakes! It captures the imagination. It is about loyalty and care, love and new beginnings, difficult choices, secrets, showing up; it teaches us about our founding fathers and even perhaps about our first matriarch, who is completely absent from the story. But today I would like to draw your attention to what I think is one of the MOST important aspects of the story, and one that is often misunderstood...

Many people find this story upsetting, jarring and problematic because it begins with God demanding a child sacrifice!

Yet, I think we completely miss the point when we focus on the request to kill Isaac. This is actually an ANTI child-sacrifice story. God ends up saying do NOT sacrifice your son. Think about it historically...

Let's consider how the original listeners to the tale would have heard it. This story has a lot of suspense to draw you in. Remember that it would have been told orally. How do you keep someone's attention when telling a story – you need tension! And this story has it. As they heard the tale unfold, the listeners must have been wondering— how will Abraham and Sarah have descendants if God kills off this child of Abraham's old age? So they kept listening ...and we keep listening to see what will happen. So the question we need to ask is 'what is the author building towards in this tale?' What is its climax and its message?

Because our religion began a very long time ago, sometimes we have to work to understand the meaning of its stories in the context of the time in which they were given. Here we need to transport ourselves back 3400 years! This story begins in a way that is shocking to us, but would have been very run of the mill to its original listeners.

Here was another story about a god requiring child sacrifice. Living when people were frequently sacrificed, this would not have been given a second thought.

The surprise to those ancient listeners would have been the climax of the story – which of course seems so unsurprising to us – this God, it turns out, is a God of life! God does NOT want Abraham to kill Isaac.

This is not just my perspective on the story. Rabbi A.I. Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel, stressed that the climax of the story, God commanding Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, is the whole point: to put an end to the ritual of child sacrifice, which contradicts the morality of a perfect and giving (not taking) monotheistic God. And Rabbi Irving Greenberg, one of the most prominent Orthodox rabbis of our day, noted that the story of the [binding of Isaac](#), symbolizes the prohibition to worship God by [human sacrifices](#), at a time when [human sacrifices](#) were the norm worldwide. (Wikipedia – child sacrifices)

We need to understand that with this story, we get a NEW religion that challenged the common ways of its time. Just as Judaism went against other common practices of the day, for example, by forbidding idolatry and by requiring protections for those who were poor or disenfranchised, so too did it prove **counter cultural** in teaching our forebears to oppose human sacrifice.

This lesson we have learned so well that most people in the world no longer need to be told not to sacrifice humans.

So then, what is the lesson of this story for us, now, today? The broader moral of this story is Judaism's insistence on doing what is **right** rather than following the popular trends of any given time. It asks us: what are the ways in which you today are carrying out common but abhorrent practices? ...How often do you do something today because- well, everyone does it!?

If we are *eved Adonai* – a servant of God...if we worship God rather than worshipping a life of ease, then on these Days of Awe and all year long we have to ask ourselves –“what does God demand of me?”

Judaism's mission is to make this world as holy, as close to Gan Eden –to Paradise on earth, as we can. **Our God is the God of moral urgency!**

Still, I don't think Judaism expects any of us to lead the life of a Jewish saint or ascetic. We are not to live a life of self-denial. Rather Judaism wants us to find a middle ground that both allows us to enjoy the blessings of this world while trying to improve it.

However, truthfully, it is not always so easy to know today how to make the world better, even when we know what the problems are. With Abraham it was so easy – put away the knife! But today we often grapple with how an individual can make a difference. For example, the refugee crisis at our Southern border is horrific, and I believe our country's lack of concern for those needing asylum is immoral. But I struggle to know how I can impact the life of the asylum seekers. Similarly, we are concerned about the environment and want to recycle -but we hear that it is becoming harder for the US to find buyers for its recyclable goods.

I think our first challenge, given the complexity of the world we live in, is not to become complacent. If the High Holy Days have one message for us – this is it! Don't go through life in an unthinking, automatic fashion. Be aware, be woke! Think about your life – day by day!

So despite the true challenges of trying to create real change in our world, I want to suggest a path for us.

The first part of that path is to commit to hearing the cries of others. Leviticus tells us '*Al tachmod al dam re'echa*- don't stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.'

Why does it need to say this? Who would stand idly by?? The answer: all of us! We do! Too often we do not act. How can we do better this year? If this was true in the time of the Bible, it is more true now. We know the earth, the animals, humans all cry out to us. We hear it 24/7 from the media. It can become too much. The irony is that perhaps we do less because the needs are too great. So I ask you to join me this year in committing to hearing the problems and truly thinking about how you might respond.

Second – I want to lift up a few causes where I think we can make a difference. I hope you have your own list too of areas of concern where you go against common culture and do what is right rather than what is easy.

a) The first thing that comes to mind is the abhorrent ways we treat animals that are related to our food consumption such as boiling lobsters alive and barely allowing calves to move when they are young so they will be soft veal for our plates. Do we really need to eat these? How about writing a letter expressing disgust at these practices or giving money to an organization that fights against cruelty to animals? An important Jewish value is *tzaar baalei Chayim* – which teaches that we should cause as little pain to animals as possible.

b) Then there are what I would call the modern plagues of our day in our own community. I am thinking of racism, poverty, and gun violence.

If you vote -that is a good start.

I want to encourage you to get involved with us in Topeka JUMP – it is already working on addressing the problems of poverty and gun violence. TBS is limited in what we can do alone, but together with others in our city we can be part of creating change. I would love to see Temple have a large contingent of members

working with JUMP. Our faith says over and over again to take care of the poor and the widow. We need to make sure those are not just words we are saying but actions we, the Jewish community, are taking. We need to be at the table helping to make sure that the citizens of our city have decent housing and safe neighborhoods! In the Listening Campaign that we just had stories came up of horrific payday lending practices and of terrible housing challenges. But we can make a difference. Can we get a dozen or two dozen Temple members attending the 6 JUMP meetings a year – just 6 meetings! Let's be part of the brainstorming and problem solving – rather than just sit in comfortable homes and leave the challenges to others.

c)Third- As I mentioned, there is the huge issue of conserving energy and taking care of the environment. We know that climate change is real. What can we do? The largest problems are created by industry. So reaching out to politicians and companies to voice our concern for the environment is important. What if now in addition to sending Shana Tova cards to friends and family we send cards of concern to our elected officials to let them know that we must have policies that promote clean air and water. That could really impact a better year!

What can we personally do? Plant trees, buy items that have less plastic, use LEDs, use reusable water bottles, eat less meat. And yes – recycle – at least try. Those are items we each can do. We also can each research other ways to help the environment.

Two more areas:

d) Welcoming the stranger. I ask each of us to consider what we are doing to welcome newcomers.

- It could be donating to HIAS- the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society which is THE Jewish agency working to help the asylum seekers at the border. HIAS has, for example, placed **Border Fellows** in three non-profit legal organizations along the southern border to increase those organizations' capacities to provide legal representation to asylum seekers in and out of detention.

-It might be welcoming into your home or your life someone who has immigrated to the US in recent years and serving as an informal mentor for them.

-It might be placing in your yard a sign that says that you want to see your neighborhood welcome people from all countries.

There are so many ways to be helpful to immigrants – pick a few!

I do want to thank everyone who donated to the Topeka family from El Salvador who is seeking asylum. We helped in a very substantial way with their legal costs.

e) One more important way to make a difference. Don't hide your Judaism! Bari Weiss, a NY Times writer and editor, has written a phenomenal new book titled *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. She describes anti-Semitism as the ever-morphing conspiracy theory in which Jews play a starring role in spreading evil in the world. She points out that there have been anti-Semites for over 2000 years -always with different claims about what horrible thing the Jew does. But, she notes, anti-Semitism gains popularity in cultures that are dying. It is when falsehoods are allowed to parade as truths that this “intellectual disease” flourishes. When a society tolerates or even supports anti-Semitism it is not only bad for the Jews it is bad for the society – because it is indicative of the demise of truth within it and the rise of a restrictive, oppressive government. So what can you do to help both Jews and our society? Be a proud and practicing Jew. She quotes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

who said “non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.” Weiss adds, “What is more attractive than people confident in themselves.” So please come learn and participate, wear your Temple t-shirts and your star of David in public – and let’s be proud, knowledgeable and practicing Jews!!

At the end of the Akeida story we are told “on the mountain of the Lord there is vision.” Ask yourself, what do you think God sees happening in the world today that is wrong? And at the start of this new year – - Decide, what will you pledge to do this year because you hear God or your conscience calling for change?