

Rabbi Gibson's Sermon for Rosh Hashana 5767

"A Soul Survivor"

September 23, 2006

From the moment of Isaac's birth, Abraham knew something was wrong. Isaac came into this world in silence, without even one cry when his lungs first filled with air. Sarah, of course, was delighted; she had waited so long to feel birth pangs, she barely winced throughout the difficult labor.

But there are often problems in children born to older mothers. It was nothing short of a miracle that Sarah had conceived in the first place, much less bring a son into the world. For Abraham there was no Viagra, Cialis or Levitra. At age 100, he probably needed "extra help" just to do his part.

So when Isaac was born, Abraham merely smiled, for Sarah's sake. He was still in anguish over banishing his first born son Ishmael 13 years before. Isaac's birth, though happy, had reopened that wound; like the tearing of stitches, it took his breath away. As Isaac grew from child to man, Abraham tried to tell himself that he would get over it.

But, try as he might, he could not get his real first son, Ishmael, out of his mind. They had been through so much together. Sarah had demanded that he use her maid, Hagar, as a surrogate mother and he complied. But he developed a tender feeling for Hagar when she became pregnant. When Sarah saw this, she felt so threatened that she drove Hagar into the wilderness, despite her condition.

Abraham had agreed to the banishment, but not without giving it a second thought or two. God had promised him children through Sarah, but at his age, it did not seem likely. Now Hagar was going to give birth to his child! Abraham named the child Yish-ma-el, meaning "God listens." God had listened to his plea for a son.

He poured his spirit into Ishmael, so that when God commanded circumcision for Abraham and all the males in the house, Ishmael readily complied, not as an 8 day infant, but as a 13 year old young man, making his first adult decision.

Then this miracle occurred, Sarah had gotten pregnant and this son, was born. Abraham named him, Yitz-chak, or "he laughs," but it might as well have been "what a joke." Isaac did not grow up laughing, but utterly and totally silent. Isaac often seemed to be in a world of his own. Midrash Rabbah, the classic text of rabbinic interpretation, tells us that Abraham was disturbed when Isaac was born. Maybe it was because Isaac was not quite right in body or mind.

The Torah says that Ishmael undertook to teach and play with his brother, Isaac. When Sarah saw them, she became terrified that maybe Ishmael would be Abraham's heir and not her son. So she called Abraham and again demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be removed from camp.

The Torah text is very specific here, saying that “Abraham was greatly distressed about the matter, because it concerned his son.” (Gen. 21.11) He loved Ishmael, who seemed to be growing up just right. And now, he was being asked to give him up for Isaac, who seemed only to respond to Sarah. Ishmael was his son; Isaac was Sarah’s - that was clear. It was a pattern to be repeated countless times in our history. One parent favored one particular child over the other. Think of Isaac preferring Esau and Rebekah bound to Jacob.

When Abraham sent Ishmael off with his mother, he felt like he had cut off his arm. He was distraught. He ached. He grieved. He was inconsolable.

As Isaac grew it got worse. Sarah called Abraham to the tent. “There is something wrong with Isaac,” she said. “He does not act normally and no one in the camp can cure him.” Abraham thought and said, “Then what shall we do to help him recover?” And she said, “There is nothing to do but love him. He barely speaks. He doesn’t relate to anyone. He wanders away in his own world. We must care for him as he is and support him as he grows.”

Sarah leveled her gaze at Abraham and said, “ I don’t think he will ever live on his own without help.”

That was when Abraham exploded. Rage and anger he had never expressed poured out of him like poison. “He is not well?” Abraham asked with scorn. “He is your first born son, not mine. Your first-born is sick with something. My first born is out, God knows where, perfectly healthy except for the fact that, because of you, he doesn’t have a father!”

Sarah kept her calm, but just barely. She pointed at Isaac listless on his cot and said through clenched teeth: “This is the child you and I have wanted to for more than 60 years. Well, there he is! No one promised you he would be perfect, or even healthy. He is ours and we will take care of him. It doesn’t matter that he is sick, it only matters that he is ours. Tonight, you tend to him - I have stayed up last 3 nights listening to him cry.”

Abraham felt utterly, totally defeated. He had wanted a son with Sarah, but not like this. He thought, “ I would rather not have had Isaac at all than have him like this.” At that exact moment something extraordinary happened. He heard God’s voice: “Take your son, your precious one, the one you love...Yitzchak...and offer him up on Mt. Moriah as an offering to Me.”

Abraham used the moment to pray: “If it be Your will, O God, please help my son, Isaac. If you do not make him better in three days, then I will indeed offer him up to You. But in three days he will be your charge, not mine.”

Abraham was putting God to the test instead of the other way around. He would see if God would answer his prayers to restore Isaac to health. If so, he would be Abraham’s heir. If not, Ishmael, his beloved first born, would regain his rightful place. So Abraham rose at sunrise, quickly cut the wood and gathered his servants for the journey to the mountain.

After three days of prayer on his journey, Abraham had heard nothing, not a voice, not a sign that he had been heard by God.

At the base of the mountain, Abraham said to the servants, "You stay here. I'll take the boy up there, pray and we'll come back." One of the servants said, "You know, that boy doesn't look too well." Abraham glared at him and said, "What do you know about it?" as he and Isaac went off together.

On the way up the mountain, Isaac spoke for the first time in months. He said to his father, "Here is the firestone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham stared at his son. Hard. He said, "God will see to the lamb for the offering - **my son**. Get it?" He chuckled to himself.

They reached the top. Abraham prepared everything for the sacrifice, devastated that God had not answered his prayer. He hurriedly picked up the knife to get it over with. His hand was on the way down when the angel stopped him, calling, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not touch a hair on that boy's head."

And then, a conversation not recorded anywhere in the Torah but hinted at in the Midrash, the Rabbinic reading of the text. The paraphrase is my own:

Abraham: Are you sure you don't want me to kill him?

Angel: Yes.

Abraham: Can I just wing him?

Angel: No.

Abraham: How about a flesh wound?

Angel: Okay, but I have to heal him up right away.

Abraham: First you ask me to kill him and then to save him. What do you want from me?

Angel: I don't know. What do you want from you?

Abraham: To end carrying this burden already.

Angel: What burden?

Abraham: The burden of Isaac. He is not my first born. He is not normal. I don't want to spend the rest of my life tending to him.

Angel: Then what do you want?

Abraham: I've got the knife right here! I can end this, once and for all. Are you with me?

Angel: No. And I'll report you to God.

Abraham: You don't understand.

Angel: No. You don't understand. In the end, it's all about the suffering - loving someone in spite of it.

Abraham: I thought it was about being a blessing. That is what I was promised. Now you tell me it's about suffering?

Angel: Yeah, suffering. That's the lesson of this whole exercise: Suffering is real and you can't kill it off to get rid of it by just sticking a knife into it. You lost your first born son and couldn't do a thing about it. Isaac is weak and he will eventually go blind. Suffering and pain are part of human life and you, Abraham, are going just going to have to live with it.

Abraham: But I don't want to just live with it. It's wrong and it's unfair.

Angel: Tough Bunnies.

According to one Midrash, the angel comes too late to stop Abraham from cutting Isaac. His son's body ascends to the throne of heaven, where God heals him and sends him back to live out his days.

When Abraham returns to camp, Sarah dies, leaving Abraham to take care of Isaac for good. Abraham arranges for Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, but he never speaks to him again.

Isaac never quite comes out his shell while his brother, Ishmael, goes on to have 12 sons and establish them as tribes. Isaac will have troublesome twins, Esau and Jacob. And in the end, he will live out his days in darkness, helpless, waiting for meals to be brought to his side, just like in a hospital. Abraham's prayer for his sons went for naught. He lost Ishmael and Isaac never recovered.

And so we ask, if Abraham's prayers were not answered, what chance do ours have? Does prayer help at all in the face of illness? Is there any meaningful spiritual response to losing our well-being? As a well-known professor from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Larry Hoffman, put it: Should religion make suffering sufferable?

It is a bold question. We don't want to ask it, because the downside is just awful. We, who pray Mi Shebeirach prayers for any and every name put on our weekly list, should wonder whether or not our prayers do any good?

But that is exactly what Dr. Hoffman seems to be asking. It is the inescapable dilemma of our Torah portion. Abraham is faithful throughout every circumstance. Why should Sarah die? Why should Ishmael be banished? Why should Isaac live an impaired life? Do we pray for God to change the growth of cancer cells? Do we pray to God to give us relief or to give meaning to the pain we endure?

Many years ago I raised this same question from the pulpit and came down on the side of religion. A family called to speak with me, terribly upset. They were angered by my words. The sheer suffering their family member was enduring was hard enough, but then to hear that it might be "God's will?" That some prayer works and other prayer doesn't?

They asked, how in the world does anyone get ill if God responds to the prayers of the righteous? It was hard enough to deal with medicine's failure to provide relief, much less a cure. And don't tell us that there is a great lesson to be learned in suffering like this! They were right.

How are we to understand it when our best words, our deepest emotions and finest intentions are insufficient to ease someone's discomfort, much less their prognosis?

Rabbi Hoffman will not allow us to flinch from this. He writes, "Pain, suffering and grief have no moral meaning; they have only reality and gravity..." He writes of the iron of his daughter, Shira, hospitalized often for recurrent seizures, receiving a card in the hospital for Rosh Hashanah: "May you be inscribed for a year of health and joy in the Book of Life!"

He concludes, "Most prayer book promise is pat; most liturgy troubling." Faith seems to offer only a broken promise, like that to Abraham, when he is about to destroy his own future and destiny.

Until recently we did not linger with chronic illnesses; we died. Only a century ago, when there was a large mass in the belly, there was no treatment, we died. Our prayers then were for passage to a better world, an existence in God forever, a promise of an afterlife, and if you were Orthodox, even bodily resurrection.

But even as we stopped believing in these dogmas, we have come to expect we can defeat almost any condition, acute and chronic. Our diagnosis may lead to many painful interventions over a long time. They may or may not give us quality or quantity of life.

There was a congregant many years ago who, despite his cancer, had great spirit and humor. I'll call him Sam. We watched together as Sam's tumor grew, forming a miniature fist on his chest. It was depressing to his family, but he managed to joke about it, commenting each day on its size and shape. "Pretty soon, it'll be bigger than a grapefruit!" he said one day when I came to visit. When the doctors told the family that they thought it was his last day, he fooled them with three more weeks of life. Sam wanted to pray because he thought the sounds of the Hebrew, a language he didn't understand at all, sounded like the cooing of a bird.

There was a young woman named Claire, who had three children under ten years old when she was diagnosed and fought for three hard months before succumbing. She insisted on breaking the rules by bringing her children in to the room and onto her bed, hugging them and kissing them and exhorting them to remember each one of her embraces for the rest of their lives and more importantly, to pass them on to others in her name. Claire's prayer was simple: To keep the family together. To be honest and strong and thankful for the gift of their time together.

Claire said all time is borrowed. The loan comes due sooner than we think and is sometimes called in early. We pray our thanks that we have been here in the first place, here to strive and fail and strive again, and fail in the end. To Claire, the struggle was painful and exhilarating. On days she was crabby, she gave thanks for crabbiness. Claire said that anyone who wanted her to be happy for their visit, obviously was not in her inner circle!

Not everyone is funny or heroic when facing suffering. Some reject any spiritual meaning or metaphor. They prefer to live on their realism and a relentless anger that gives them an extra foothold on life.

There was a famous essayist and author named Susan Sontag. She had a keen eye and a sharper pen. She had no tolerance for misty eyed romantics, yet knew that something in our spirit drives us on when death seems all powerful and all present. Long before her own prolific struggle with cancer, she wrote:

“Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.”

When I eulogize a member of our congregational family, I often find myself saying that the person who has died is at rest, not from disease, but from treatment. “So and so will never know needle or knife, pain or procedure again.” I have said these words more times than I can count.

So what is our prayer? So many of us prayed that our Mayor, Bob O’Connor, be cured of his cancer. I was honored to stand with more than 800 of his fellow parishioners at St. Rosalia’s Church in Greenfield . The priest directed everyone to lift their hands in the direction of Shadyside Hospital to send “healing energy” to Mayor O’Connor. He lost his battle for life less than a week later.

What was our prayer for? Even though Abraham was spared killing Isaac, I believe that he would want to know what his prayer was for. Was it successful because Isaac was saved, even if Sarah was not? Since so many of us will all suffer pain, and all of us will die, what is our prayer for?

A possible answer comes, not from a rabbi or spiritual master, but from a doctor, Rachel Naomi Remen. She writes:

“Prayer is a movement from mastery to mystery. I used to pray for my patients. These days I pray for myself, too. Sometimes I pray for compassion, but more often I pray for harmlessness, the great spiritual quality embodied in the Hippocratic oath.

I know I can never hope to have the depth and breadth of perspective to know whether or not any of my actions will ultimately harm or heal. Yet it is my hope I may be used to serve a holy purpose, without ever knowing...Understanding the suffering is beyond me. Understanding the healing is, too. But in this moment [of prayer] I am here. Use me.”

This is our prayer. Use me. We will never know if our prayer works for the end that we want.

We are spending these precious moments together on this holiday talking about illness, suffering and pain. To what end? I fear that the cute spirituality of Chicken Soup for the Soul will neither comfort nor cure us. I fear that our faith, Judaism, which has survived wars and genocide, may not survive if you and I do not find meaning when it matters the most, at times when life is precarious and death lingers in the doorway.

If our faith is enduring it must respond to our most enduring questions, questions that go all the way back to the trial endured by Abraham's entire family in this portion.

For sooner or later, all of us will all take up that second passport and travel on to the kingdom of the sick. What language will we speak? What will we value? How will we pass on our essence? Tradition for tradition's sake will not be sufficient to give that voyage meaning, purpose and direction. Our faith can give us all three, if we are honest about our prayer and its limitations.

What do I pray for? I pray for forbearance and forgiveness, the ability to let go of the petty hurts that harm me more than anyone. I pray for acceptance of the inevitable end, as well as refusal to accept injustice along the way. I pray for grace, the undeserved goodness I get from being with you and my family. I pray to be of use, like Dr. Remen. I pray to let go of the knife the first time we are called, instead of having to be asked twice, like Abraham.

But most of all, I pray for blessing. It is a long road for Abraham from the promise of being a blessing when he is called in chapter 12 of Genesis to finally laying aside the knife from Isaac's throat 10 chapters later. It is the laying aside, not the taking up of the knife which yields blessing. His blessing is in the honor Abraham gives to Sarah in securing her burial plot so that her remains are not disturbed, no matter how unfair her death. Blessing in the face of pain, blessing despite hard roads to be navigated back to wellness. Blessing in word and touch and thought and deed. Our blessings are our prayers.

This Rosh Hashanah, I pray that your prayers be answered. The prayers of anguish and hope. The prayers to stand still and find strength. The prayers to find kindness to give even when we face terrifying illness or even death. I pray that our faith make your suffering a bit sufferable. That indeed would be a blessing. That indeed would be a blessing. This is my prayer and blessing for us all:

May you be blessed like Avraham, Yitzchak v'Yaakov

May you be blessed like Sara, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah

May you be blessed like Yosef's sons, Ephraim and Manaseh

Children of God, may we find blessing, too.

All those in pain, like Leah's daughter Dinah

All those who fear, whose burdens overwhelm their hearts

May they find grace and strength to carry onward

Children of hope, they do not stand alone.

All those who die before their years are counted

All those who live but suffer in the shadow lands
May they find hope as well as light and blessing
Children of life, whose comfort blesses all

May we be blessed with patience and forbearance
May we forgive all those who do not understand
And may our tears, those holy drops of sorrow
Redeem our lives, forever and one day

May we be blessed like Avraham, Yitzchak v'Yaakov
May we be blessed like Sara, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah
May we be blessed like Yosef's sons, Ephraim and Manaseh
Children of God, our souls surviving through
May we be blessed.