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RH II - 5768  
"The Angels' Tears"  
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Isaac was old before his children were born. He and Rebekah argued for years over their inability to have kids. There was so much anger that when Rebekah finally gave birth to twins, she and Isaac separated. Each of them claimed a child and let it go at that. Isaac got Esau and Rebekah took Jacob.

According to legend, Jacob and Esau went to visit their father one day. "Who is there?" he called out. By then Isaac was completely blind. "Esau!" one called. "Jacob!" the other chimed in. Together they said, "Abba, can we come in?"

"Of course," Isaac said. "Just come to where I can hug you both." He embraced them and nuzzled their necks. "Now let's see who's who here." By feeling their skin, he knew which child was which. "Jacob, I don't get to see you very often. How's your mother?" he whispered in his ear. Jacob didn't answer.

"Esau!", Isaac said, "what has your mother said lately?" Esau said, "We asked Mom to tell us why the two of you separated. She said to go ask you. She mentioned something that happened when you were a kid on a journey with your Dad."

"Oh." was all Isaac could say. He knew this day would come. "Let me see..." he said, with a laugh. The boys groaned. It was their blind father's favorite joke - just the kind of dumb joke that fathers love and their children can't stand. Let me see, says the blind man.

His memory flew back to that fateful day with Abraham, his father. He took a deep breath and he started the tale we know so well from today's Torah portion, only he told it from his point of view:

"Many years ago, your grandfather was in the grip of a spell. What kind of spell I do not know. Perhaps God had reasons beyond reason. But out of nowhere Dad says, "Come follow me, we're taking a trip to offer prayers to God."

Next morning, we went off for a three day journey, accompanied by two of my Dad's servants. My father spotted one particular mountain and then dismissed them. He said, "The boy and I will go yonder and worship and we will return to you."

On the way, I felt the presence of an evil spirit by my side. It nudged me and said, "Fool! Don't you know that your father is going to offer you as God's sacrifice this day? Run! Run for your life!" The thought was so preposterous that I didn't know what

to say. But the spirit said, "If you are going to make an offering to God, where is the animal?"

And a cold wave struck me, like a splash in the face. This spirit seemed to know our business far better than I did! So I asked my father.

"Dad?" "Yes, son." "Uhhh, I see the flintstone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?" And he gave me a really funny look. He stared right at me without blinking and answered in a strange voice, "God..will..see..to..the lamb..for the offering.....*my son.*"

Old Isaac interrupted himself and gazed sightlessly at his sons, so young, so innocent. He murmured, almost to himself, "Those were the last words my father ever said to me. His last words!"

He continued: "We got to the place for the offering. He built an altar while I watched. He took the wood from my hands and placed it on top; then he did what I had realized he was going to do all along. He tied me up, hand and foot, and lifted me on top of the wood." The boys' eyes went as big as saucers.

"He stretched his hand for his knife and everything froze. He never stopped staring at me. I was sure there were angels over his shoulder. I saw tears falling from their eyes. I steeled myself for the blade. At that moment I saw was his knife melting in his hand. Then I fainted."

"Really?!" the boys asked. "The knife *melted*?" Isaac nodded gravely. "Really." He closed his unseeing eyes and finished his story:

By the time I came to he was gone. I picked my way down the mountainside. And I never saw him alive again."

Jacob and Esau were dumbstruck. "It melted? From angel tears?" they asked again. "Cool."

This retelling of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, may seem fanciful. But its roots go all the way back to our earliest teachers. Our Rabbis agonized over this story and its unavoidable questions. How could Abraham not protest God's outrageous demand? How could he have gone along and never questioned it at all?

In the past Abraham was not afraid to protest to God. When God shared the plan to kill off every living soul in S'dom and Gemorrah, Abraham couldn't contain himself. He screamed at God with anger, scorn and disbelief, saying: "Ha-Shofeit kol ha-aretz lo ya-a-seh mishpat? The Judge of the entire earth won't do Justice?" And now, nothing? With his son's life at stake? Nothing?

More than 1800 years ago, our Sages retold this story over and over, putting in the emotions they saw as necessary to justify the words of Torah. These “retellings” are called Midrash. They do more than put meat on the bones of the story. They put their present concerns at the center of the scene they interpret. And in doing so, they create magic.

What does the Midrash do? It invents whole conversations between God and Abraham. It inserts Satan as a tempter. In one Midrash they have Abraham actually cut Isaac with his blade to draw some blood. In another they blind Isaac as he gazes on God’s throne from where he is strapped on the altar. And in our Midrash, they make the angels cry to stop him from going through with it.

Even with all of this Midrash, the questions will not cease. How did Abraham overcome knowing he was about to take a human life? Why didn’t he tell Sarah? Isn’t that particularly cruel after she brought him into the world? After all, Isaac is Abraham’s second son, but Sarah’s first. According to the Torah she dies only 12 sentences after Abraham lays the knife aside.

Today’s Midrash, Genesis Rabbah, says: “When Father Abraham stretched forth his hand to take the knife to slay his son, the angels wept... [B.R. 66.5]

The ministering angels saw what God did not, that the whole Jewish future hung by a thread as Abraham’s knife dangled above. With Isaac gone, there would be no Israel, no Jewish people, no Rosh Hashana today. The angels were overcome with grief.

Another rabbi fine tunes this telling: “God’s angel called out, ‘Do not stretch forth your *hand* against the lad.’ Where was the *knife*? Tears had fallen from the angels upon it and dissolved it.” [B.R. 66.7].

The angels take action behind God’s back, as it were. Since they could neither change God’s mind nor stay Abraham’s hand they dissolved the knife with their tears. When the angel calls, “Avraham! Avraham!” he does not ask him to set aside the knife, rather “Do not extend your *hand* to the lad.” The angels had dispensed with it, melting the blade so that only the handle remained. Abraham didn’t need to be stopped from harming Isaac anymore. A blunt knife handle is no threat to anyone.

This is a riot, a literary tour de force. But so what? What do crying angels and fathers and melting knives have to do with us?

It matters because we share our Sages terrible discomfort about Abraham’s single-minded faith. The secret of our tradition is that it feels free to ask the same questions we do. In the end, their answer changes the story completely. And, if the Rabbis can change something as fixed as Divinely written text, what can’t we change in our own day?

Let us imagine today that the angels' tears were so powerful that only three were needed to dissolve Abraham's knife. What three tears might aid us in at least protesting, if not melting the challenges we face today? What three tears could have such power? Three very different tears.

This Rosh Hashana those tears might be: A tear of witness, a tear of compassion, a tear of faith. A tear for the war. A tear for our young. A tear for the faith we deserve but deny ourselves.

A tear of witness falls this day for the War in Iraq, a tear born of almost 5 years of listening to misguided threats and promises.

A tear of witness this day for what has been done in Iraq in our name. We need this tear to burn through our apathy and listlessness. It is so strange that we can hear daily reports of the dead and maimed and simply sigh or turn the channel to see how the Steelers are doing.

A tear of witness for the scandalously "good news" that General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker brought to Congress this week. No matter how calm things are in the Kurdish north, or in Anbar Province for now, no matter how many government officials make it there and back without getting blown up, a tear of witness falls this Rosh Hashana.

It is a tear of witness for more than a million Iraqi refugees made homeless by this war. It is a tear of witness for well more than 75,000 Iraqi dead, who for too many of us are as if they had never been.

It is a tear of witness for the almost 4,000 American soldiers dead and 27,000 wounded and paralyzed. Many will spend the next 50 years of their lives at the tender mercies of a government that sometimes can't find patients much less care for them. These soldiers need more than new prosthetic limbs. Many need a lifetime of care which we should have put in place before putting their well being at such risk.

Today, on Rosh Hashana, this day of judgment, a tear of witness falls for soldiers, men and women who sacrifice daily more than most of us can imagine. This Rosh Hashana, a tear for witness.

A tear of witness for those who will die whether our soldiers come home or remain in place. If there is one thing that we do not need any general to tell us it is that if our troops stay, Americans and Iraqis will die and if American forces leave, thousands more Iraqis will certainly die in sectarian fighting. We cannot move. Like the Giant in Gulliver's Travel's we are pinned down despite our size and our might.

A second tear falls from the angels of our own time - a tear of compassion for our own young people who fight battles that most of us do not see or appreciate, battles born

of an economy that will continue to reduce opportunity, and global warming which is truly frightening.

A tear of compassion for the unseen battle between our youth and many of us, their Baby Boomer Parents.

A tear for young people, many of whom will not and cannot live up to their parents' expectations. They hear their parents' stories endlessly, like a rewind loop. They hear of the hard times and challenges their parents mastered - the Depression, the wars, anti-Semitism and more.

A tear of compassion for the children of our Boomer generation, which claims pride of ownership over virtually every new experience, who walked to and from school uphill both ways in the snow on broken glass, without shoes! Young people in our midst are likely to hear about how their parents did everything better or more authentically than they ever could.

A tear of compassion for young people who, throughout our society, see baby boomers like me who will probably want to be taken care of, fed and housed; who are going to live to age 95 and spend every penny of their savings, their Social Security and then ask for more.

A tear of compassion for young people who have to put up with the generation of parents from the 60's and 70's telling them not to smoke, do drugs or engage in sex; a generation of parents that has enjoyed the fruits of the largest economic boom in history and now professes shock that some of their children have not developed an appropriate work ethic.

This Rosh Hashana, a tear of witness for the war and all who suffer from it. A tear of compassion for our young who face hurdles I'm not sure I could surmount.

The third tear this Rosh Hashana, however, is a tear for us, for those among us who have lost the deepest gift our faith can offer, the gift of faith itself.

There are many in our Reform congregations who are happy to study Torah and work for Israel or save humanity through every cause on earth. But when it comes to God, they say, "No thanks." They sometimes even scorn those who believe in God, claiming that believers simply choose fantasy in place of reality.

You and I are Jews born of modernism and rationalism. But we are born of faith in God as well. Here in this family of families we say the Shema every morning and evening that we gather. Many say it at night before going to bed. Judaism is not just a culture, it is the faith of our fathers and mothers. Judaism is not just customs and practices, but a world view that has helped us make sense of life when anti-Semites threatened our very existence.

A tear for God who barely has a moment in our day, if any at all. Many of us believe, rather, in Modernity and its twin children, success and sports. This is the faith many teach their children day and night. Grades, soccer, football, baseball, hockey, school contests of all kinds - these are what we have taught our children to rely on to give substance and meaning to their lives.

This, rather than praying the prayers of Shabbat together, rather than singing the Shema to our children at night, rather than saying the Motzi, the blessing of permission over our food. It has gotten to the point where Reform Jews seem reluctant to say the following words: I believe in God. A tear for God in an age that either rejects belief as silly and unscientific or regards it too far literally and not open to question.

I believe in God. I do not mean these words like Pat Robertson or James Dobson mean them. I do not mean them the way Ted Haggard or Senator Craig believe them. I do not mean them the way the chief Rabbis in Israel mean them.

But I do believe in goodness, spirit, purpose and order. I see them in the world in abundance. And I wonder where they came from. The exquisite interplay between planets, comets and stars. The intricate workings of the body. The indescribable connection of soul to soul I see when I am invited into your lives during times of joy and sadness.

I believe in the God who makes this possible. No name or description fully contains this Divinity. But I honor its presence in the world around me. When I pray our prayers, I do not pray to old men with beards on thrones.

I use our ancient words as a means of connection: between Jews and other Jews, between our people and the rest of the world, between this world and the great beyond. I try not to be blind to the connections that are too small, great or wonderful for me to perceive. Just because I don't see it doesn't mean it is not there. As Reform Jews we do not, we cannot, concede the world of faith to the ignorant and the intolerant.

After 20 Rosh Hashanas with you, I believe I may have refrained too much from God-talk. I know, God may seem too personal, too real, too raw to talk about on Rosh Hashana. Better to give a rallying cry on the great issues of the day, a plan of action to solve all of our problems: Iraq, Darfur, Global Warming, Health Care, Israel, Anti-Semitism, the Survival of our people. A colleague once said to me that if you talk about God on Rosh Hashana, no one will talk about your sermon over lunch. Not the point, is it?

I believe that life is good and that we Jews are good. Part of that goodness is taking note of the angels' tears in the story of the Binding of Isaac. Tears of witness, compassion and faith.

With the knife dissolved in Abraham's hand, we need not fear anymore. We will be all right. We are not destined to be bound and forced to submit. We, like Isaac, can walk away on our own power, with our conscience intact. Our destiny as Jews is not yet

written, it is ours to write. For Isaac is free. Free to live, grow, breathe, change himself, change his world. Yes, his father may have traumatized him, but trauma is not destiny. Even tears are not destiny.

There is a fourth tear for this Rosh Hashana found in the Midrash, not a tear of angels, but of one man. It is the very man whom we have doubted throughout the story of the Binding of Isaac. The Rabbis, who allow angels to redeem Isaac, allow Abraham to redeem himself in our eyes.

The Midrash, Genesis Rabbah, says: “Rabbi Isaac said: [Abraham] stretched forth his hand to take the knife while the tears streamed down from his eyes, and these tears, prompted by a father’s love, dropped into Isaac’s eyes.” [B.R. 65.8]

This tradition teaches that Abraham could not do the deed. In the end, he could not even see where to inflict the wound. He saw only his son. His son. No, we are not angels. We do not shed angels’ tears. But we, like Abraham, do shed precious drops of love for our world, our loved ones and even ourselves.

Isaac hugged his children goodbye. Then Jacob, the bright one, said, “Dad, you didn’t answer the question. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a great story. We really liked the part where the knife melted in Grandpa’s hand. But why did you and Mommy separate?”

Isaac sighed. “We separated because I could not promise your mother I would not take either of you up the same mountain. I knew you would come to no harm. But your mother, who wanted you both so desperately, came to me with her own tears. We agreed that she would follow her heart and I would follow my God. With Esau already living outdoors and you with your mother, both of you were safe. Safe from mountains, and knives and impossible promises to God. Tell your mother that I still love her. Tell her that I will always love her.” And a tear dropped from his eye. Jacob said, “I’ll give your tear to Mom.” Esau asked, “Which angels’ tear is it, Dad?”

“Yours,” said Isaac. “Who is blind now? Can’t you see that you are my angels?” But they couldn’t see anything at all. Jacob and Esau had dissolved in their own tears. Tears of witness, compassion, faith and love. The tears of the angels. The tears of the angels.