

Rabbi Josh Bender - Rosh Hashanah Sermons 5786

Erev Rosh Hashanah

As the new year begins, we begin.

We begin to reflect on our past year. We examine our actions, we seek forgiveness for where we have erred in them. We intensively work towards teshuva, that is to return to a place of spiritual balance and equanimity *bein adam l'HaShem* between ourselves and God, and *bein adam l'Havero*, between one another.

So in that spirit... tomorrow we will read about Abraham abandoning his child.

It is an odd way to start the season of repentance, but I actually think reading about Abraham casting out Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar actually makes great sense, to start with, because of Ishmael's name.

Yee-Shma-El, meaning "God will hear."

During the High Holidays, we ostensibly want God to hear our pleas for forgiveness. *Slakh Lanu, Kapar Lanu*, etc... but God doesn't need to hear us... we need to hear God.

We need to hear God: in the words of the Torah and the *Machzor*.

We need to hear God: to be inspired toward *teshuva*.

We need to hear God: so we can reach the peace that is *teshuva*.

We read of Ishmael... "God will hear"... but it is we who need to hear God... We need to hear God as our rabbis teach Ishmael heard God.

The rabbis accuse Ishmael of all manner of terrible sins but because he helps Isaac bury their father, the rabbis discern that he must have done teshuva at some point and made peace with his younger brother.

When God promised Abraham that he will be buried at a *sayvah tovah*, a good old age, our rabbis teach this meant he would live to see Ishmael do teshuvah.

To do teshuvah and to see those we care about do teshuvah.

To find peace and to see those we love find peace.

That is the best any of us can hope for in life.

Regardless of where we are on our way to that destination, we have between now and shofar's blow at the end of *Ne'ilah* to focus on that.

May we all be blessed to find deep meaning in the coming days, to find spiritual growth and work our way towards *teshuva*, towards greater peace within and without.

Shenah Tovah.

Rosh Hashanah Day 1

In the middle of August I found myself several hundred feet below ground in Berlin staring into the eyes of a mannequin....

.... That was because I was touring the Boros Collection, an art exhibition housed within a massive bunker on *Friedrichstrasse*. This bunker was constructed in 1943 and was meant to shelter 1200 people from allied bombs but at times held up to 4000.

After the war it enjoyed a second life as an illegal disco during the years of Communist East Germany. In 2003 it was bought by an advertising executive who turned it into an art gallery and private residence.

The artwork it housed was pretty strange: Mannequins dressed in futuristic clothing posed strangely, large wooden plane propellers hung from the ceiling, 3D printed statues of video game characters.

When our guide asked at the end of the tour what we thought the theme of the exhibit was.. I struggled to come up with an answer ... but he said that the Boroses collected these works because they first confused them, then made them angry and then finally gave them this euphoric moment of insight.

Confusion, Anger, Insight.

A strange statement, but that was definitely what I felt wandering the exhibits at times.

I would wonder why on earth someone made or bought what I was looking at, then the idea of how much time and money went into their doing so so would irritate me. Then with some of the works of art I would take in the deeper meaning of what I was looking at, of what it had to say about the world we live in, how we treat one another and that which surrounds us. Then I'd experience some sort of greater insight.

Confusion, Anger, Insight.

As I was leaving, I thought about what else makes me feel that way. I realized: the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael, which we read about in our Torah reading for today.

The story confuses me.

Why is Sarah so cruel as to order Ishmael and Hagar be cast out, likely condemning them to die?

What could have inspired that degree of anger in her?

When Abraham asks God what to do, why does God tell Abraham to do what Sarah says?

God promises to sustain Hagar and Ishmael, but are we to believe that what's best for the now teenaged Ishmael is to lose his father? What teenager would respond well to this kind of sudden upheaval and rejection?

It makes me angry that God would do this to Ishmael and Hagar. Regardless of what rabbinic

tradition might ascribe to the two of them that so incensed Sarah, is this the best response God can come up with?

Is this truly in keeping with attributes we ascribe to God in our liturgy for today. We say that God is merciful and compassionate, but how does this reflect that?

Answering this question is complicated by it not being clear how old Ishmael really is in this scenario.

The Torah states Abraham is 86 at Ishmael's birth and 100 at Isaac's. If we figure Isaac is weaned around age three, Ishmael is 17 when he is cast out.

Now today, that would be an appropriate age to leave home, even if the circumstances of his departure aren't exactly a hug goodbye outside his new college dormitory, 17 is a normal age to leave home. It's when I did.

That's not the age that our Torah reading for today seems to depict Ishmael as being. He is carried by his mother, he cries out when he's thirsty. The Torah seems to depict him as a younger child. It's not just the Torah's narrative creating this impression, it's the wording of the Torah itself.

When Hagar carries Ishmael as they depart he is called a *yeled*. This term is more indicative of a young child. When Ishmael cries out from the bushes, the Torah refers to him as a *na'ar*, a youth or lad.

The Torah has made it clear how old Ishmael actually is. He is about 16 to 18 years old. The narrative and terms used to describe his age are poetic license.

Something similar is done with Joseph, Jacob and Esau at different points. They are described as *yeledim* despite being a good deal older than that.

The Torah is conveying what Ishmael and his mother are feeling. It is conveying what their relationship to God and those around them is in these moments.

They feel vulnerable and helpless. You can think of the Torah's choice of wording here as an image filter, like you might see on Instagram. Selective emphasis is placed on the lighting or texture of an image to send a message to the viewer.

Usually on Instagram that message is "I am cool and attractive" but filtering can convey more than that.

In the underground art collection I referenced at the start, I found my favorite pieces of art were these oil paintings of young men in relaxing everyday scenes of life.

They were eating lunch with friends, getting a haircut or just laying on the couch looking at their phone.

The artist painted these scenes with soft edges and curves. The scenes were shown through a deep yellow filter. This accentuated the warmth, brightness and tenderness of each scene.

This artist did that with paint, and the Torah is doing it with words. Ishmael is a young man on

the cusp of adulthood. Abandoned by his father and cast out into the wilderness, he feels like a helpless little boy.

He grows up to become the epitome of machismo and strength, “a wild donkey of a man” in our *chumash’s* translation. We are told he is quite handy with a bow and arrow.

Yet here he is vulnerable, crying and totally unable to support himself.

It is God who is there for him when no one else is, when even his mother seems to have given up and his father seems to want nothing to do with him. It's then that God comforts and sustains him. God makes him who he is.

It is God who guides him back to a place of peace with his brother Isaac and his family of origin. They stand together at Abraham’s grave, as I spoke about last night.

The Torah’s language around Ishmael’s age seems confusing, but it illustrates the kind of relationship with God that we can work to discover for ourselves in the coming days. That is one of reliance and nurturing support. One that facilitates growth and teshuva.

With that I arrive at the same place I did when I walked back above ground and out of that Berlin Bunker. I’ve gone from confusion, to anger to insight. I hope you have too

If you’re still at the confusion or anger stage, maybe wait until after Yom Kippur to tell me.

In any case, *Shenah Tovah*.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2

I was meeting with my faculty advisor for my senior sermon at JTS. This is the big sermon we give the year of graduation. The sermon that is supposed to show our friends, teachers and loved ones how much we've learned and grown.

My assigned parashah contained our Torah reading for today, the *Akeidah*. This is the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac.

So I asked my advisor, a rabbi who I considered one of my real mentors in rabbinical school, how do you address such a difficult topic? How do you address Abraham, someone we revere so much, doing something that seems so terrible?

He looked at me empathically and he said, "well.. I wouldn't... not unless I had to... let's go with something easier... How about Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Today we do have to talk about the *Akeidah*. We have to ask questions.

How should we relate to Abraham in light of his actions? Why do we read this text year after year at Rosh Hashanah?

To answer these questions, I have to go back to a lesson I learned in High School English.

I don't know if what my teacher said is true, but I think about it every time I encounter a heroic figure in the Torah acting in ways that seem less than heroic.

She asked us why we thought we were studying Greek mythology instead of Roman mythology?

Someone suggested that perhaps it was because the Greek myths are older. Our teacher shook her head.

The Greeks gave their heroes and Gods flaws. The Romans made theirs perfect. We might be studying mythology, but *perfection is the real myth*.

More than that, if we acknowledge that even those we admire most are flawed, then we don't have to grapple with the dissonance between our image of them and the reality of who they are.

I try to apply that to my understanding of the *Akeidah*. Sometimes I read it as a story cautioning against zealotry. A warning we shouldn't blindly do as we are told or ignore our conscience out of devotion to an individual or cause.

Sometimes I read it as a cautionary tale against tuning out doubts or concerns. Because Abraham could only have done as he did by choosing to avoid the internal conflict he felt about what God asked of him.

I never come to nice clean resolutions in my understanding of the *Akeidah*. In fact this is more about what I don't get than what I do get from asking these questions.

Why does Abraham act as he does? Why do we study this text?

When I ask these questions without being afraid to hold Abraham to account, I find I am not troubled by the feeling that I am not really grappling with the reality of his actions.

When I look to our rabbis to explore my feelings on this, I am troubled by what feels like an attempt to justify or sanitize Abraham's actions.

I read things like he knew all along that God wouldn't let him sacrifice Isaac. I read that he did actually sacrifice Isaac, but did so knowing that Isaac would be resurrected (an often dismissed interpretation).

Most commonly taught is that Abraham did as he did out of love and devotion to God. This was a test of his faith.

If you find satisfaction in these answers, you have far greater and more illustrious rabbis on your side than I do. I still can't shake my discomfort with these explanations.

Nor can I shake the feeling that my discomfort is actually a really good thing. It means I am engaging with the Torah, that my respect for the Torah and our ancestors is greater because I am not avoiding uncomfortable feelings or questions about them.

I want to know and love them for who they are more than who I might wish them to be.

I think when we try to sanitize the actions of those we admire, we lose the opportunity to learn as much as we can from them. We read about the *Akeidah* at Rosh Hashanah so we can take that with us into the new year.

This lesson is worth applying to every area of our lives we will face in the coming year: No matter whom you admire for their scholarship, athleticism, creativity, compassion, wisdom, you name it... Do not lose sight of the fact that they have flaws and they make mistakes.

Abraham could be incredibly righteous and thoughtful. His life's mission to create nations and spread monotheism was one long act of incredible bravery. Yet we see him come very close to doing something horrifying in this Torah reading...Something I do not find at all admirable.

These do not cancel each other out. They exist alongside one another. They are the textures and nuances of a real human being. Abraham had the ability to choose good or bad. Sometimes he chose one and sometimes he chose the other.

The *Mishnah* teaches that the wise person learns from everyone. I'd add to that they learn from the different sides of those they meet too. They learn from the mistakes and flaws of others.

The Baal Shem Tov taught from this *mishnah* that recognizing another person's flaws should be like looking in a mirror. You should see a bit of yourself in these flaws.

The existence of those flaws is not an inherently bad thing. The Baal Shem Tov teaches when God was creating the world, God looked upon creation with such forceful love and reverence that it would have annihilated everything.

When God looked upon our capacity to do wrong, it balanced things out. God's love for us turned into something healthy.

Because love and admiration that ignores any capacity for imperfection isn't sustainable, and no matter how good it may feel, it is destructive.

Perfection, like my English teacher said, *is the real myth*.

Shenah Tovah.