



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 26, 2014
Rosh Hashana - Day 2

Human Sacrifice & God



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

With the world suddenly on fire and nation turning against nation, Rosh Hashanah could not have come at a better time.

Because Rosh Hashanah – the day the world was created – is the New Year for the entire world. Not only Jews.

The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, were created on Rosh Hashanah, and they are the grandparents of all humanity.

So why is it that only the Jews celebrate it?

Only the Jews count time (not from the beginning of their religion but) from the beginning of all the world's creation. Why? What universal message does Rosh Hashanah hold for us Jews and for the entire world?

The answer lies in one of the most controversial episodes of the Torah – the *Akeidah*, the "Binding of Isaac" – which took place on Rosh Hashanah and about which we read today.

What was God thinking? What was Abraham thinking? What should we be thinking? Especially considering the latest string of brutal murders perpetrated by terrorists in the name of God.

The answer is:

We are here not to slaughter but to elevate. We are here to change the world for the better. We are here to create a *New Year*, a *new* energy, a *new* narrative.

This is the ultimate human offering. As captured in an incredibly moving story – the interpretation of *Avinu Malkeinu* offered by a Holocaust survivor to Rabbi Itzikel of Antwerp.

And it contains the secret of achieving world peace.

HUMAN SACRIFICE & GOD

1. Mazal Tov

Mazal Tov! Today, the world is one day old.

As with a newborn child, the world is full of hope, and the possibilities are limitless. Like a newborn child, the world (and everything in it) is unblemished, without prejudice, negative habits, or preconceived patterns. Like a clean slate or a newly-primed canvas, today the newborn child that is the world – and the newborn energy within us all – begins to find its way ... to explore, experiment, grow and ignite.

May we take the newness of the world, the new energy of the New Year, the new blessings and new life that the Creator instills in us all, and let it spread outwards, bringing new electricity to everything we touch, to everything we do.

May we never allow this New Year to get *old*.

To help sustain the freshness, I would like to offer some thoughts on today's Torah reading. But, first something to ease the dreadful pain of a rabbi's speech: a joke. A joke never hurt anybody; a joke never put anyone to sleep. Talented indeed is the rabbi who could put a congregant to sleep with a slice of humor.

Disagree? Well, case in point!

2. Beginnings of Life (Joke)

A rabbi, a minister, and an imam are discussing the beginnings of life.

The imam says: "In our religion, we believe that life begins at conception."

The minister says: "In our religion, we believe that life begins when the fetus is viable away from the mother's womb."

The rabbi says: "In our religion we believe that life begins when the kids graduate college and move the hell out of the house."

3. New Year For All

It is beautiful to see the synagogue so full of life and vigor, brimming with individuals and families who have come to celebrate new beginnings. For life is renewed today, on Rosh Hashanah, the day it all began, when God created the world and everything in it. There is a new energy every New Year. You can feel it in the air.

On Rosh Hashanah, the whole world is renewed.

Unlike, say, Passover, a uniquely Jewish holiday when we celebrate the freedom of the Jewish people and the establishment of the Nation of Israel, Rosh Hashanah is not just a Jewish, but a *universal* holiday. It is the New Year celebration of the creation of the *entire* world – and last I checked, the entire world was not Jewish. As a matter of fact, 99.9% of human beings are not Jewish, and every non-human creature is certainly not Jewish. Thus, Rosh Hashanah, the creation of the *globe*, is a *global* holiday, not just a Jewish one.

So why is it that only the Jews celebrate Rosh Hashanah?

If you look at the Western calendar, you see that it is based on the Christian religion. Its starting point – its year zero – is the birth of the founder of Christianity (who was Jewish, as it happens), and it counts 2,014 years from that event until today. In other words, the Western world's calendar and the Western world's New Year have nothing to do with the beginning of creation.

Same thing with how the Muslim world celebrates. The Muslim lunar calendar begins in the solar year 622.¹ That year, Muhammad and his followers, after being warned of an assassination plot, migrated from their native city of Mecca to the city of Medina. That is the point from which the Muslims begin counting. So, their New Year does not celebrate the beginning of the world's creation but rather the beginning of their *religion*.

¹ The discrepancy between solar and lunar calendars results in 44 additional years for the Muslims.

Only the Jews count time (not from the beginning of their *religion* but rather) from the beginning of *creation*. Consequently, while the Western/Christian and Middle-Eastern/Muslim calendars are completely based on religion, Judaism's calendar has nothing to do with religion – or the origins of any religion – but rather is based on the origins of creation itself!

Why? What message does Rosh Hashanah hold for us as Jews, and for the entire world? Why do other people see the beginning of the world from the genesis of their religion, but Jews see the beginning of the world from the genesis of, well, Genesis?

Perhaps the answer lies within the dramatic episode of today's Torah reading.

4. The Birth and Near-Death of Isaac

On Rosh Hashanah we read two successive chapters of the Torah, Genesis 21 and 22 respectively. On the first day of the holiday, we read the story of Isaac's birth. Today, on the second day, we read the story of Isaac's near-death.

Isaac was born 1,948 years after Adam (or 3,827 years ago). The connection between Isaac's birth and Rosh Hashanah is obvious: Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birth of the world and the birth of Isaac marks the birth of the Jewish nation.

Today's Torah reading, however, is a whole other story. Today's reading speaks of Abraham nearly slaughtering his very own son, the son meant to father the Jewish people. What, pray tell, is the connection between the wild episode of the *Akeidah*, the "Binding of Isaac," and Rosh Hashanah?

On its own, the *Akeidah* is difficult enough to understand. But to read it on Rosh Hashanah, the day all life was created, seems completely off-kilter. We spend hours beseeching God to bless us with health and inscribe us in the Book of *Life*, and then suddenly we read this. The story of how our forefather, Abraham, came this close to sacrificing his own son upon Mount Moriah? This doesn't sound very *life-affirming* at all. Come to think of it, this doesn't sound *normal*.

What are we to make of this, especially in light of the latest series of murders and brutalities perpetrated by terrorists in the name of God. How can we explain what is going on here?

Perhaps if we examine the actual words the Torah uses to describe this event, we can begin to understand:

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and He said to him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Please take your son, your only one whom you love, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for an offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you."²

Okay, God instructs Abraham to bring his beloved son, Isaac, up to him as an offering – specifically an *olah*, which is an *elevated* offering. What does Abraham do?

Abraham gets on with it.

And they came to the place of which God had spoken to him, and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and he bound Isaac his son and placed him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife, to slaughter his son.³

Uh-Oh. This. Does. Not. Sound. Good.

But then...

An angel of God called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham! Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And He [God] said, "Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad, nor do the slightest thing to him, for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me."

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and behold, he saw there was a ram, caught in a tree by its horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an elevated offering instead of his son.⁴

Today, we blow the *shofar*, the ram's horn, as a reminder of that ram offered up in Isaac's stead.

²Genesis 22:1-2.

³Genesis 22:9-10.

⁴Genesis 22:11-13.

5. The Questions

This is one of the best known stories in the Torah – and also one of the most debated. There are so many questions to be asked and answered, so many lessons to be learned.

To begin with: Human sacrifice? Killing in the name of God? Is this what God desires? Is this Judaism? If yes, who would want to be part of such a religion?

And what about the contradictions:

Just yesterday we read how God promised Abraham that from Isaac will spring the Jewish nation. Today God instructs Abraham to kill Isaac. So, from whence will the nation come?

But, of course, God reverses Himself and then commands Abraham *not* to kill his son and the hope of the future Jewish nation.

All this seems absolutely confounding, baffling, mystifying!

What can this confounding baffle of a mystery teach us? What was God thinking? What was Abraham thinking?

And what should we be thinking?

6. The Midrash

The Midrash describes exactly what God was thinking and what Abraham was thinking. And, if we take its words to heart, we will find what we should be thinking as well.

This is what the Midrash⁵ says:

[At the time of the *Akeidah*] Abraham began to wonder ...
“Yesterday, You [God] told me, *for in Isaac will be called your seed*,⁶
then You went back on Your word and said, *please take your son*; and
now You tell me, *do not stretch forth your hand to the lad*.”

⁵Midrash Rabba, Vayeira 56:12.

⁶Genesis 21:12.

The Holy One Blessed Be said: “Abraham, *I shall not profane My covenant, neither shall I alter the utterance of My lips.*”⁷ When I told you to *please take your son*, I did not tell you to slaughter him, but to elevate him. In the name of love, I told you to do this. You have elevated him and fulfilled my words – and now lower him.”

And then the Midrash adds the following:

This is analogous to a king who instructs his loyalist to offer up his child upon the king’s table. The loyalist comes with a knife in his hand. The king asks the loyalist: “Did I ask you to offer up your son upon my table to be eaten? No! I asked you to offer him up to elevate him, out of love. [Sacrifice] *did not enter my mind.*”⁸

Ah – now this story reads completely differently. With the illumination of the Midrash, the entire *Akeidah* narrative makes total sense. God did not instruct Abraham to slaughter Isaac at all. Rather, God simply said: “*Please take your son, your only one whom you love, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for an olah, an elevation offering, on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you.*”

In other words, as per the Midrash’s analogy: “Do not bring him up onto my table with a knife so that I may eat him; rather bring him up, offer him up, out of love, so that he may be elevated.”

This changes everything. Now we read the *Akeidah* like this:

God tells Abraham to elevate his beloved son Isaac upon the mountain (the Temple Mount) so as to be ascendant before God. Beautiful. Wonderful. Fantastic.

This meshes beautifully with what we read yesterday. Yesterday, we read that God told Abraham that *in Isaac will be called your seed*. And today, we read that God told Abraham to *please take your son ... and bring him up there for an elevation offering on one of the mountains*. After all, Isaac is going to be the father of the Jewish people, a people that will be God’s ambassadors on earth, light unto the nations, therefore it is incumbent upon Abraham to raise his child up – literally, to elevate him – to the greatest of heights.

⁷ Psalms 89:35.

⁸ Quotation from Jeremiah 19:5.

And then, God said, after you Abraham have done so, after you have elevated Isaac upon My table, you should lower him back down so that he may change the world.

Wonderful.

7. The Problem

But there's one major problem.

Abraham doesn't exactly see the narrative that way, does he?

I mean, Abraham comes with a knife! He ties Isaac up! He makes a pyre of wood! He puts his son on it and raises the knife to slaughter him.

Why? Why does Abraham assume that he is meant to slaughter Isaac? Why would Abraham think this, if God merely instructed him to offer up Isaac as an elevation offering? Why would Abraham do all these things?

Imagine this scenario today:

God instructs a father to raise his son up to celestial heights. Would any normal father assume for a second that God is instructing him to *slaughter* his son? Of course not! The father would assume that God is asking him to educate the child, inspire him, show him the mountain of possibility, the heights that he could reach.

Why did Abraham not assume this? Why did Abraham see it differently? Why did Abraham come brandishing a knife?

This – especially today, considering the filmed beheadings of innocents in the Middle East – seems evil.

8. The Purpose of the Akeidah

The answer lies in the purpose of the *Akeidah* in the first place – and its outcome for all future peoples and all future generations.

The Akeidah, which happened on Rosh Hashana,⁹ had one purpose: to change the old narrative. To start a *new* year, with *new* energy, with a *new* narrative. But even more so: to create a template for all humankind for all eternity of *how* to change the *old* narrative into a *new* narrative ... and to set the precedent of this idea of a *new* narrative in the first place.¹⁰

To understand the purpose of the *Akeidah*, and how it not only changed the narrative but taught us that we also must change the *old* narrative into a *new* one, we first have to familiarize ourselves with the *old* narrative, the narrative of the world at the time of Abraham and Isaac.

9. The Old Narrative: Sacrifice Your Child

Life is cheap. Kill or be killed. The fittest survive.

That was the old narrative that also called for child-sacrifice to the gods.

The powerful Midrash we just quoted, concludes with a verse from the Prophet Jeremiah, which speaks of child sacrifice:

*And they built the high places of Baal to burn their children with fire as elevated offerings to Baal, which I [God] did not command, neither did I speak, nor did it enter My mind.*¹¹

Human sacrifice and child sacrifice was the normal narrative in the Middle East 4,000 years ago. People believed that the ultimate sign of commitment was to offer up the fruit of their own loins to their many gods. And that's what they did. They took their own children and slaughtered them on altars or burned them on pyres, believing that these offerings would find favor in the eyes of their stone, wood, earthen, or celestial deity honchos.

Baal, the deity of which Jeremiah speaks, was one such example. But there were many others. In fact, whenever the Torah warns the Jews to stay far away from the pagan gods – and it warns them often –

⁹ Pesikta Rabbasi, ch. 40. Zohar III 18a.

¹⁰ See *Guide for the Perplexed*, part III, ch. 24; *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 30, pp. 68-75; vol. 11, pp. 116-126.

¹¹ Jeremiah 19:5.

it points to these gods of infanticide, of bloodbath orgies, and of unimaginable evil. "You are not of this type," says God to the Children of Israel. "You are holy. So stay away and do not defile yourselves!"

It is precisely because of the Jews' sanctity that today the world holds dear the value of life. Otherwise, the world would still be offering its young to some idol or another. And one need not be Freud to infer that those present-day cultures that still do slaughter innocents to please their self-defined "god" are the antithesis of Israel and the One God. Indeed, they are the modern version of Baal worship.

Says God to this hideous child-slaughter: *I did not command, neither did I speak, nor did it enter My mind* – not once did I, God, the Creator of the world and all life, command, speak, or even consider this barbaric and horrific thing.

This was not the narrative (or even thought) of God – but sadly it was the narrative (and action) of the world.

10. Three Terms (Optional)

The Talmud¹² elaborates on the three terms that God uses – *command, speak, nor did it enter my mind* – and teaches that each term refers to a different biblical episode of child sacrifice, each of which demonstrates how prevalent this heinous practice was.

The first episode concerns the king of Moab, who sacrificed his firstborn son as his defeat at the hand of Israel was drawing near. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel had joined to destroy Moab. When the king of Moab saw that his defeat was inescapable and that it was choreographed by the God of Israel, he made a last-ditch effort to save himself – he sacrificed his firstborn son and heir, thinking this would influence God.¹³

To which God says: *I did not command* you to do such a terrible thing.

¹² Taanit 4a.

¹³ And he took his firstborn who would reign after him, and brought him up for a burnt-offering on the wall. And there was great wrath upon Israel, and they withdrew from him and returned to the land (II Kings 3:27, see also Rashi ad loc).

The second episode refers to Jeftach, one of the warrior-judges of Israel, who promised God that he would sacrifice the first thing he saw walk out his door if God would but grant him victory in war. After victory, as he was returning home, Jeftach saw his daughter coming out of his front door with musical instruments to celebrate his great victory. When he saw his very own daughter walk out the front door, he rent his clothing. After two months, he fulfilled his promise to God, to sacrifice the first thing that walked out of his door.¹⁴

To which God says: *Neither did I speak* to you to do such a barbaric thing.

The third refers to our Torah reading, the Binding of Isaac, when Abraham took Isaac up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac to God.

To which God says: *Nor did it enter My mind* for you to do such an appalling thing.

To sum up: God says, *I did not command, neither did I speak, nor did it enter My mind* – I did not command you, king of Moab, to do this terrible act; I did not speak to you, Jeftach, to sacrifice your own daughter; it did not enter My mind that you, Abraham, should slaughter your child Isaac.

Okay. So now we know what the narrative of those days was. It was to sacrifice life – specifically the life one brought into the world – so as to please the gods.

How is the *Akeidah* different? What was it about? What was God teaching – not only Abraham, but all of us – with the *Akeidah*?

11. The New Narrative: Elevate Your Child

What was the *new* narrative to be?

A fundamental principle of Judaism is that the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were seamless conduits of the Divine. They were not only on the same page as their Creator, but all of the days of their lives were dedicated solely to fulfilling the desires of their Creator.¹⁵

¹⁴ Judges, ch. 11.

¹⁵ Avot hen hen hamerkav (Bereishit Rabba 47:6; Zohar I, p. 210b, III p. 184b.)

Thus, it is obvious that Abraham was not on a different page than God, and that when God instructed Abraham to elevate Isaac, Abraham knew that the way to elevate was not through the sword, through sacrifice, or bloodbaths.

The problem is that the *entire world* did not know that. And so, the *Akeidah* wasn't for Abraham; the *Akeidah* was for all of humankind.

God created the world to be beautiful and harmonious, a place where all people respect the sanctity of life and the holiness of living, where we feel the pulse of every living thing and how we are all connected with each other and with our Creator.

This indeed is what we celebrate on the High Holidays generally and Rosh Hashanah specifically.

However, after creating this world, God had a major dilemma. God saw that the world was the exact opposite of what He intended. People hated each other. People worshipped gods that they believed told them to slaughter their own kids. People were prepared to kill millions of others just so that they would stand out as the most powerful. People's entire identity was based on what they thought was best for them, not what was best for the world.

How to change that perception? Not so much Abraham's perception, because Abraham had already become one with God and the divine vision for the world. Rather, how to teach the entire world, for all future generations – including those of us sitting here right now – that, when God asks you to offer up your child, it is out of love? How to teach the entire world for all generations that the reason God created the world in the first place was so that sanctity of life would reign, not barbaric slaughter and blood-soaked religions?

How?

Through the *Akeidah*.

The *Akeidah* was meant to set the precedent and be the message for all the world – *I, God, did not command, neither did I speak, nor did it enter My mind* for there ever to be human bloodshed and human sacrifice in My name.

The world says slaughter your children for the sake of martyrdom, but I, God, say elevate your children, inspire your children, teach your children for the sake of heaven.

Never, ever, climb a mountain to kill; climb a mountain to live.

Back then, 4,000 years ago, human sacrifice was normal. Child sacrifice was a ritual. Since then, most of the world has changed its narrative. Life, at least in the civilized world, is sacred. The *Akeidah* made it so.

This is the *Akeidah* – the template for how to change the norm, to elevate without destroying, to sacrifice without shedding blood, to celebrate life by creating life.

12. Avinu Malkeinu (Inspirational Story)

For 4,000 years we Jews, descendants of Abraham and Isaac, have been living proof to this testament and to this precedent. We have been teaching this ideal and this dream wherever we have gone. And for this, the world has tried to slaughter us again and again. But through it all, we have prevailed, sometimes with the greatest pain. But we have always maintained the sanctity of life that is conveyed in the Oneness of God. We have done so against the greatest odds. And this is why we were born.

This ideal is encapsulated in a story that is connected to one of the most profound of the High Holiday prayers, *Avinu Malkeinu*.

After the war, a Holocaust survivor asked Rabbi Itzikel of Antwerp: “We say in the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, ‘Our Father our King, do it for the sake of those who were killed for Your holy Name’ and then in the next line we say, ‘Our Father our King, do it for the sake of those who were slaughtered for Your Oneness.’ Why does it repeat itself using two different expressions, ‘Your holy Name’ and ‘Your Oneness’?”

Rabbi Itzikel was stumped and had no answer. The survivor said, “Please allow me supply my answer...”

"When the Nazis marched into my town, they assembled one hundred men and lined them up in front of the river. A Nazi with a machine gun started shooting from the right side of the line to the left until, methodically, he killed all the men. When the shooting began, all the men started to say the *Shema* together, *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad* – 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.'

"The people on the right barely had the chance to get the first words out before the bullets tore through their holy bodies. They perished with the words *Hashem Elokeinu*, 'the Lord is our God' on their lips. They did not manage to finish the *Shema*. They were the ones 'who were killed for Your holy Name.'

"The people on the left managed to stay alive for a few extra seconds to finish the *Shema* – *Hashem Echad*, 'the Lord is One.' These were the ones 'who were slaughtered for Your Oneness.'"

When Rabbi Itzikel heard this explanation, he cried for hours.

Avinu Malkeinu, our Father our King, who is like Your nation Israel, a nation that understands Your message – the message of the *Akeidah*.

13. The Message: Creation

The message of the *Akeidah* is not the taking of life but the creation of life. This is why we read this section on Rosh Hashanah, the day the world was created.

We are here to create – to create a *new* narrative, to create a *new* energy, a *new* light, a *new* inspiration, a *New* Year.

This is what the *Akeidah* teaches us – that we have the ability to change the old narrative into a new narrative, to change death into life, to change slaughter into elevation.

Most other religions begin counting time with their religion; Judaism begins with creation. There is One Creator and the One Creator instructs the creations how to live. Period.

Most other religions celebrate their religion; Judaism celebrates the creation of the world. Why? Because most religions want to *supersede* the world – they say, the world is evil, we will replace it with good (good as they define it – which can mean a world ruled by a master race, a world empty of infidels, a world subject to *shariah* law).

Judaism says the exact opposite: God *precedes* the world. God *creates* the entire world. Judaism and the Torah merely reveal the built-in purpose of the world.

The *Akeidah* tells us why we are here: to elevate the entire world to God – not with a sword, but with love.

14. Changing the Narrative (Conclusion)

We have to change the narrative in such a way that all the world will hear and remember it. We have to do the unexpected, the unpredictable, the shocking. We have to shock the world out of its comatose state.

Back then, God instructed Abraham to set a precedent, a precedent of how one is meant to raise a child and raise up a world – a precedent of how one is meant to change the predicable narrative and create a whole different, deeper, more divine conversation. How to take old time and turn it into a New Year.

For 4,000 years the world has been doing its thing a certain way, evolving naturally. But all the while, there was this small voice of the gentle Jew saying *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*, perpetuating God's holy Name and teaching the world about God's Oneness.

For 4,000 years we told all who would hear that it's not good to sacrifice your own children, and we pointed to the *Akeidah* as an example. They mocked us and tried to kill us. And yet, today, at least in the West, it isn't normal to slaughter your own children. With our commitment and perseverance, we have changed the nature of much of the world.

Today, 5775 from creation and nearly 4,000 years after the *Akeidah*, it is our obligation as Jews to once again change the nature of the world.

What “new” energy will we bring to the world in 5775? What “new” idea will we teach the world in this coming year? What will be our *Akeidah*, our binding, our commitment to changing the way the world sees things?

This is our challenge. And the *Akeidah* demands that we meet this challenge and elevate the whole world to God.

This is the true meaning of a New Year. And then it truly will be a *Shanah Tova*, a Good Year.

Time to put the *shofar*, ram’s horn, the *Akeidah* reminder, to our lips and ... Blast Off!