

GOD'S GREATEST SIN
Rosh Hashanah Second Day
October 1, 2019 ☆ 2 Tishri 5780
Rabbi Jennifer R. Greenspan

I have found, at least in my life, that we are often our own worst critics. We expect too much of ourselves, and we overuse the word “should,” trying desperately to reach some unattainable goal of perfection. I should be able to work a full-time job, maintain a clean home, cook and serve three healthy meals a day, and find at least an hour a day for exercise. I should be able to find time to meditate, go to bed earlier, get up earlier, still get eight hours of sleep, drink more water, and start a yoga routine. I should stop buying things I don't need and be better about saving money. I should stop using disposable bottles, plastic straws, and eating anything that isn't organic. I should come to synagogue more often. I should stop looking at my phone. I should use my phone to make sure I'm on top of my calendar. I should spend more time with my family. I should figure out how to be perfect already.

How many of those “should”s that we constantly tell ourselves are really true to who we are, and how many come from a culture of perfectionism?

When we are sitting in a season of judgement, how are we to judge ourselves and our deeds and our sins when we know we're not perfect?

In the Talmud, Rabbi Abbahu asks: Why on Rosh Hashanah do we sound a shofar made from a ram's horn?

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: תקעו לפני בשופר של איל כדי שאזכור לכם עקידת יצחק

The Holy Blessed One said: use a shofar made from a ram's horn, so that I will be reminded of the binding of Isaac.¹

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 16a

Why, through both the Torah reading and the sounding of the Shofar, do we need to remind ourselves, or perhaps, remind God, of the Binding of Isaac? Of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar?

Elsewhere in the Talmud we're told not to use Cow's horn for the shofar at Rosh Hashanah, as one's "prosecutor cannot become an advocate."² This harkens back to the story in which the Israelite people built and worshipped a Golden Calf while Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai waiting to receive the 10 Commandments. To use a cow's horn, the Talmud is trying to teach, would be to remind God of our people's greatest sin of idolatry. Probably rightly, our sages think that's unwise at this time of year.

And yet, in this passage of Talmud, God enters and says, "Remind me of the Binding of Isaac." Perhaps God is really saying, "In this season of judgement, remind me of *my* greatest sin toward *you*."

Because what God asked of Abraham is, indeed, be nothing short of sinful. How did God manage to do that, to ask God's beloved Abraham to sacrifice his beloved Isaac?

God crossed the line and asked for more than can be asked of a person, more than a loving and caring God who wants a relationship with human beings should expect to receive. God learned, and therefore we learn, that there are limits to what can be asked of us, and what we can expect of ourselves. Not every "should" needs to be deemed a worthy one.

Throughout the interactions between God and Abraham, God seems to be testing and learning Abraham's limits, trying to understand the boundaries of what a human being will do. God wonders, "Will Abraham uproot himself and drag his wife Sarah and nephew Lot hundreds of miles across the desert if I promise him offspring? Yes! He did that!"³

² Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 26a

³ See Genesis 12:15

“Will he stand up to me if I threaten a whole city with destruction for their sinfulness? Wow! He *did* stand up to me! He told me not to destroy Sodom and Gemora. He didn’t change my mind, but he did go in and save his nephew’s family.”⁴

“Will he throw his oldest son and his mother, Hagar, out into the wilderness as Sarah requested if I promise to make sure the kid will be okay? He did do that. He must really trust me and the limits I’m asking. Let’s try this.”⁵

“Will he sacrifice his younger son, the one he and his wife prayed and yearned for if I say please?”

Throughout Abraham’s life, God seems to push him further and further, trying to understand the limits of a person, and the limits of what God, a higher power, can ask. God calls Abraham, and Abraham answers, “Hineni, here I am.”

קח־נָא

“Please take your son, your precious, beloved Isaac, and offer him on a mountain I will point out to you.”

Abraham is dumbfounded. This is God. The Creator of the world, the One who wants him to father not just one, but three major religious traditions. “I should do what?!”

Abraham never says another word to God, and after the conclusion of this story he never says another word to anyone. But, for some reason, he can’t bring himself to say that *now* God has asked for more than he can really give. Like so many of us, he doesn’t push backs when too much is asked. He prepares to do it, recognizing his own suffering and that it will kill his child.

Abraham seems to act in a daze, perhaps trying not to feel what he is doing, and slowly follows instructions. He prepares his donkeys for the journey himself, rather than letting his servants do it; maybe he hopes God will see his devotion and call the whole thing off. He gets up early,

⁴ See Genesis 18:16-33

⁵ See Genesis 21:1-21

probably because he couldn't really sleep, and didn't want his wife to notice the sleepless distress on his face. He tells his son that God will provide the ram for the offering they are setting out to do, perhaps hoping that saying it will make it true.

And in the end, Abraham ties his son to the altar, lifts the knife, and suddenly--
"Abraham, Abraham!" calls out an Angel of God, stopping him.

It is as though God suddenly realized that Abraham, a human being, was so overwhelmed by the power of God, that he might actually *do* whatever it took to maintain their relationship, even if it would absolutely break his heart and destroy everything he loved. How many of us have fallen into a similar trap, moving forward with what we think we're *supposed* to do even when we know it will hurt us?

God realized that it is possible to sin by asking too much. God realized that we, human beings, have limits to what can be demanded of us, and have limits to what we can give before we end up destroying ourselves.

We are in a season of reflection and repentance. We are doing what the tradition calls, "Cheshbon haNefesh," an accounting of the soul. We evaluate our mistakes and our deeds. We weigh what we have neglected. And we weigh what we can work on and improve upon. But while we weigh our deeds, we have to remember to ask: Have I had reasonable expectations for others? Have I had reasonable expectations for myself? Have I allowed striving for perfection to cloud my understanding of what is a reasonable expectation?

When the angel stops him from sacrificing his son, Abraham sees a ram and sacrifices it instead. God sees this effort, and realizes where the boundary lies. God seems to allow Abraham to say, "I can give much, but I cannot give everything. To be a full human being, I must give of myself. I must make sacrifices *for* those I love. But I am not expected to make a sacrifice *of* those I love. I cannot be expected to make a sacrifice of *myself*."

This is the moment God wants to remember when the shofar is sounded.

We as humans seem to have a fear that if we do not have high expectations of ourselves and our loved ones, we will become inert and stop growing. In truth, we do have limits, and we must learn to grow with them, to push them gently, but not to blow past them and hurt ourselves. When we expect too much of others, we lash out when they fail to meet those expectations. When we expect too much of ourselves, we become depressed and allow our deeper needs to become clouded, and indeed we have seen people who cannot achieve perfection sometimes sacrificing their own lives. We suffer when we expect to be perfect. We end up sacrificing our own health, and the health of our loved ones, and sometimes ourselves.

Through Abraham, God discovered that we can only give so much. We cannot afford to be Abraham when judging ourselves, trying to push ourselves so far that we nearly lose everything. But it was also Abraham's decision to offer the ram, to offer as much as he could *within* his limits. When we weigh what we have done in the last year, we must remember not to repeat God's sin, even to ourselves, of forgetting our real limitations, nor Abraham's sin of failing to state that too much was asked and the boundary was crossed, as he instead set out to sacrifice his child.

As we move from Rosh Hashanah into the 10 Days of Repentance leading to Yom Kippur, let us be honest with ourselves, knowing that God is assured of our limitations. We will be judged on whether or not we sought the ram, or our own appropriate level sacrifice; we won't be judged against an unattainable level of perfection. We must forgive ourselves for not being perfect, and, instead, reflect on who we can actually become. When we expect perfection and ignore our limits, we risk stagnation because we eventually do give up. When we know our limits, we give ourselves the chance to grow beyond them.

What are you called to do this year? What is your role in improving the world, and yourself? Have you taken a true, honest look at where your limits truly lie? Have you forgiven yourself for not being perfect?

Shanah Tovah.