

## **The Binding of the Soul: Drasha for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah**

Ari Yovel, 9/15/15

We've all heard this story before: "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering..." The father and son go up the mountain, G-d intervenes at the last second, and the father and son go back down the mountain after having a barbecue. The story is familiar and recognized as something that happened in another time to another person. There's nothing new under the sun. So, let me suggest a slightly different perspective on this reading. What would you say if I were to tell you that the very same knife that Abraham Avinu raised towards his son so many generations ago is in our hands right now? Sounds exaggerated, right? I'll try to explain.

Within the long caravan of texts that spreads out along our siddur (prayer book) is placed that famous and frightening prayer: Unetaneh Tokef. With a loud and fearful voice, we remember that this sweet and happy holiday is the opening of a trial that lasts for ten days, during which the entirety of humanity is standing accused. The world is renewed on Rosh Hashanah, true, but are we worthy to be renewed along with it? And, if so, what are willing to do- what are we willing to sacrifice- to justify our existence?

During these ten days, the poem warns, the fate of each and every one of us is decided, and we are given the chance to present before the True Judge everything we have to say in our defense. The text describes the Book of Memories, in which our actions- our successes and our failures- are all recorded and detailed. "It will read itself, and every person's signature is in it." We ourselves signed off on those deeds every day with our intentions and thoughts, be it accidentally or deliberately. We have no way of dodging what is written there. We can only look at the amount of sins as opposed to the amount of good deeds and try and calculate the difference between them. Doing this spiritual math is what we call "cheshbon nefesh" (figuratively "introspection", literally "mathematics of the soul")!

I return now to our earlier binding. We've been asked to do something extreme and most severe- to sacrifice a living soul. Isaac may have gone willingly in his case, while his father agonized over what he so painfully knew was going to happen. We are not that fortunate. G-d calls on us to look at the human race and its worth with a piercing and critical eye. We are not blind to what goes on around us and are aware that humanity isn't flawless (Translation note: the Hebrew idiom actually used here is "a tallit that is not entirely tchelet", as in not entirely made of the valuable material used in some tallitot). But is the negative side big enough to justify imposing a death sentence?

The sad fact of the metaphor I'm trying to build here is that choosing death- admitting our own guilt, accepting the sentence, and dying a personal and collective spiritual death- is really easy. It doesn't take effort to just say, "I sinned and there's nothing I can do about it. That's how I am. That's how we are." And in our most difficult moments, in the depths of our soul, there is a part of us that wants to give up. After all, we go through this crisis every single year, and when we understand how long the list of our shortcomings really is, it's hard to believe that the year to come can be any different. If we couldn't manage to overcome things in the last year, why should we bother going through this painful process again? It's much easier to make peace with our fate and with ourselves. It is what it is. This is how we are. This is how I am.

But G-d is not willing to give up on us so quickly. The Judge in this great trial is not just a judge. He is also our Sovereign Father, in whom the measure of judgment exists alongside the measure of mercy. He didn't give us free will just to watch us toss that ability aside. In all the readings of the last few weeks there have been foreshadowing hints to the great binding of the Days of Awe, the binding of the soul. In Parashat "Nitzavim" (Deut. 29:9-30:20), the parasha we read just before the holiday began, the verses throw out a piece of advice that is actually a last request from us, right before we step into the courthouse: "choose life" (Deut. 30:19). Even Unetaneh Tokef, with all the bleakness and pessimism that prayer contains, offers us a way to change our situation: "But repentance, prayer, and charity annul the severe decree."

Choosing life is difficult. We choose life every time we decide that the fact that we are limited and flawed as human beings will not stop us from trying to deal with, and perhaps overcome, our weaknesses and struggles. For each person the details are different, but the message we are aiming for is one: it's true, this is how I am and this is how we are *today*, but we can change. We are willing to change. We *must* change! Only that can move the knife in our hands away from its target upon the altar. It is a choice that happens not only once, but countless times in every day throughout the year.

This choice is one that we can only make for ourselves, but indeed we all must make it. The Book of Life stands before us, and in it is all the evidence both for and against us. The Judge is waiting within, and the trial will begin in a few short moments. And what says the accused? The *teshuvah* (answer/repentance) I will leave to you.

Shana tova (*Have a good new year*).