

## The Unbinding of Isaac

We have just read the story of the Binding of Isaac, in Hebrew *Akeidat Yitzhak*, and though this story is always referred to in Isaac's name, it is told through the perspectives of both Abraham and G-d. Not only are we missing Isaac's point of view, but Sarah, his mother is also missing from the story. Our Sages noticed this as well and attempted to fill in some of these missing pieces through creative *midrash*, that is, a creative re-telling of the story. In one Rabbinic version, Satan comes to Isaac's mother Sarah in the guise of Isaac, just at the moment when he was tied on the altar. When Sarah saw him she asked, "My son, what has your father done to you?" He replied, "My father took me, led me up hills and down into valleys, until finally he brought me up to the summit of a high and towering mountain, where he built an altar, and grasped a knife to cut my throat. Had not the Holy One said to him, 'Lay not a hand upon the lad,' I would have been slaughtered." Even before Satan finished his tale, Sarah's soul left her body and she died. Sarah actually becomes the victim in this version of the story. Her pain is overwhelming.

In this midrash, Sarah represents those whose stories remain untold. The ones whose pain is overlooked. Our tradition is deeply concerned with the idea that truth includes multiple perspectives and that most often, the suffering of others is hidden from view. Our primary story of the binding of Isaac does not include his mother Sarah and the effect of Abraham's actions upon her. As her perspective is missing, her suffering is hidden until our attention is turned to her in this later Rabbinic re-telling.

It is an uncomfortable truth that many in our community are bearing unseen suffering. Most of the time, we hide our suffering from others. That is natural. But in my experience, these days, most of us are really not fine. This is a time when everyone is feeling oppressed, as if we are bound. Whatever had all along been difficult or challenging in someone's life, has now become more painful. Whatever was hard, is now harder. And for many, whatever was painful is now almost unbearable. So how do we get through these difficult days?

Let us remember that after Isaac is bound on the altar, he is unbound, although the account of the unbinding is not recalled in the Torah. We never get to see that part of the story. We have to figure that out for ourselves. How do we unbind one another? How do we lift some of the burden? That is both the mystery and the challenge.

There is another Rabbinic midrash, a commentary that tells this story. When Isaac lay bound upon the altar, the angels above looked down and began to weep. Their tears fell into Isaac's eyes. In one interpretation, the tears revived him from the shock of the experience. In other words, it is the sharing of grief that provides a healing balm.

The Slonimir Rebbe, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic scholar, offers a beautiful teaching about the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. In Hebrew, the word for one of the shofar sounds is *teruah*. In fact, the Torah names this holiday *Yom Teruah* - the Day of the *Teruah*. But what does *Teruah* actually mean? The Slonimir Rebbe points out that *teruah* has 2 meanings. On the one hand it means brokenness. The

sound itself is made up of many short staccato broken sounds. It is meant to evoke the sound of weeping, the sound of a broken heart. On Rosh Hashanah we are invited stand before G-d and call out in all our humble brokenness for a compassionate response. But the word *teruah* also has another meaning, stemming from the root *rei-ut* which means friendship. On Rosh Hashanah, as the cycle of the year begins anew, we gather to strengthen the loving bonds between ourselves and G-d and between ourselves and our community. How do we reconcile these two very different meanings in the same word? Perhaps, when we make ourselves vulnerable, when we share our pain, with G-d or with one another, our bonds of friendship are strengthened.

Perhaps we can unbind each other a bit by simply reaching out to one another and asking sincerely “how are you **really** doing?” We can unbind one another by listening deeply to the answer. Sharing our grief , like the angels’ tears, can perhaps lift some of the burden.

Since I have arrived in this community, I have been asked by so many kind and caring community members, how am I really doing. And each time, it made a real difference. To be truly seen and heard is really the foundation of what most people need and desire. So, while we navigate through these days with masks over our faces, let us unmask our hearts just a bit more than usual. Let us add some extra kindness to our interactions. And then likely, we will come through this time as a stronger and more connected community- *a kehillah kedosha*, a truly sacred community.

