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ROSH HASHANAH SERMON 5770

Take him. Who? Your son. Which one? Your only one. What do you mean? You know, the only one who matters to you. Oh, Isaac? Yes, the one you love. Take Isaac where? To the land of Moriyah. And do what? Burn him completely as an offering to Me. I will show you the mountain.

The shock of this passage from the opening of the Akeidah never fails to jar me. Our Rosh Hashanah Torah readings force us to confront the painful consequences of making choices. Yesterday we saw Hagar's agony, as she was un-chosen from Sarah and sent with her son to languish in the wilderness; today we heard Abraham acknowledge Isaac as his chosen son and only moments later choose God's command over his own parental love. On the *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe- as we plead with God to choose to forgive us, to write us in the Book of Life for another year, and to help us overcome our human frailties- we can see our lives mirrored in Torah. Abraham's dilemmas remind us that we too often choose between people- sometime consciously and compassionately, and sometimes without awareness or sensitivity. This morning, I'd like to linger on these questions: What motivates us to choose between people? What are the implications of these choices? Do we ever know how deeply others are affected by our choices?

Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world. Perhaps the placement of these early Abraham stories in the Rosh Hashanah service hints to us that inherent in our human condition- our human creation- is the necessity to make difficult choices.

A story was told about Rabbi Israel Salanter, the Salanter rebbe, who saw a servant girl carrying two pails of water on her shoulders. When dinner was ready, he washed his hands sparingly, doing the Al Netilat Yadayim blessing with barely wet hands. When his students asked him, "Why didn't you use more water?" The rebbe replied, "One should not be generous with a mitzvah upon another person's shoulders."

I don't fault Abraham for the choices he makes here in Breisheet. After all, both God and Sarah encourage him to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael as only consequentially relevant to the Jewish story. What I do fault Abraham for is his lack of compassion or explanation to those whom he does not choose. He misses the sensitivity of Rabbi Salanter towards his quiet maidservant. The "un-chosen" of Abraham are never directly addressed, never given rationale or apology, and never offered an emotional connection that could bring them peace and closure.

Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher, gave us a profound understanding of what it means to be present for another person. He compared the "I-It" encounter to the "I-Thou" encounter. According to Buber, we often think about objects and people in functional terms. This can sometimes be good: when doctors examine us, they look for specific problems and warning signs; when scientists research, they observe very specific actions and draw wider conclusions. Unfortunately, we often think about other human beings in terms of their function in our lives rather than their own unique self. Instead of

really opening up and sharing with another person, we keep a sort of distance- either to protect ourselves or to elicit a certain response- making a deeper connection impossible. These sorts of interactions, Buber tells us, illustrate I-It relationships.

I-Thou relationships, says Buber, are an eternal butterfly: free, un-stifled, honest, and surprising. This is the world of pure relationship. I need nothing from you; I do not care what you can do for me. Rather, I respond to you from the deepest compassion for your humanity and divinity. Life is a series of encounters, and only by encountering *You* as *You*, do *I* become *I*.

Abraham, the father of the Jewish experience, seems to have fallen into some I-It relationships. Once it becomes clear that a person has no more to offer to him or to the Jewish future, I find little effort on Abraham's part to continue relating in a Thou paradigm. Earlier in the story, Abraham let his wife Sarah be taken to bed by King Avimelekh under the guise of being his sister, distancing her and letting her be objectified as an "It" in order to save his own life. In yesterday's reading, once he learns that Ishmael will not be the continuation of the monotheistic nation, he no longer bothers to relate to this son as a Thou. Ishmael and his mother Hagar, the concubine handmaiden dismissed for annoying the matriarch Sarah, are sent off into the wilderness with minimal supplies and less than minimal remorse.

Today, in the story of the Akeidah, we find Abraham in a dilemma. In order to choose God as a Thou, he must relegate Isaac to an It, literally a sacrifice to a Higher Authority. And yet in the initial commandment that I read at the beginning, God reminds Abraham that Isaac is indeed chosen: he is both *yachid* and *ahov*: his father's only beloved in this world. On one level, this is the ultimate disappointment, to choose the Unseen Mover over flesh-and-blood child. On another level, our tradition acknowledges, it is the epitome of commitment: Abraham transcends his biological instinct of parental protection and births a new religious awareness that guides all future generations.

When I read these Abraham narratives, the lack of emotional turmoil around his most defining choices feels anti-climactic at best. Father and son barely speak on the journey to Mount Moriyah. It's as if Abraham is in a dream sequence, putting one foot in front of another, moving in a bubble without human connection. It is Isaac who breaks the silence with one word: "*Avi*- my father." This single word, although just for a moment, snaps Abraham back into a Thou relationship, as he answers, "*Hineni, b'ni*- I am present, my son." But this level of truth and intimacy cannot be maintained: he still cannot allow himself to share the reality of what is about to happen with his son. The struggle between Thou and It culminates with a knife over Isaac's head; his death stopped by only God's angel desperately calling out "*Avraham, Avraham*." For Abraham, hearing his own name is like a spiritual defibrillator, once again shaking him back to the reality of the moment. Although he does not physically kill his son, never again does he speak to Isaac. Perhaps scarred, perhaps oblivious, Abraham has bound himself in an I-It relationship.

My yoga teacher in Los Angeles used to say that the universe gives us the same lessons over and over, until we decide to learn them. Clearly Abraham is stuck on this lesson of

choosing between people and doing so with grace, communication, and compassion. He never quite understands that reaching out to God is not supposed to come at the expense of human connection. I wonder if we are still learning his lesson. Perhaps this is the year that we can finally get it right and move on to the next spiritual challenge. Perhaps, our prayers this Rosh Hashanah can help us facilitate this shift.

In the Vidui, the communal confession we recite throughout the High Holidays, we say: *Avinu Malkeinu chatanu l'fanecha bivli daat*, literally, that we have sinned before God without knowing. Many *Machzorim* translate this line to mean that we have inadvertently transgressed, but the word *daat* indicates a very deep kind of knowing. It is the kind of knowing that Adam and Eve first experienced after eating from that tree in the Garden of Eden. It is the kind of knowing that the Torah uses to describe sexual union. I think Buber would say it is the type of knowing that allows us to relate to each other as Thou. So against this backdrop, and the backdrop of Abraham's experience, I offer a different interpretation of this phrase. *Avinu Malkeinu chatanu l'fanecha bivli daat*: God, our ultimate Parent, we have transgressed by not relating to others as Thous, and we have transgressed by not paying attention to the effects of our nonchalance on those we claim to love.

We are like Abraham who allows Hagar and Ishmael to wander into the wilderness with only one pouch of water. We are like Abraham who neglects to tell Sarah where he is taking her son that fateful morning. We are like Abraham who cuts off any verbal relationship with Isaac after raising the knife above him on Mount Moriyah. What kind of father sends his children out to die? What kind of husband barricades his wife from any information about her son?

This is the same Abraham who argued with God to save the innocent people of Sodom and Gomorrah; and yet now, he cannot stand up for his own family! It seems easier for him to advocate for an unknown group of Its, rather than a few intimate Thous. We know this inclination too: We fight for hungry children around the world but can't find an hour of our time to drive 10 minutes to East Palo Alto and serve dinner at a homeless shelter. We push our government towards social responsibility but fall frighteningly short in our own Tzedakah commitments. We customize seminars for our corporate clients but skip family dinner to meet our deadlines.

Buber himself – the creator of the I-Thou paradigm- fell short of perfection in this area. In his autobiography, he recounted a story in which a young man came to him for advice. He felt that he gave sufficient but not outstanding attention to the visitor, and moved on to more pressing issues as soon as the young man left him. Shortly thereafter, the young man committed suicide. When Buber found out about the death, he deeply felt that his inability to connect with this boy as a Thou played a serious role in his suicidal despair.

It seems that Abraham's blessing came with a shadowy curse. Since the beginning of our religious awakening, we keep failing the test of compassionate choosing. We continue to dismiss the Hagers in our lives and ignore the Ishmaels. We continue to lose the opportunity to say "Hineni" and to extend that moment into a deeper, more intimate

connection. We allow ourselves to treat so many potential Thous as Its, and by justifying our behavior, we perpetuate our transgression.

On the flip side, when someone “chooses” us, when they take the time to relate to us as a Thou, we have to acknowledge the gift they have given us. As Buber says, *It requires me time after time to thank my fellow-man even when he has not done anything special for me. But for what? For encountering me for real when he encountered me; for opening his eyes and perceiving reliably what I had to tell him; yes, for opening what I talked to: the well-closed heart.* Rabbi Booth and I have been talking about positive reinforcement in education, especially with students predisposed towards disruptive behavior. The minute that loud, distracted kid gets involved in class, when his eyes light up as he explains something to another student, his teacher should call home with a glowing report. Why? To communicate that there was a real encounter, and that a well-closed heart had opened its doors. One of the greatest gifts a teacher can offer is to see a child as a Thou.

Some years ago, I taught a large 5th grade religious school class. I saw this class as a laboratory to bring the theories and ideas of my training to life. Throughout the year, I experimented with all sorts of creative lesson plans and interesting programs. But looking back, I can see that the need to deal with 22 students at once overpowered my best-laid plans, and I fell into an I-It mentality with the group.

The following summer at another synagogue, I stepped in as a substitute B’nai Mitzvah tutor. Every Wednesday, I worked with six pre-Bar Mitzvah boys and their families. We focused on trope, blessings, Haftarah portions and the seeds of their *divrei Torah*. Although these students were now the same age as last year’s 5th graders, I felt a clear shift in excitement as their educator. I felt energized instead of exhausted. I was able to match my temperament, teaching style, and educational goals to each individual, and meet each one as a Thou. I began to articulate my epiphany: *a classroom is meant to be a web of simultaneous one-on-one relationships.* My greatest goal as a teacher, and now as the Director of Lifelong Learning, is to relate to the individual within the structure of community: learning more and more about each student, reaching out to their families, and structuring lessons or programs in a way that allows for these connections.

In the Zichronot section of Musaf today, we will plead to God: “Remember for us, God, the covenant and the loving-kindness and the oath that you swore on Mount Moriyah, and may the binding with which our father Abraham bound his son Isaac on the altar appear before You; how he overcame his compassion in order to perform your will with all his heart.” Why would we want God to remember this moment? How can the image of the Akeidah sway God to write us in the Book of Life?

Once again, it is Buber that brings the lesson home for us. God, he writes, is the Eternal Thou. All that work that we have to put in to our interpersonal relationships, that presence of mind and heart that allows the person across from us to know they are being fully experienced, we must put that effort towards God as well. By bringing the Akeidah into Musaf, we remember the positive side of Abraham’s actions. We commend him for listening for a call of God at all! When we read the Akeidah in the Torah service, we

intellectually grapple with the morality of the story- but in Musaf, we beg God to remember the covenant that came out of it. I know that I will transgress again, and continue to brush over people as Its instead of Thous. I know that I will not reach the awareness of holiness that I so deeply crave. But with *daat*, with intimate awareness and honesty throughout these Days of Awe, I can try to redirect my patterns and recommit to being more deeply present with you- my community, and with God-my Creator.

This Rosh Hashanah, let us finally learn the lessons of Abraham. Let us see each person as a Thou. Let us move towards *Hineni* and stretch those moments of presence into actual relationships. It might mean offering eye contact and a simple smile to the homeless person holding a sign at the stoplight, or asking about your spouse's day at the dinner table, or sharing more about your child's individual needs with their teachers. Let us bring the intimate knowledge of *daat* into our conversations and our prayers. It might mean going deeper than "I like your haircut." Let us re-encounter our Hagar and Ishmaels, those people in our midst whom we so easily dismiss with disdain, and regard them with dignity and respect. Let us hear the voice of the Eternal Thou, reminding us to see the inner essence of each person, each Thou that stands before us. Let us recommit to God and to Isaac- opening the depths of potential both with the people in our lives and the Creator who gives us our lives. And may our connections with others inspire the Holy One to inscribe us in the Book of Life.

Shanah Tovah.