

Shanah tovah !

Many of you know that here at Temple Micah we have a rich tradition of writing sermons in the form of a letter. B'nai mitzvah students ask the Rabbi a question and the response takes the form of a letter. This plays off a long Jewish history of students asking their teachers questions - starting in the middle east about 1600 years ago.

As the Jewish community began to migrate, many rabbis still studied together in *yeshivot* in or near the land of Israel. When a group of Jews would move further away, they discovered new Jewish questions. They'd write their rabbis, and the rabbi would respond in a letter. This form of Jewish literature is called *sh'iltot* (meaning questions) *u'tshuvot* (and answers). Yes, a response is called *teshuvah*, the same word that we use today for returning back, for repentance, and repair.

This year, as I thought about our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading - the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, I was struck by a missing voice from the story. Where was Sarah, Isaac's mother - and Abraham's wife? I imagined that she woke up on the morning that the boys left - only to find herself more or less alone. How might she feel? What might she think about? If she wrote Abraham a letter, what would it say? My sermon this morning is an attempt to answer these questions.

Dear Abraham,

My love,

The sacred isn't meant to be done in secret.

When I woke up this morning and learned that you had taken our sweet son Isaac, a donkey, and a few of the servant boys to hike up a mountain and offer God a sacrifice,¹ I was a little surprised. When you didn't come back that evening, I was more than surprised. Though it is not totally ridiculous for you to

¹ Genesis 22

get up early to hike up a mountain, we usually talk about it before you go. I usually know when to expect you back.

We don't have a fully equal partnership - after all, the patriarchy is alive and well right now in the year 1800 BCE - you and I do have a baseline of respect.

This respect is built on decades of love and trust. After all, I knew you back when we lived in Ur,² and I knew your family. Your father Terach sold idols for our neighbors to worship,³ and when you heard the call from Adonai, you and I journeyed to a new land together.⁴

We trusted Adonai's promises to us.⁵ Despite the fact that it seemed so strange that Adonai would give us children, with me in my advanced age, we had faith. And it seemed that Adonai had faith in us - God changed our names - from Avram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah⁶ as a symbol of our mutual commitment.

Together, Abraham, you and I journeyed away from our birthplace, from the land we knew, from our parents' homes.⁷ Together, we managed to survive, even when I had to stay in the home of a foreign King⁸ - at great personal danger. Together, we continued to journey on. We even made it through when my slave woman Hagar had a baby, Ishmael - by you.⁹ We made it through those challenging days when our children were so young. Despite moments of misunderstanding and pain between us, you and I have always found our way back to each other.

But today, you have gone away with our son, our only son, the one we love, Isaac.¹⁰ The servants who remain here with me tell me that your trip is based on yet another call from God. But how could God ask more of you - of us - than God already has? And if God asked this of you - why did you not tell me, the way you always have before?

² Genesis 11

³ Genesis Rabbah 38:13

⁴ Genesis 12

⁵ Genesis 12 and 17

⁶ Genesis 17

⁷ Genesis 12

⁸ Genesis 20

⁹ Genesis 16

¹⁰ Genesis 22

My mind cannot help but imagine the worst. Are you going to offer our son as a burnt offering to God? It seems like a bad dream - you are all hiking up the mountain. You are leaving the servants and continuing on with Isaac. You are binding him to the altar, lifting your slaughtering knife. You are poised to sacrifice him until the voice of an angel cries out, shouting your name - twice, because you are so in the moment that you do not hear it the first time. You looking around and finding a ram in a thicket to sacrifice instead of our son.¹¹

How could you do all of this? Surely, it is just a terrible dream. A terrible dream for me, for Isaac, for you. A terrible dream of God's. After all, you know - I know - even God must know - the sacred isn't done in secret.

After all, when God thought about destroying the wayward cities of Sodom and Gomorrah - God shared these plans with you. You used your voice, asking :

הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט

*will not the judge of the earth do justice?*¹²

You understood, then, that there is a moral order in the universe. That the one who sees it all - God - follows a moral code. And when you don't understand what God is doing, you, my Abraham, give your concerns a voice.

So I need to know: why did you act in secret, waking up early in the morning before I arose? Isaac is, after all, *our* child - our only son, the one we waited so long for.

God's initial promises to you were made in public. God showed you the stars and asked you to count them¹³ - saying: "your offspring will be as numerous as them." Future generations would bear witness to God's word.

When generations come after us, they will understand that secrets are corrosive. Holding on to them, hiding them from others causes a pain that reaches the soul. If this dream I have had - this vision of you and our son on the mountain - is true, then I will not be able to speak to you again. I will not be able to carry on living. Your secret hurts both of us.

¹¹ Genesis 22

¹² Genesis 18

¹³ Genesis 17

When generations come after us, they will understand that that which is holy cannot be hidden. They will understand that holiness, *kedushah*, set-apart-ness, is only true when it is based in love. When God created a covenant with you - with us - Adonai became our God and we became the first of God's people.¹⁴ Our *brit*, our covenant, was not based on bravado or platitudes, but mutual obligation and justice. Until now, everything that God has asked of us has been life affirming.

Love is life- affirming. So it follows that true sacrifice must be also life affirming. In other words, there must be a line that cannot be crossed. Some things must be off limits. Our children must be off limits.

My Abraham, at this season of *teshuvah*, we are called by Adonai to return - to try to find our best selves. We are taught that only God should be *yodeah nistarot*,¹⁵ the knower of secrets. God knows, too, that none of us can get it right all the time - that is why God is *El Rachum v'chanun - erech apayim, rav chesed v'emet*¹⁶ - slow to anger and quick to forgive. That is why in this season, we practice *tfilah*, honest reflection, and *tzedakah*, the doing of righteous deeds as a part of our *teshuvah*, repentance.

My Abraham, we need each other. We need our faith in God to lead us to act in ways that affirm life and dignity for all humanity. We need to remember that we are built to be in relationship - both with Adonai and with one another. That these relationships rely on our mutual obligations - to share, to protect, to communicate. Because you know, the sacred is not meant to be a secret.

Love,
Sarah

¹⁴ Genesis 12

¹⁵ Adon haSlichot piyyut

¹⁶ Exodus 34:6-7, High Holy Day Liturgy