

## 2<sup>ND</sup> DAY ROSH HASHANA DRASH – 5770

When the rabbi called to ask if i`d give the 2<sup>nd</sup> day rh drash, I was stunned into total honesty: absolutely not, I`m not on speaking terms with the torah. But when the rabbi asks, one must at least consider. I thought of my attempts to live with kavanah, with intention. And what is more terrifying and thrilling than to publicly think about one`s spiritual quest. So I said yes. And then she told me the parasha was vayera and I wondered if I could still weasel out of it. I hadn`t opened the chumash in 50 years and am not learned. The akedah, the binding of Isaac, seemed utterly foreign and irrelevant to the questions of my life. I could promise only that I would read a little, study a little, and write honestly of what comes up for me.

I grew up orthodox and went to yeshiva as a kid. I loved the framework that learning torah gave a life, the sense that there is a right and wrong but that it can take a lifetime to figure out which is which. I loved the search for meaning thru words and the intellectual rough and tumble. Yet I chafed at the rigidity and intolerance of the orthodox world and could not live within its confines, despite my love. At puberty when I was to take my place behind the mechitza, the curtain that separates the men and women when praying, I announced to my mother in all of my adolescent arrogance and certainty that I was fed up with all of this jewish stuff and would no longer participate. My mother, who is a very smart woman, was silent for a long moment, then said, ok, darling, whatever you want, but it`s

too late, you're already a Jew. I spent the majority of my adulthood fully aware that my Jewishness informed a huge part of who I was but could see no path to live Jewishly that fit me.

One of the obstacles that lay between me and the Torah, now and then, are the characters: killing and cheating, lying and scheming. In this parasha alone we have Abraham, willing, not for the first time, to sacrifice his wife to a rapacious ruler to save his own skin, Lot willing to abandon his daughters to a mob of rapists, Sarah scheming to kill Hagar and Ishmael, not to save her son's life, but to ensure his dynasty and Abraham, again, whose ultimate responsibility as a parent is to protect his child, ready to literally sacrifice his son. Couldn't we find some better ancestors, just a little more heroic? Many Torah scholars, folks I respect, find Torah vital to their lives despite our deeply flawed ancestors. But my first reading of the parasha left me cold: I just couldn't forgive them. How can such damaged and damaging people guide me? I had to think about how and why I returned to the practice of Judaism.

My Jewish renaissance began in Cuba a number of years ago. I went to see a babalao, a santeria priest, with a friend, who was going for a reading. The priest then turned to me and asked if one of my parents was dead. I replied yes, my father died some 30 years before. And he said well your father wants a mass said for him. The conversation was in Spanish so I thought maybe I misunderstood: my father, the orthodox Jew, with whom I had had a difficult and

estranging relationship, wants a mass said for him. But he was saying la misa, mass. Ok, fine. But as I left the room, a thought blinded me in its powerful clarity: my father had never had kaddish said for him. I was an only child, a girl at that, not permitted to say kaddish.

When I returned to the states I came to csz for yom kippur. It was the first time in 40 years that I entered a shul. I wore my uncle's tallis, and said kaddish for my father, weeping in the realization that in order to be part of l'dor v'dor, the generations, in order to have my perfect, beautiful toddler grandson, I had to accept and forgive my less-than-perfect father. There is no picking and choosing of ancestors, near or far. And so my jewish renaissance began.

This year, this time, it's not my less-than-perfect father that slams me into the wall of slichot, of forgiveness. I judge our ancestors and find them wanting and behind that judgment hides a mirror that reflects the harm I have done in my lifetime and finds me wanting. This year, this time, the slichot is for myself. That moment of softness, of self-acceptance opened for me the possibility of the way back to our foremothers and forefathers, of forgiving them their imperfections. We are told "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses, therefore, v'charta b'chaim, choose life."

And that's what our ancestors did: brawling and sprawling, so-less-than-perfect, they chose life. Avraham, hearing god's voice, or

hallucinating it, chose Isaac's life. Lot's daughters, in a fury of life, wresting control, founded nations with the seed of the father who offered them to rapists. And now I could begin to think about this terrible story, the akedah, the binding of Isaac.

I realized during this process that for me the point isn't the sacrifice, it's the binding. To me the akedah symbolizes Isaac as the first generation of Jews bound to our tradition. We are a people thousands of years old, tied together by our Torah, our laws, our profoundly ethical morality, and our God who requires us in each generation to complete her. This binding, terrifying for Isaac, the son, heart-wrenching for Abraham, the father, it's not an easy thing for any of us. We are bound to each other in a less-than-perfect community. We are bound to our less-than-perfect ancestors in a less-than-heroic founding biblical story. We are bound to a God who often angers and confuses us.

As a child, though I loved the Jewish traditions and felt myself in the stream of the generations, I felt tied up, tied down, tied in knots by religiosity. I couldn't breathe. I saw my father, a would-be baseball player in a family of rabbinical scholars, deeply damaged by religiosity. In response I became a dedicated and inveterate rule-breaker. Tradition, rituals, rules, were all the same to me: soul crushing bonds.

For a short time I belonged to a conservative shul that required the men to wear yarmulkes. It thought of itself as an egalitarian

congregation and allowed women to wear yarmulkes and tallises, as well. It greatly saddened me to see all of the little boys with their kipot, their head coverings, but only a few of the girls. It took me a while to figure out why this bothered me so much. Then I realized that it is the requirements that bind us to our heritage. To make a rule mandatory for men and voluntary for women loosens our ties, tells us we are not as important, or capable.

Here we have these opposites: being bound to Jewish life in a way that can stunt and fossilize or being unbound in a way that sets us adrift. Isaac's binding, our binding, it is not an easy thing. Binding that becomes sacrifice or binding that connects us. Unbinding that frees us or unbinding that sets us adrift. Is it possible to be bound, to our families, our community, our Jewish practice, in a way that does not sacrifice the most cherished parts of us, that enables us to forgive ourselves and each other our imperfections, to choose life in all of its messy splendor? I was at a Jewish meditation retreat and a woman there showed me how to put on my uncle's t'fillin. I put on the t'fillin slowly, ritually and as the long leather strap encircled my arm, my hand, my finger, my forehead, I felt connected, not suffocated, and I did not struggle. I davened, prayed, and for a brief moment I felt the feathery touch of ruach, of spirit on my cheek. Tho I never again wore t'fillin, I know it is possible to bind ourselves to our truest natures. But after the epiphany come the moment-to-moment choices that make up a life. True binding, connection, to each other, to our heritage, that does not fossilize, does not sacrifice our truest selves, is

not a one-off choice but requires us to look with new eyes at our connections, again and yet again. We must struggle in our course corrections, re-examining, re-committing, re-defining, returning.

And so during these chagim, these holidays when we perform t'shuva, when we turn inward in search of our heart's longing, I pray that each of us, unique as a snowflake yet bound together in our imperfect humanity, becomes who we are supposed to be, does that which only each of us can do, this year, at this time, with this breath, v'charta b'chaim, therefore we choose life, for the world depends upon it.