

So We Started Up the Mountain

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780 – September 30, 2019
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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This morning's Torah portion is one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. Genesis 22 begins with Abraham hearing God's voice commanding him to take his beloved son Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him. The next morning Abraham departs with Isaac as well as two lads. Isaac wonders where his father is taking him and even questions aloud, "Abba, I see the knife and the wood but where is the lamb for slaughter?" Abraham assures his son that God will provide and they journey on.

After three days they arrive. Abraham instructs the two lads to remain behind and father and son start up the mountain. At the summit of Mount Moriah, Abraham binds Isaac upon an altar, takes up his knife and is about to slaughter his son when an angel cries out, "Do not raise your hand against your son or cause him any harm. Do not slaughter Isaac, instead sacrifice the ram that you see over there caught in the thicket." Abraham does so and the angel blesses Abraham for his faithfulness.

If the story of the Binding of Isaac ended right there, we would be comforted to know that everything turned out all right. Abraham passed the test. He followed God's commandment. He was ready to sacrifice his beloved son, the inheritor of his faith. He trusted in God and God rewarded him.

But that's not how the story ends. For after the angel blesses Abraham, we read: "Abraham then returned to his servants and they departed together for Beer-Sheva; and Abraham stayed at Beer-Sheva."

The meaning of this verse is clear: Abraham alone rejoined the two lads but Isaac did not. Father and son ascended the mountain, their hearts joined together as one. But something happened on that mountaintop that severed their relationship. Abraham raised his knife, certain that he was following God's command but Isaac, Isaac saw something else. The look in his father's eyes terrified him. His father was a man of faith – but Isaac now doubted what his father believed. What kind of God demands a father to sacrifice his son? What kind of faith requires such total commitment? Isaac knew he could no longer blindly follow his father. He could not be the passive, obedient son. For the sake of survival, Isaac would have to strike out on his own.

This morning's Torah portion reveals a shocking break between generations. In the tale of the Binding of Isaac, a parent is convinced his actions are right and just. But his child sees things radically differently. A chasm opens up separating one generation from the next.

The story of the Binding of Isaac is disturbing. This tale of generational conflict makes us uneasy. And so, as I reflect on this passage on this morning of Rosh Hashanah, I struggle with one primary question, am I like Abraham?

My most precious blessings in life are my three children: Naomi, Carmi, and Rebecca. I love them with all my heart and soul and I know, without any doubt that they love me, too.

They range in age from 26 to 34. For all of their lives, they have been aware that their father is a rabbi. I have dedicated myself to the Jewish faith and to the Jewish people. I have been a rabbi for thirty-five years, striving to teach Judaism to preschoolers, children, teens, and adults. I have sought to be a role model, demonstrating how being Jewish is deeply fulfilling. I am committed to building a sacred community where love and joy are the foundation stones upon which it is built.

I know that for my youngest child, Rebecca, the Judaism I have sought to exemplify is meaningful. She is committed to being involved at this synagogue. She was confirmed at Temple Beth Torah and has taught in our Religious School. Rebecca serves on the board of the Women of Temple Beth Torah and feels connected to TBT.

But for Naomi and Carmi, the Judaism that I have practiced and modeled is not their path. Naomi lives in Kansas City; Carmi in Seattle. Do they belong to a synagogue? No. Observe Shabbat? Not likely. Attend services on the High Holy Days? I do not ask them this question because I already know the answer.

And lest you draw any conclusions about my three children being somehow unique having a father and a mother who are rabbis, the essential truth is that my adult children are no different than their peers. I am speaking about the millennial generation who are between the ages of 25-39. Some, like Rebecca, are connected to synagogue life. If you look at our congregation this morning we see some young adults. A number have very significant roles in our service: Rabbi Stacy, Cantor Miriam, our pianist, Amy, our shofar blower, Ashley, and reader of Torah, Megan.

But the majority of millennials are like Naomi and Carmi; they are not connected to organized Jewish life. How many of you in the congregation are parents who have adult children born between 1980-1994? How many of them are in services this morning? Very few. How many of your children belong to a synagogue? Not enough. How many of your adult children practice Judaism in a demonstrable manner beyond attending a Passover Seder or participating in a family Bat Mitzvah or wedding?

There is a yawning gap between those of us who grew-up as members of the boomer generation and those who are millennials. We boomers, born between 1946-1964, have been shaped in an environment radically different than our children.

Many of us are second generation Americans. I was fortunate to grow-up with a large extended family nearby. My grandparents were immigrants from Latvia and Belarus who came to this country during the great wave of Jewish immigration in the early 20th century. My grandparents lived within a few miles and their Yiddishkeit made an immeasurable impact on my life.

My mom and dad were committed Reform Jews. They were active leaders in my home congregation in Long Beach, as well as in other Jewish communal organizations.

As I grew-up, the events of recent Jewish history weighed on me. I was born a decade after the Holocaust. From the time I was in high school and read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, I have felt a moral responsibility to honor the memories of the Six Million.

The precarious condition of the State of Israel also influenced me. I was a young teen during the Six Day War in 1967 and a college student in 1973 when the Yom Kippur War broke out. The Holocaust and Israel are central to my Jewish identity.

But it is far less so for my children. During their younger years, they had no grandparents or aunts or uncles living nearby. They were fortunate to be close to Rabbi Eve's father who was born in pre-state Israel. However, for them, Israel is not a miracle created after 2,000 years of dispersion but instead is a superpower in the Middle East that recently celebrated its 71st birthday. As for the Holocaust, they are a generation removed from the horrors of the Shoah.

There are other elements that impacted our generations differently. We boomers grew-up during a time of unparalleled prosperity in the American Jewish community. During the post-war period Jews left the cozy confines of major metropolitan areas and migrated to the suburbs. Tight knit Jewish networks were dispersed and congregations became for many a substitute for family. With a burgeoning population of kids, synagogues became centers for educating the young, a primary reason why many joined congregations.

However, our children live in different times. Many millennials came of age during the Great Recession of 2008. After attending college they have faced enormous challenges just finding work. For those who are employed, it often does not pay enough to cover basic necessities. They carry a load of student debt while low wages offer few if any benefits. For millennials, following their parents' path of going to college, graduating, starting a career, finding a life partner, getting married, buying a house, and having children can feel daunting if not impossible.

For Jewish boomers, a primary component of our identity is joining a synagogue. Doing so represents continuity with our tradition and a commitment to community. However, many millennials approach Jewish life quite differently. A significant number do not seek a synagogue for finding Jewish connections. They do not look to brick and mortar institutions to foster relationships. For many a sense of community is sustained online. Friends from youth group or Jewish summer camp or a trip to Israel stay connected through social media. And it is not likely that they are using Facebook – that's what their parents use!

Given the differences between the generations, between parents who are 55 – 73 years old and their adult children, is there hope for bridging the generation gap? Are we parents fated to be like Abraham, so certain that we know the right way that we are blind to our children's individuality? Are we prepared to burden our children with our anxieties and fears about whether our faith will continue in the years to come?

As for many of our adult children, are they consigned to be left at the altar, alienated from the gleam in their parents' eyes? Are they prepared to watch their parents trudge down the mountain alone, wondering whether they have abandoned their own flesh and blood?

The Binding of Isaac is a formidable story of the breakdown between parents and children. But Genesis 22 does not have to be a predetermined tale of generational disjunction. It does not have to serve as the text of our own relationship with our adult children. Instead it can serve as a cautionary tale from which we can learn and grow.

We can do better than Abraham. We can remove the blind faith that causes us to view our children as failing to meet our religious expectations. We can rewrite the story of this bind.

But in order to do so we must be prepared to alter the script. We can do so only when we rid ourselves of the desire to blame our offspring when they do not follow our commands. We can change a tale of alienation if we are ready to attentively listen to one another.

What does it mean to engage in attentive listening? It is not simply having a conversation. Chances are parents and children talk all the time – by text, by email, by Facetime, by phone, and in person. The amount of chatting between the generations has never been greater. But conversation is not the same as dialogue. Dialogue is more intentional. It means being willing to listen, without judgment, to what another is saying. It means going outside of your comfort zone and being open to sharing something that can feel risky.

I will give you an example. A few years ago, I wanted to find a new way to connect with my kids. I wanted to feel like we went beyond the usual things we talk about.

So two years ago I decided I would try out a new practice with my children. Right around Rosh Hashanah, I would invite each of them to ask me a question. There were no preconditions as to what they could ask. I wanted them to be able to raise any question or issue that concerned them and I would listen to what they were saying. Then I would do my best to respond.

I admit that when we did this the first time I was nervous. Just posing this invitation to my children was uncomfortable. Would they even take me up on this offer? But they got it. And the results have been really satisfying. Their questions have been very personal and thoughtful. They have been about areas of life we had never explicitly discussed. I listen carefully, trying to discern what my kids are asking so that I can give a heartfelt response. In the process, I have learned a lot about what is really important to them.

As a parent, this dialogue with my kids has been a wonderful way to begin the New Year. As a result of our being open and honest, I feel an even greater connection with my kids. So let me suggest that you parents may want to give this a try with your adult children. Maybe you will invite them to ask you a question that rests on their hearts. You might be really moved to hear what is weighing on them.

Attentively listening to one another enhances communication and understanding in families. In addition I believe that attentive listening should be an important component of our congregation. In the coming months, we are launching a program called the Shema Project. The word Shema means to listen, pay careful attention, to be present and open. The purpose of the Shema Project is to increase personal relations between our members. In the coming months, small groups will be invited to gather in homes. Through attentive listening we will endeavor to discover our shared interests in order to create a more connected congregation. Forging more personal connections will enable us to strengthen our congregation now and in the future.

For the Shema Project to succeed, it is vital that our listening groups not solely consist of people who already know one another. To foster dialogue, they should contain multiple generations. Temple members who are millennials as well as Generation Z are a vital source for hearing what makes this congregation significant for them. We can all benefit from learning about what our members value, both young and old.

There is one other step we should take in the coming year. We should reach out to adults who live in this area who grew-up at Temple but are not affiliated with the synagogue.

The purpose of this outreach is not to reel them in and make them members of TBT. We will not succeed making this our hidden agenda. Instead, we should make a considered effort to reach out to the millennials in our midst and to attentively listen to their desires and perspectives. We may hear things that disturb us. We might be tempted to criticize them for not following their parents' path. But we have to be willing to remove our blinders if we are to grow spiritually. And just maybe, through attentive listening, we will discover ways Temple Beth Torah can support a younger generation in their Jewish journeys.

This morning, we read the story of the Binding of Isaac. Though father and son begin the journey together, at the end, their paths diverge. In fact, after his binding on the mountain, Isaac never sees his father again. Only after Abraham dies, does Isaac come to pay his final respects.

It is a tragic tale. But it does not have to be our story. Let us commit ourselves to creating a different account of one generation bridging to another. Through attentive listening, let us hear the voices of our children, accepting them for who they are and learning of their inner quests. Let us be resilient in our response, affirming how we can promote understanding between generations. We may yet find common ground. For in a time of accelerated change and societal stress, there is a need for people of all ages to offer support and strength. There is a spiritual longing to find meaning in community, to break bread together, to embrace one another.

As we usher in this New Year of 5780, let us celebrate the potential for newfound understanding. May we elevate our hearts, lift up our eyes, and listen to the hearts of our children. May we bridge divides, renew spirits, and begin this Rosh Hashanah with gladness and joy.

The prophet Malachi envisioned a time in which the prophet Elijah will announce the coming of the day in which the hearts of parents will fully respond to their children and the hearts of children will fully respond to their parents. May we hasten that great day.