

Rosh HaShanah

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Most anyone in Judaism will tell you that the biblical story of the binding of Isaac by his father Abram is a *Rosh HaShanah* theme. They are speaking of Genesis 22:1-19, of course, but I always wondered why it was a theme. *Rosh HaShanah* means “Head of the Year” or more commonly “New Year,” and if you try and find it in Scripture you won’t. In fact, Exodus 12:1-2 places the New Year on the first day of *Nisan* which is in the Spring – not now in the Fall. According to Scripture, we are not here today because it is the New Year, but because we read in Leviticus 23:23-25:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. ‘You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.’”

So, according to Scripture, we are here to celebrate a memorial of blowing trumpets – *shofarot*. Actually, the Hebrew Scripture doesn’t say *shofarot* – it just says “blowing,” and that’s why this day is biblically called “Day of Blowing” or “*Yom T’ruah*.” I began by talking about the “binding of Isaac” and I will come back to it, but let me continue to reflect on the Leviticus commandment of *Yom T’ruah*. The ancients of Israel noticed that trumpets were sounded ten days before the atoning sacrifice for Israel on *Yom Kippur* and they concluded, probably correctly, that the days in between should serve as a time of spiritual preparation – a time of searching for and repenting of sin because the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice was of no value if it was not accompanied by repentance.

The leaders of Israel were not exempt from needing to repent and, in fact, tradition has it that the High Priest was isolated during this time so that he might search his soul, repent of his sin, and be able to enter the Holy of Holies, intercede for Israel, and hopefully come back out alive. Our information about this time of isolation comes from *Mishnah Yoma 1:1* of the *Talmud*, where we read:

“Seven days before the Day of Atonement the High Priest was removed from his house to the cell of the counsellors and another priest was prepared to take his place in case anything happened to him [the High Priest] that would unfit him [for the service]. R. Judah said: Also another wife was prepared for him in case his wife should die for it is written, and he shall make atonement for himself and for his house. His house means ‘his wife.’ They said to him: If so there would be no end to the matter.”

Also, the *Gemara* in *Yoma 2a* states that the separation of the High Priest was in order to keep him ritually clean and insulated from temptation, so that he could perform his Temple duties on *Yom Kippur*. And therein lies a lesson for us because, although we are not LEVITICAL High Priests, 1 Peter 2:5-10 combined with Hebrews 4:14 teach that we who are New Covenant believers have been elevated to priesthood under our new High Priest who is Yeshua, and that

WE are responsible for offering up spiritual sacrifices and are need of spiritual cleansing ourselves.

I will have more to say about this later, but getting back to the Levitical High Priest: Likely related to his seven-day separation before *Yom Kippur*, Jewish tradition designates the ten days between *Rosh Hashannah* and *Yom Kippur* as “Days of Awe” (*Yamim Noraim*), also known as “Days of Repentance.” They are days of introspection – days to look for sin of which to repent so that (it is said) by the time of *Yom Kippur*, individuals of Israel would be in a spiritual condition to receive the atonement of the Mosaic Covenant and be written in the Book of Life for the coming year.

But unlike the High Priest of old we, in the 21st Century (and in the New Covenant) have no Temple in which to sacrifice, so how should WE respond to *Yom T’ruah*? One possibility is, of course, to disregard it, thinking it to be inapplicable. The problem is though, that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches us:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”

Well, if we can’t fulfill the Scripture as commanded and can’t disregard it either, what are we to do? The Jews who lived immediately after the Temple’s destruction in 70 AD had to answer that same question. Those who believed in Yeshua had an answer to it because they were not without a sacrifice for sin; their sacrifice was Yeshua as it is for us. However, those who did not believe in Yeshua, the forerunners of Rabbinical Judaism, had no such answer so they began to teach that God really didn’t want animals to be sacrificed; what God wanted were substitutes such as keeping the traditional 613 commandments, giving *tz’dakah* (charity), and performing good deeds. Even so, both groups of Jews (those who believed in Yeshua and those who did not) continued to use the period from *Yom T’ruah* to *Yom Kippur* as a time of reflection and personal repentance. And so it is with us.

It is fascinating that, over the centuries, *Yom T’ruah*’s theme of blowing trumpets has had so many other themes added to it, and that *Rosh Hashanah* was adopted as the day’s name by the latter day Jewish community. Some of the added themes are “the anniversary of the creation of the world, and “the day that books of our spiritual account are opened in heaven for God to judge.” These do not come from the Bible, so we notice them, but do not proclaim them as necessarily true.

There are also many CULTURAL traditions that have been attached to *Rosh HaShanah* such as:

1. We wish each other “*l’Shanah Tovah*” (“To a good year!”) or “May you be written in the Book of Life for a good year!”
2. We celebrate with sweet foods like apples dipped in honey, and honey cakes, symbolic of our desire for a sweet year. Other traditional foods are pomegranates and carrots and even

fish heads symbolic of our wanting to be like the head and not like the tail. Don't ask me to explain that!

3. We reshape our *challah* bread during this season from the traditionally braided *challah* to the round spiral *challah* with added honey and raisins.

4. We celebrate *Tashlich* – tossing bread or stones into a large body of water to symbolize the casting away of our sins.

5. We blow the *shofar* to alert us of our need to repent of our sins.

6. In some traditions we wear white clothing symbolic of this being a season where we seek God's holiness in our personal lives and for Israel.

7. And we read about the binding of Isaac (*The Akedah*) in *Bereshit*, the Book of Genesis.

The story of the binding of Isaac holds great mysteries for us and also great lessons because God asked Abraham to do what is no doubt the most difficult thing anyone can do – sacrifice his own child's life. We heard readings from the *Akedah* during the *Torah* service today, and it leaves us with some perplexing questions. First, why did God order Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac when we know from other Scriptures that such killing of another human being is contrary to His law? Also, why didn't Isaac resist being bound and sacrificed? After all, he was a strong fully grown young man and Abraham was elderly. And why does Scripture say that God commanded Abram to sacrifice but that the Angel of the Lord told Abraham to stop?

The annals of Jewish legend and tradition discuss these questions and give many answers, most of which are more problematic than the questions. Had the Rabbis been considering the New Covenant Scriptures in their thought processes, however, they would have understood what the *Akedah* was prophetically pointing toward. There is, however, one Rabbinic *midrash* I came across that, while it departs from biblical truth as many *midrashim* do, is nevertheless insightful about one biblical truth, so let me share with you what Rabbi Judah said that is recorded in Pirkei de-Rav Eliezer 31, remember, this is not biblical:

“R. Judah says: When the sword touched Isaac's throat his soul flew clean out of him. And when He (meaning the Angel of the Lord) let his voice be heard from between the two cherubim, ‘Lay not thy hand upon the lad, ‘the lad's soul returned to his body. Then his father unbound him, and Isaac rose, knowing that in this way the dead would come back to life in the future; whereupon he began to recite, Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who quickens the dead.”

Clearly Isaac's soul flying out of him has no biblical basis, and the *midrash* is also at further variance with the Bible, since Isaac did not die and come back to life. However, what it does show us is that some early rabbis were grappling with the concept of resurrection from the dead and the related issue of eternal life.

We who are believers in Messiah Yeshua and knowledgeable of the New Testament do not need such *midrashim* to explain what happened here. All we need do is read Hebrews 11:17-19, which says:

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.”

So we see that that Rabbi Judah was on the right track in his understanding that the Scriptures of the *Akedah* validate God’s ability to raise Isaac from the dead, and also that Abraham had faith for it and relied on it:

James 2:21-23 says:

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God.”

But let me tell you about someone else who rose from the dead – the one that the *Akedah* Scriptures point to – Yeshua our Messiah. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, Paul says of Him:

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Yeshua (Jesus) died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Yeshua. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Messiah will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

And in Romans 8:11 Paul says:

“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Yeshua from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Messiah from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.”

So you see, our Father in Heaven, who raised His son Yeshua will raise us also to eternal life if we will just exercise the same faith as Abraham and believe God. As John 3:16 teaches us:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Do you see the parallel between Yeshua and Isaac?

"For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son .."
"For Abraham so loved the Lord that he gave His only begotten son .."
[my words]

Both Yeshua and Isaac had fathers who were prepared to sacrifice them unto death, because both fathers knew that their sons would be resurrected. Because the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham's hand and supplied a substitute sacrifice, Isaac did not die. But Yeshua did die, and was resurrected to life for our sakes. He is our ram in the thicket – our substitute sacrifice for our sins for which we deserve to die, but for which we need not die if we repent and accept Yeshua as our sacrifice.

What I have just told you is true, so any of you here in this room who want to know more about how to assure your eternal life with God, please find me or one of the elders after this service, and let us explain it to you, and pray with you.

Now let me turn to another aspect of this Holy Day and speak to those of us who have already received Yeshua as our Messiah. I said earlier in this message that, in the New Covenant, Yeshua has been made High Priest and that we who are His disciples have been made priests under Him, to offer up spiritual sacrifices; 1 Peter 2:5-10 explains it this way:

"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Messiah Yeshua. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame." Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy."

Our priesthood has relevance to this day of *Yom T'ruah* (or *Rosh Hashanah*) because the *shofar* that will be blown shortly, will signal the beginning of a ten day period for us to make ourselves spiritually ready so that, on Yom Kippur, we can accompany Yeshua into the Most Holy Place, and perform our duty as priests to intercede for the preservation, protection and salvation of Israel. The Jewish People are the focus of Yom Kippur because when the Temple still stood, the Levitical High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place once every year, to conduct special sacrifices for himself, his family, and for all of Israel. In the final sacrifice, the High Priest laid his hands on a goat that was chosen by lots, and sent it away into the wilderness to carry the sins of Israel out of the camp.

Are you surprised to hear that you can enter the Holiest of places with Yeshua? Then consider Hebrews 10:19-22, which says:

“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Yeshua, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Perhaps you have never looked at yourself as being a priest or considered what responsibilities that entails. If not, this is an appropriate time to do it.

Father, I pray that each person in this room will take away exactly what he or she needs in order to spiritually move forward in You and with You. For those among us who do not yet know Yeshua as Lord, I pray that You reveal Yeshua through whatever means you deem best.

For those of us who already know Yeshua, I pray that you impress each and every one of us with our priestly responsibility to examine ourselves, in these next ten Days of Awe, and to repent, under Yeshua's cleansing blood, of any personal sin we may discover so that we can be fit to intercede for the People and Nation of Israel on Yom Kippur.