

A Short Explanation of Rosh HaShanah

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Anyone you ask will tell you that the biblical story of the binding of Isaac by his father Abram (the *Akedah*) is a theme for *Rosh HaShanah*. They are speaking of Genesis 22:1-19, of course, but I always wondered why it was a theme. I guess it shouldn't surprise me because, after all, *Rosh HaShanah* really doesn't have its own biblical theme. *Rosh HaShanah* means "Head of the Year" or more commonly "New Year," and if you try and find it in Scripture and you won't. In fact, Exodus 12:1-2 places the New Year on the first day of *Nissan* which is in the Spring – not now in the late Summer or Fall of the year. According to Scripture, we are not here today because of it being a New Year, but because Leviticus 23:23-25 commands us:

"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, Scripture doesn't say *shofarot* – it just says "blowing." That's why this day is biblically called "Day of Blowing" or "*Yom T'ruah*."

It is fascinating that, over the centuries, the biblical theme of blowing trumpets has had so many other themes added to it and that the day's name was changed to *Rosh HaShanah*. Some of these 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.

There are many 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 the fish heads!
3. We reshape our *chalah* bread during this season from the traditionally braided *chalah* to the round spiral *chalah* with added honey and raisins.
4. We celebrate *Tashlich* – a ceremony where we toss bread or stones into a large body of water to symbolize the casting away of our sins.
5. We blow the *shofar* multiple times to alert us of our need to repent of our sins.

6. And, of course, we read about the binding of Isaac 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 to benefit another or to obey God. We heard Genesis 22:1-19 read during the *Torah Service*, and there are some perplexing questions in the passage. 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 against God’s 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 the sacrifice but that “the Angel of the Lord” (seemingly not God Himself) 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 (the *B’rit Chadasha*) in their thought processes, they would have understood what the *Akedah* was really about. There is, however, one Rabbinic *midrash* I came across that, while it departs from the biblical account (as most *midrashim* do), is nevertheless insightful about a biblical truth, so let me share with you what Rabbi Judah said that was recorded in *Pirkei de-Rav Eliezer 31*:

“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 this contradicts the biblical text, since Isaac did not die and come back. However, it does show us that at least some early rabbis were grappling with the concept of resurrection from the dead and the related biblical truth of eternal life.

We who are believers in Messiah Yeshua and knowledgeable of the New Testament, the *Brit Chadasha*, 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, for 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 Romans 8:11:

"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 exercise the same faith as Abraham did 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 Abraham so loved God that he gave His only begotten son...etc." [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 God says that we need not die if we accept Yeshua as our sacrifice – recognize Him for who He is – the son of God, our Lord and savior.

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 facet of this Holy Day – *Yom T'ruah* – and speak to those of us who have already received Yeshua as Messiah. Scripture teaches that, in the New Covenant, Yeshua was made High Priest, and that we who are His disciples have been made priests under Him.

1 Peter 2:9-10 explains it this way:

“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* 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*, 10 days from now, 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. Israel is the focus of *Yom Kippur* because on that day long ago, once each year, the Levitical High Priest entered the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) 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 chosen by lot, and sent it away into the wilderness to carry all the sins of Israel out of the camp.

Are you surprised that we can enter the Holiest of places along 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. I recommend you pray about it. When the reality of your priesthood under Yeshua takes hold, you will never again look at yourself or any other believer in the same way.

Father, I pray that each person in this room will take away exactly what he or she needs to move forward in You. For those who do not yet know Yeshua as Lord, I pray that you reveal Yeshua to them, 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 10 days, and to repent 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*.