

"THE GREATEST TRIAL"

In the story of the akedah, we read that, after the angel of the Lord had stayed the hand of Abraham, and Isaac was released from his bonds on the altar, the angel declared: attah yadati ki verei Elokim attah, "Now I know that you are a God-fearing man."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the most profound and mysterious of the Polish Hasidic leaders, asks: why the emphasis on attah, "now?" If the binding of Isaac on the akedah was the act of sacrifice that marked Abraham as a verei Elokim, then the statement attah yadati should have come earlier in the narrative, when Abraham bound his son. Is it not out of place "now" that Isaac was saved?

The answer of the Kotzker is nothing short of amazing, even shocking. He says that for Abraham to take Isaac off the altar was many times harder than for him to offer him up in the first place! It was more painful for Abraham to release Isaac than it was to bind him -- and that is why the angel said attah yadati, first now do I know that you are really a verei Elokim.

What can the Kotzker Rebbe mean by this? Certainly not that Abraham had any special pleasure in sacrificing Isaac! To cast Abraham in the role of an idealistic sadist or masochist is to misread and undo the entire meaning of the akedah.

Rather, the Kotzker here presents us with a new interpretation of the akedah, one which teaches an awesome psycho-spiritual insight. It is the nature of man, once he has taken a clear position in life, especially if he has suffered for it, not to retreat from it, but to mold the future along the doctrines of the past in order to vindicate his past. It is part of our normal psychology: what we have invested in time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change, we cannot change, lest we thereby declare that our entire past has been invalid and inauthentic. Self-justification of our past dictates our future.

Consider what Abraham had to invest in his initial decision to offer up his son. He had to overcome such enormous inhibitions in order to bring Isaac up on the altar. The Rabbis describe the inhuman anguish that Father Abraham had to undergo between the divine commandment and the actual binding on the altar. In these three days he lived through 300 years. This was his entire posterity, his beloved Isaac -- and the Lord who had promised him that his seed would occupy his Land, now ordered him to destroy this child with his very hands! What greatness, what enormous and even inhuman devotion was required of Abraham. He had to cut out a whole part of his heart, he had to subdue the tenderest, gentlest, most powerful love -- in order to obey what seemed to be such a cruel demand of

his Lord. In his mind's eye, Abraham saw his son dead over and over again. As he made his way up the mountain, he rehearsed the bloody scene a thousand times. His mind ached and his heart burst and his nerves threatened to snap from the death screams of his own child which he anticipated in such unspeakable agony. This was his beloved Isaac, and he was a warm and compassionate father, and now -- he had to subdue his most powerful natural instincts. Yet Abraham followed the dictates of God and sacrificed the love of a father's heart. The love of God demands that every other love be subservient to it. And so Abraham invested in his momentous decision every fibre of his humanity and his very being. And once he had decided on his path, ~~and~~ that was that. Having made his decision, Abraham was no longer the same man. He aged, and was now -- in his own image of himself -- and old and bereft father, whose light of his life had been extinguished. He cut a tragic figure in the halls of history who had to choose between family and faith, between God and son, and, having chosen, would never sleep soundly again.

This, then, was what was involved in Abraham's submission to the divine command to sacrifice Isaac. At this time, after having made that historic, heart-rending, and soul-wrenching psychological decision; at this point when Abraham held up his hand holding the knife above Isaac, he had, in the reality of his heart and mind, already sacrificed his son on the akedah. The pain, the suffering,

the renunciation, the conflict, all of it was over -- only the anti-climax of the actual physical act remained to be done. And now, after all this, to be told to cease, because it was only a trial, a show, would have meant invalidating all that he had done, his anguish and his fear, his commitment and his pain -- and especially his renunciation of his love for his child. When now the angel suddenly told him to stay his hand, he in effect told him: Abraham, you gave up that boy's life too quickly; morally you already spilt the child's blood -- and it was not really necessary: you marked yourself as a murderer in the name of a higher cause, and, after all that, you are not even going to receive the reward of knowing that your sacrifice was a real one. Who would have blamed Abraham for turning to God and saying: "God, are You playing games with me? Once I had decided to raise my hand over the akedah, to stretch out my hand against my son, the entire story was over for me. Couldn't You tell me before it was only a game? Why, in heaven's name, did You force me into a sacrifice of heroism, and then pull back and reduce a sacred drama to a pretentious gesture?" To be told to release Isaac at the last moment could very well have meant that Abraham, in his own eyes, would henceforth be the eternal fool: the man who hallucinated about God, the man who was ready to do something which he thought noble but which now seemed terrible, the man who was haunted and pursued by heaven itself, telling him that his great sacrifice was unwanted by God, unnecessary, and therefore pointless. The

angel's command not to sacrifice Isaac meant that Abraham must be prepared to embrace the role in history of a confused old man rather than, as Kierkegaard called him, "the Knight of God." So it was inhumanly difficult for Abraham to invalidate his past, to risk making his whole life illegitimate -- how much easier and more natural to convince himself that the angel's voice was the temptation of his fatherly love, or Satan, or his inner resistance to the divine command. But Abraham was a yerei Elokim, a God-fearing man. And a God-fearing man -- does not look to his own investment, to his own reputation, to his own sacrifice; he cares only about the will of God. He is willing to surrender the justification of his past conduct and start all over again. No matter how much pain and pride he had invested in the past, he is willing to declare it bankrupt and change. Abraham's greatness is thus more ^{ev} ~~accident~~ in obeying the angel's command to stay his hand than in God's command to sacrifice Isaac. His not sacrificing Isaac marks him truly as the "Knight of God."

The Kotzker was right: binding Isaac on the altar was the act of akedat Yitzhak, the sacrifice of Isaac; taking him off was the act of akedat Avraham, the sacrifice of Abraham.

Perhaps this is why this portion is read on Rosh Hashana -- not only because tradition ascribes the event of the akedah to Rosh Hashanah, but because Rosh Hashanah is the time of teshuvah, and repentance implies the invalidation of one's ego, the confession that my past cannot and will not be justified, the admission that all that

I have done and been until now is null and void. For this, indeed, is what Abraham had to do when he obeyed the voice of the angel to release Isaac: he had to say that my enormous sacrifice of offering him up in the first place -- was null and void. My self-image as a heroic, tragic figure-- is an error. I submit -- to the crushing of my ego.

Shofar, symbol of the akedah, has ever since been the chilling summons to us to forego self-justification, to renounce the vindication of a life in which we have built powerful super-structures on shifting sands and uncertain foundations. To say "I was wrong, I'm willing to start all over again, to abandon my self-image, to declare myself in error, even bankrupt" -- that is the greatest trial, even greater than the sacrifice of one's greatest love. But it is a challenge we cannot escape, either individually or collectively.

This affliction of self-justification hampers us at almost every juncture of life. As a Rabbi who does counselling as part of his professional duties, I can say that, objectively speaking, most of the personal problems brought to my attention can be solved fairly simply. Logically, many are open-and-shut cases. What causes most of the difficulty is - self-justification. A wayward husband or wrong-headed parent or child or contentious brother has followed one policy or way so long that to change would call into

question his past wisdom and judgment, and invalidate his character and conduct and "image" and reputation. So he decides to spend his energy perpetuating the same mistake, elevating an error to a philosophy and stubbornness to policy, and getting deeper into the same mess, because he hasn't the courage to change. But that is precisely the message of the Shofar and the Akedah it symbolizes: atta yadati ki yerei Elokim atta -- true character requires the courage to admit that, despite your best intentions, you were wrong, and now must redirect your course of life.

Our failure to do just that is probably the major cause of our great national agony, the most humiliating episode in American history --the Vietnam war. No diabolical industrial-military complex gathered in some Pentagon basement to involve us in a bloody Asian land war. We stumbled into it, bit by bit. And then, when we realized what we had gotten into, when the public became aroused -- there was a point at which we could have gotten out, but we found we did not have the courage of Abraham. We began to justify our past decisions, we threw in good money after bad money; new young lives were sacrificed on the Asian akedah because we would not respond to the angel's call to stay our hand, retract, and cease forthwith. So more than one father and mother is bereaved as a result.

And now, as citizens of this country, we must not shrink from another moral obligation. We must insist to our leaders that any further enormous investments in manned-landing programs in space

be thoroughly debated before we stumble into it simply because the apparatus and capability exists and because not to do it would call into question the completed Moon landing. It is too late now to argue whether the Man on the Moon program was worth it -- ten years in which we spent \$24 million, 10% of our national budget, on a project of questionable scientific value (the "manned" aspect), and a decade during which we have suffered through a long Far Eastern war, a quick Middle Eastern war, several major political assassinations, student uprisings, urban crisis, racial unrest, youth rebelliousness, a sex revolution, and a run-away economy. Perhaps some will agree with the President that the landing on the moon was "the greatest day since the creation." But no one ought to agree with the Vice President mindlessly and without further deliberation that now we must immediately embark upon a Man on Mars program. Man's salvation lies not in the exploration of distant planets but in alleviating pain and hunger and want on this planet.

שופר בליל ראש השנה . Shofar is

sounded on Rosh Hashanah , when the moon is concealed, as it always is on the first day of the lunar month. Rosh Hashanah bids us redirect our attention from Moon and Mars and all that which distracts us from the real, fateful issues that trouble men and women in their daily lives. We must not permit Moon to eclipse Man.

Abraham said hineni, "I'm ready," when he was told to stay his hand; without hesitation, he was willing to risk invalida-

tion of his past. We must do no less. The fact that we have the technical capability and administrative apparatus necessary for such a venture further into space, should not push us into it. Just because we did so these past 8-10 years should not make us justify the Moon program by investing in a Mars program. Too many human lives may be sacrificed on the altar of that distant and barren planet. Now is the time to say, "enough!" The Moon landing salvaged our national prestige; let us now tend to our national honor - education, and health and social justice and the quality of life -- instead of squandering our resources on sophisticated gimmickry.

As Jews -- especially as Jews -- we must listen to that challenge of the akedah. Judaism is in trouble in America ~~too~~ -- and even in Israel. And unless we have the courage to indulge in self-criticism and openly say we were wrong in our lukewarm, tepid loyalties --our children will. Unless we abandon self-justification and invalidate our past-- the next generation will abandon us. For example: there is hardly a more doctrinaire anti-Torah group than the Marxist Hashomer Hatzair in Israel. Yet a year after the Six-Day War, the same group issued, for private distribution only, a conversation of its youth in which the tone was set by a young man who expressed resentment against his elders who had denied him any real contact with the Jewish tradition, and thus left him both rootless and without a common language with other Jews in the Diaspora. He said, in reference to the lack of a Shabbat in his life:

אני יבול דנגיז גצומה קצוות לבח"פ
שלן שלום פ. החיים שלן פ חוץ אהב אהב...
אנחנו חיים חיים אהב פ 365 ימים בשנה

"Our lives are parched, empty. We live one long week-day -- we live gray, dull lives 365 days a year."

What a condemnation of parents who didn't have the guts to question their own anti-religious dogma and to undo decades of commitment to the wrong ideals! They are saying the opposite of what God said to Abraham: atta yadati -- "now I know that you have no fear of God, that you are a moral coward and spiritual weakling, that you failed me!" For in attempting to justify a bankrupt ideology when events screamed out against it, you bestowed on us a life that is a burden -- for a life without Shabbat, without Yom Tov, without kashrut, without a touch of transcendence -- is "one long week-day!"

This lesson of the akedah, as the Rabbi of Kotzk understands it, confronts each of us, then, each in his or her personal way. None of us is perfect. Each of us has failed, in one way or another, in greater or lesser measure, to live by the highest standards and ideals of our tradition -- ethically, morally, halakhically. Having chosen that way, we invest in it our logic and time and energy and pride, we are caught up in the grip of inertia. We feel we must justify our past and thus we threaten to destroy our future. Rosh Hashanah attempts to dislodge us and to encourage us on to a new way.

No one says it is an easy task. On the contrary, it is the greatest trial of all. It is harder than sacrificing our greatest loves, for it means sacrificing our very egos, our reputations, even our identities.

But we can do it. And we must do it. And having done it, we shall be liberated from the tyrannical rule of self-justification.

We enter now a New Year, a new shanah. That Hebrew word for "year" is related to two other meanings. Shanah also means "he repeated" and "he changed." Two opposites: to repeat and to change.

If this is to be a shanah tovah, a good year, we must know what to repeat and what to change: to continue that which deserves perpetuation and to abandon that which does not, even at the risk of self-invalidation.

May we do that, with our inherited Abrahamitic courage. And then the good Lord will pass His judgment: atta yadati ki yerei Elokim attah, now ~~that~~ you are truly God-fearing and deserving of a shanah tovah, a year of health and happiness, of blessing and peace, a year of fulfillment and reconciliation, for us individually, for the State of Israel, for Jews throughout the world, and for all mankind.