

Rabbi Alexandra Wright, LJS

‘Three sons had Abraham...’

Rosh Hashanah 5787

I think if I were to begin this sermon by referring to the ‘S’ word, you would be clambering on to this bimah either to tear me to shreds or, conversely, breathing a quiet sigh of relief. So, I will not mention the UK government’s sanctions banning goods produced in Israeli settlements in Palestine except to say there will, undoubtedly be those in our community who support the government’s move, seeing it as leading Israelis and Palestinians to safety, security and self-determination; and those who think it is ill-timed, that it will harm the ordinary Palestinian worker, that it is unenforceable and will not curb the violence. To ignore this plurality of voices in our wider community would probably be negligent, but in truth, there is a time to speak about these things and I am not sure that a government’s political decisions are appropriate for Rosh Hashanah – for a season that demands from us introspection, return, reconciliation and frankly, a tiny glimpse of hope in the future.

So let me begin instead by welcoming everyone to the LJS – those here in the synagogue and those online who now, or at some point over the next few days, will hear our prayers, glimpse the warmth and dignity of our Sanctuary and listen to the beauty and majesty of our music. And here I want to mention the fact, as Peter Kauders, a tenor in the Members’ Choir, reminded me last week, that today marks the golden jubilee – the fiftieth anniversary - of the choir’s first appearance at High Holy Day services. Since its inception in 1975, under the baton of Israel Hoffman, when the choir sang at Friday evening services, and its first Rosh Hashanah in 1976 conducted by Edward Cross, it has been led by devoted musicians, Norman Lazarus (*zichrono livrachah*) and William Falk, and I want to express our heartfelt gratitude to Cathy under whose leadership the choir has grown, its demographic diversified, and who, after she has stepped back from her role as Director of Music, will continue to conduct this fifty-year-old choir whose existence and achievements we celebrate today.

Music lies at heart of the spirituality and exceptional beauty of our services. As a community, we are remarkably privileged to pray in a place of such aesthetic magnificence, with musicians of sensitivity who sing with expressive tonal and emotional nuance. Music

invites us to be attentive and alert. It allows us to surrender ourselves to the deepest part of ourselves, it stirs our memory and imagination. Music is not only an intellectual experience; it evokes feelings of joy, grief, longing, sadness, loneliness, peace and serenity. Music allows us to express our vulnerability, and it is precisely at those moments, when we feel small, unsteady, unworthy, that our understanding and empathy towards others have the potential to become more reflective and more refined.

We read this morning the story of man who had been uprooted from his family home and commanded to make a journey to a strange land. He tries to put down roots, he fights in wars, he makes peace with neighbouring nations, he frees captives and offers hospitality to strangers. He is unafraid of arguing against God's intention to kill the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah on account of their sins. He is described in the prophets as the rock from which the people Israel were hewn, and to God, he is 'My friend' (Isaiah 41:8).

In the great scheme of the Abraham narrative, the *Akedah* – the Binding of Isaac – seems an aberration, a moment of blind faith. For what purpose is Abraham to sacrifice his son? It is not for any greater good, not for any ultimate ethical purpose, but simply because God has commanded it. Where is the man who rescues his nephew who has been taken hostage in war, who washes the feet of strangers? Why are we not told, as we are told in the story of Ishmael and Hagar, that this test grieves Abraham? Where is the man whose emotional responses of anger, indignation, empathy, compassion and longing, have propelled the narrative this far? It is as though this test, a test that seems to disregard his pursuit of justice and compassion, has set in motion an impersonal, rigid mechanism in which Abraham's own will is no longer really involved. He seems detached, emptied of all psychological content and depth.¹

Can one compare him to the alarmist's view of artificial intelligence when taken to its ultimate objective? Robert Wright in *The God Test: Artificial Intelligence and Our Coming Cosmic Reckoning*, draws on a thought experiment known as the paperclip experiment or

¹ This interpretation is based on Eva Illouz's article 'What is Angering Michael Kohlhaas?' *Haaretz* March 15, 2012, an exploration of Heinrich von Kleist's story 'Michael Kohlhaas' written in 1811.

paperclip maximiser, devised by the philosopher Nick Bostrom to demonstrate AI's capacity for destruction. In the test, AI is given a primary objective to maximise the production of paperclips. As AI becomes more capable and smarter, it finds increasing ways to turn the whole planet into a sea of paperclips, using not only minerals, metals and other materials, but even parts of the human body. It pursues its objective without constraint, creating sub-goals that will destroy human civilisation.

It is, in many ways, a grotesque interpretation of the conflict Abraham must have experienced in that slow paced, arduous journey towards Mount Moriah, his son carrying the wood for the burnt offering. And yet, it is an interpretation that warns us of what happens when we live without moral constraints, when we harden ourselves towards suffering, when the softer edges of compassion and empathy coagulate into something that prevents us from seeing what others might be experiencing, from feeling something of their grief and being able to weep with them.

There are many ways of reading the *Akedah* – as God's rejection of human sacrifice and a test of Abraham's trust in God; as a critique of blind obedience and the need to wrestle and be open to moral questioning; as a story that focuses not on Abraham, but on Isaac's fear and trauma, as a paradigm of martyrdom for communities facing annihilation. From early imaginative midrashim to Emmanuel Levinas, taking in Wilfred Owen's poem 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' in which Isaac represents the sacrificial offering of a generation of young soldiers in the trenches of World War I, the story has been read against the canvas of world events and the spirit of the age in which those interpretations were written.

In his late collection of poems, *Open Closed Open*, the celebrated Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai creates another interpretation in a poem which begins with the words: 'Three sons had Abraham, not just two.' In this short poem, Amichai invents a third child of Abraham called Yivkeh – and the name is critical:

'Three sons had Abraham, not just two.

Three sons had Abraham: Yishma-El, Yitzhak and Yivkeh.'

The poem explores the meaning of each of the names: Yishmael – God will hear; Yitzhak – he will laugh, and Yivkeh – he will cry. ‘No one has ever heard of Yivkeh,/ for he was the youngest,/the son that Father loved best,/the son who was offered up on Mount Moriah.’

Yishma-El was saved by his mother Hagar, referring to the boy’s expulsion from his father’s house at the behest of Sarah and endorsed by God. Yitzhak was saved by the angel, but ‘Yivkeh, no one saved.’ The Torah says it was a ram that was sacrificed, but it was Yivkeh – Yivkeh who ‘When he was just a little boy, his father/would call him tenderly, Yivkeh, Yivkeleh, my sweet little Yivkie – but he sacrificed him just the same.’

There is no evidence for Yivkeh in the Torah, but in this contemporary midrash, it is possible to see Yivkeh – ‘he will weep, he will cry’ – as symbolising the idea that the human capacity to grieve and feel compassion is too easily sacrificed; that the suffering of victims can silently disappear. The long war waged by Russia against Ukraine claims its victims daily, the latest on the Ukrainian-Moldovan border. But who knows the names of the woman who was killed or the two children who were injured? What do we know of the victims of the brutal civil war in Sudan where over 14 million people have been displaced from their homes, four million fleeing to neighbouring countries like Chad and Egypt? What can we tell each other of the 19 million who are facing famine and hunger, the children who are growing up without education, families without access to health care because schools are closed and health care services are severely disrupted?

Our capacity to grieve, to empathise and to feel compassion is often exhausted simply because of the scale of malign, corrupt and oppressive power and because of our own feelings of powerlessness. In Afghanistan brutal tyranny is directed, against women and girls, who are barred from secondary school and university, restricted in employment and movement, access to justice, healthcare and participation in public life. While Iran’s repressive regime exerts control over women’s bodies, dress and behaviour.

The victims of the massive glacial collapse in Nepal over two weeks ago are no longer front-page news. Like Yivkeh, they become the forgotten sacrificial victims of an unimaginable catastrophe – ice, water, mud, bridges, houses, hydropower structures and debris, sweeping

away homes, livelihoods and over a thousand people. This environmental tragedy demands that we wake up to the irreversible damage we are doing to our planet through our intensive use of fossil fuels that are warming the atmosphere and harming the poorest in the world.

The figure of Yivkeh reminds us that we are not machines, but are endowed with the attributes of kindness and empathy, that as human beings, we grieve, we weep, we do not forget, we do not allow those whose suffering is portrayed on the front pages of the media in one moment to disappear from our hearts and minds in the next. (And as we continue to develop artificial intelligence, those who understand the capacity of its power will need to put in place powerful constraints to ensure that it does not outstrip the moral endeavour to limit power and preserve the human capacity to do good.)

The poem, and its imaginary figure of Yivkeh can also be read as a critique of the glorification of sacrifice and martyrdom. This summer I spent nine days at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a leading research and educational centre in Jerusalem. The theme of their annual Rabbinic Torah Seminar was 'Being Human,' and through days of lectures, text study and discussions, it was difficult not to be affected by the brokenness and desperation of those who want to see regime change in Israel at the end of October. How do you remain human in a time of dehumanisation was a question that arose repeatedly? Israel is a warrior society; the army is glorified, its dead are not always tragic victims of war but often seen as martyrs for the cause of the State. It was painful to hear one Israeli lecturer confess aloud that on October 8th, one day after Hamas had attacked Israel, that he seriously thought of ways of painlessly killing his own children so that they would not experience a repeat of the devastation that had occurred a day earlier. The fear and trauma of some, although not all Israelis is so palpable, so all-consuming, that the capacity to empathise or grieve for the other is markedly diminished.

We are not a people who glorify death. Death for the sake of a land, for the sake of an idea is anathema to the Jewish people. The command 'Choose life' is eclipsed in the justification of war.

The poem warns, too, of the different responses to trauma. Yishma-El is saved from death by his mother Hagar and Yitzhak is saved by an angel, but both walk away from the experience damaged. Neither remain intact and the poem reminds us of that:

‘Yishma-El never heard from God again,
Yitzhak never laughed again....’

The trauma of October 7th, its psychological consequences are never far away from the surface of Israeli consciousness, and this tragically can lead to blindness about the suffering of the other, of Palestinians, of Gazans and what they have endured, not only during these last three years, but further back.

There is, too, a political lens through which we can parse this poem, seeing Yishma-El as the father of the Arab people and Yitzhak as the father of the Jewish people, each holding competing claims to the land. Who then is Yivkeh, if not the ordinary human being destroyed by the conflict, erased by the brothers’ religious, national and ideological assertions. He is the most imaginary of the three sons in the poem, but paradoxically, he is also the most real. It is his experience of being forgotten and sacrificed that we need to hold on to, more than anyone else’s. He is the victim who is left to cry over his losses of home, land, family and community.

The poem ends ambivalently and powerfully, drawing us into a theological realm:

Yishma-El never heard from God again,
Yitzhak never laughed again.
Sarah laughed only once, then laughed no more.
Three sons had Abraham,
Yishma, “will hear,” Yitzhak, “will laugh, Yivkeh, “will cry.”
Yishma-El, Yitzhak-El, Yivkeh-El,
God will hear, God will laugh, God will cry.

These prayerful, almost supplicatory last lines open a tiny window of hope. Although the trauma of exile and sacrifice leaves its victims damaged and changed, faith in God's capacity to listen, to laugh and to weep with us, to express rage, pity and compassion for a world in pain, is what awakens the human spirit, our desire to flourish, to find a purpose in the world, to refine our sensitivity, our desire for justice. As God listens, so must we listen out for injustice and suffering, hunger and homelessness and fulfil our human task, our Jewish task to repair the disorder in the world; as God laughs, so let us as this New Year begins find joy, vitality and meaning in our daily life; and as God weeps at the scale of human, creaturely, environmental, cultural, spiritual and psychological damage in the world – so must we, created in the Divine Image, weep with pity and love, with righteous indignation and rage.

At the beginning of this New Year, help us O God to open our eyes, our ears and hearts to the world around us; renew in us Your sense of purpose and meaning so that we may go out from this place of sanctity, with a quiet determination to do the work of righteousness and peace and once again to be *l'or goyyim* - a light for nations. *Keyn yehi ratzon*. May this be God's will and let us say, Amen.