

p. 103 Torah reading intro

Students, the upcoming exam is not pass/fail, it is not multiple choice; it will be graded on a curve, it will be in your academic transcript; the record of it may follow you throughout your adult life.

If you stick with this Jewish program, you will encounter the exam text at least twice a year, both in the fall Torah readings. It is also in the preliminary section of the Orthodox morning service. “It” is the story of our patriarch Avraham being commanded by God to sacrifice his son Yitzchak.

The essay questions are based on those 19 verses of Torah in Bereishit / Genesis. We’re about to read it to you. Please don’t take notes.

The traditional title of this episode is The Binding of Isaac. The first question you are to answer is why that title? Why not “Genesis 22, being a polemic against the abhorrent rite of child sacrifice?” How about “The Failure of a Father to Protect His Son?”

You will recall that we discussed what it means for a father to secure his child with ropes or straps. Avraham has not hesitated. Binding Yitzchak and placing him on the altar can be seen as Avraham’s critical moment of commitment. And for Yitzchak, now unable to reconsider and perhaps escape, this is the beginning of lifelong trauma. (Remember, Yitzchak never again speaks with his father.)

You should relate this episode to today. For example, how about parents of Israeli soldiers whose children are bound by oath to protect and defend their homeland, our homeland, and whose children may be sacrificed when fulfilling their commitments.

To review, we’ve looked at traditional commentaries lauding Avraham for his deep faith and obedience to God. Some of you have noted the absence of suggestions that we emulate Avraham’s actions in our day.

We learned that the weight of commentary is on the theoretical side, the theological side: Oh, God didn’t really

want Avraham to sacrifice his son! It was, um, just a test (kind of like this one, eh?!) Besides, wasn’t Yitzchak a willing participant — *vayeilchu shneihem yachdav* / they walked together, father and son, twice!

If you’re able, please cite Chancellor Ismar Schorsch’s connecting this episode, the Akeida, with the bloody First Crusade, 1096, in Europe. It was then, he writes, that Ashkenazi Jews carried out Avraham’s unfinished sacrifice by killing their own children before committing suicide rather than fall into the Crusaders’ hands.

You might also consider Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg’s comments about the shofar and the Akeida. Noting that a ram was substituted for the boy saved from slaughter, “the shofar recalls the binding of Yitzchak and God’s covenant with Avraham” and other seminal moments in the relationship between God and Israel.

Wittenberg writes, “It is as if by [sounding] a shofar we are specifically reminding God of all that the Jewish people have sacrificed throughout the ages. [We protest and declare:] ‘See what we have given for the sake of our relationship with You God. Remember Your side of the partnership and protect us with Your love.’”

How important that protestation and declaration for us and for all Israel today!

Students, you have all the time you need. You may begin.

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p. 140 hineni

What were you thinking when you DID that?

What were you thinking when you SAID that?

Oh, how many times have we asked those questions, of others, of ourselves?

When asking ourselves, it is usually with an overtone of incredulity, as when we’ve done or said something that shortly afterward we are regretful and perplexed.

(Really,) **I did that?! I said that?!**

We are taught to speak our minds and to mind our mouths. Sometimes, the wrong one wins out. Then it's teshuva time!

For teshuva — repentance, returning, answering for our actions — sometimes all we have is words. How do we use them?

Rabbi Shai Held writes that teshuva... is less about castigating ourselves or enumerating our manifold sins than it is about remembering our capabilities. Teshuva encompasses taking stock of what we still **need to do** in order to live a life that reflects God's love and our worth. Teshuva requires us to consider our potential and our successes.

On this day, in this place or anywhere we are, our words can open the gates of teshuva, leading to lighter hearts and, perhaps, more meaningful relationships.

A mitzva can be an opportunity for togetherness with God. Rabbi Held again: "I believe that, for most of us, prayer is usually a mono-directional, human instigated process. Even spontaneous prayer — words, ideas that spring up fully-formed or remain nebulous — spontaneous prayer is a way of conversing with God."

Responses from God? We might feel them, we might hear God's words in our heads — as did the Israelites at Sinai, according to one midrash. We might feel God's responses to our words and our mitzvot, our deeds, in how our day, week, or year unfolds, OR, we might wait ... and wait ... and wait.

When you stood on the beach yesterday afternoon, tossing bits of bread representing your casting off wrongdoing, were you thinking that Jews around the world are engaging in the same ritual — and using the same words for the same purpose? What power we can find in our mutual texts and rituals!

Let's consider even the words we offer in the most common greeting of this season: "*shana tova*," happy new year! Elaine Geller mentioned recently that she objected to the typical consideration of "*shana tova*." In her view, we should not wish for the same year just with

a different number; that could leave us in a dejected state of "been there, done that."

Rather, *shana tova* should mean that we can start from scratch, building ourselves a year that is new even to us, giving ourselves ample opportunity to realize the potential of the next twelve months.

Now, in this service, we turn to the prayer preceding the repetition of the amida. Through the "Hineni," the cantor expresses, in humble terms, a recognition of the limitations of words. Hineni is a prayer for God's compassion, a plea that "there be no obstacles confronting his prayer."

In this new year, with God's help, let us use our words thoughtfully with one another to, in the words of the Hineni, transform our afflictions and those of all Israel to joy and gladness, life and peace.

p. 158 hayom harat olam

hayom harat olam: today is the birthday of the world.

(Lev Shalem) **hayom harat olam:** Today the world stands as at birth. (Rabbi Shai Held) **hayom harat olam:** today is pregnant with the [possibility of a renewed] world.

(Rabbi Ron Aigen) **hayom harat olam:** Today the world was called into being

Lev Shalem marginal note: This is no mere anniversary celebration; rather, all humanity — and all creation — are recreated anew today.

Here's a challenge: HAYOM means TODAY. This is the SECOND day of Rosh Hashana, right? Which TODAY is THE DAY?

Rabbi Gordon Tucker describes the Israeli teacher and poet Sara Friedland ben Arza, focusing on the prayer Hayom Harat Olam in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. She asks: Why this rare reference to the "birthing" of the world? And why does that short prayer immediately follow sounding the shofar?

She observes that imagery of conception and birthing children, so unusual in a liturgy that is mostly about God's

sovereignty and judgment, is at the heart of each of the scriptural readings for this holy day: Sarah and Isaac, Abraham and Ishmael, Hannah and Samuel, and Rachel and her exiled children.

Ben Arza suggests that, by connecting our relationship to God to the relationship of parents and children, the tradition is trying to direct our thoughts to God through things that we already know in the human realm. Parents whose children hurt others or are hurt by others, parents who are unable to keep their children from harm, or even death, cry a shattering cry. Those cries are the broken and breath-snatching tones of the shofar's *shevarim* and *terua*.

This year, we heard these cries, these laments, from the loved ones of October 7 victims, from the families of Israeli hostages and of fallen IDF soldiers, and from tormented parents in Gaza. Ben Arza asks, Can we imagine the anguish of AVINU SHEBASHAMAYIM, our heavenly Parent, seeing tiny caskets — any caskets! — being interred anywhere because of humans at war?

So it is that immediately after *shevarim* and *terua*, those sobbing and wailing sounds of the Shofar, we are given a bold image of God as the womb that nourished us. We remember that one description of God is “*harachaman* / the merciful One.” The root of “*harachaman*” is “*rechem*,” womb.

By turning our thoughts to a parent's pain as felt by the Creator, we might be able to inspire human compassion to quell the fears we have for those conceived in love.

Rabbi Shai Held discusses that elusive and evocative phrase: *ha-yom harat olam*, often translated as “today is the birthday of the world.” In Hebrew, *harat*, from the same root as *herayon*, refers to pregnancy rather than birth. With some homiletical license, **Held** suggests that this year, even amidst our grief and our worry, we may choose to translate “*hayom harat olam*” as “today is pregnant with the [possibility of a renewed] world.”

After being told of a pregnancy, many of us offer the congratulatory “*mazal tov!*” — good fortune, good luck. However, a traditional, and to me more appropriate

response is “*b'sha'a tova* / in a good or auspicious time.” This phrase is loaded with cautious optimism; congratulations will come, God-willing, a little later.

For us, for this moment, let us consider how we can help realize the possibility of a renewed world and deliver it.