

UNDER THE NIGHT SKY

West End Synagogue, Rosh Hashanah Day Two, 5774/2013

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As an old man, late one night Abraham confronted God about the discrepancy between his childless reality and God's promise that he would father a great nation. "What can you give me, God?" asked Abraham, "I'm going to die childless, and the only one in charge of my household is my servant Eliezer. Since you've granted me no children, I guess he'll be the one who inherits from me."

"No way, Abraham," answered God. "None but your very own issue shall inherit from you." And then God led Abraham outside his tent into the darkness of the Negev night. "Look toward heaven," said God, "and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your offspring be." [Gen. 15: 1-6]

In a sense, the birth of Isaac in today's Torah reading represents the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. After their failed efforts to conceive, after desperately experimenting with surrogate motherhood -- at last, when it's least expected, the old couple finally celebrate the miraculous birth of their own kid.

Yet would we blame Abraham and Sarah if late that night, when baby Isaac was finally asleep, they wondered aloud about the disparity between God's promise of a huge family and the reality of their single child? In the privacy of their tent, might they have asked each other: what about all those kids they'd been promised? Why had God delivered them only this one child, born only after so much anguish and conflict, when they were too old for late-night feedings and diaper changes?

Wrestling with these questions, Abraham might remember that dark night when he'd despaired over their lack of children. He might begin to realize the deeper implication of God's sign. "You know," Abraham might whisper to Sarah, "that night God didn't show me just a single star in the sky -- Isaac's star. God showed me something so much bigger -- a sky full of stars, more than I could count. That night, it was as though I was looking down at the stars from above; I felt as though God lifted me up beyond the universe. I had a God's eye view of the whole thing [Bereishit Rabbah 44:12]."

Maybe that star-filled night was meant to remind Abraham and Sarah that in the end, Isaac would not be their only heir; their family would encompass all the generations to come, all the Jewish children born to the end of time. Maybe that night, Abraham and Sarah agreed they'd better invest in something long-term, something other than Isaac's college fund or their IRA. Maybe Torah is reminding Abraham, and each of us, parents and non-parents, that each of us is linked to all generations yet to come -- not only the descendants of our biological or adopted children, if we have them, but all the children who will inhabit this community and this world, children we'll never know, children who will never know us.

Jewish mystical tradition teaches us that God appoints a star for each person. Each new life is represented by a star. If and when we are blessed with children, their stars are joined to our own family constellation. But we know that parents sometimes can be transfixed by their own children's stars to the exclusion of the rest. Sometimes, each of us is so dazzled by our own constellation that we lose sight of the rest of the sky.

We read again today the deeply troubling story of *akeidat Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac, a story which defies logic and moral reasoning. Did God not say to Abraham, "none but your very own issue shall inherit from you?" Why would God command Abraham to offer up the child who is the only tangible fulfillment of that promise?

Maybe there's a clue in the subtle difference between God's words to Abraham before and after the binding of Isaac. At first God says, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzhak." God's instructions reflect Abraham's singular devotion to his precious Isaac. Could the Torah be implying that Abraham has focused too much love, too much attention on his miracle child?

After the binding, God says to him: "you have ... not withheld your son, your only one." After the binding, God neither describes Isaac as the child Abraham loves, nor even mentions Isaac by name. Could the omissions mean that God is teaching Abraham -- and all parents -- don't worship your child to the exclusion of others?

After Abraham offers up a ram instead of Isaac, God continues, "Because you have done this, I will surely bless you and I will surely make your seed as numerous as the stars of the sky." This is the only other time in the Torah God compares Abraham's descendents to the stars in the sky. Could it be that God is teaching Abraham that his "issue," his "inheritors," extend further than Isaac? Could it be that the ***akeidah* is reminding Abraham -- and all Jews -- we are responsible not only to our own children, if we have any, but also to future generations as well?**

Ever since Abraham, to be a Jew has always meant to be part of an infinitely extending family with a past and a destiny. All those tedious genealogies in the Torah, the long lists of begats, remind us that history is a family epic in which each generation is connected and obligated to a before and an after. Torah teaches that we live in the weave of history. God promised Abraham an infinite chain of descendents. Living with awareness that we are part of an infinite reality, an endlessly unfolding night sky, lifts us into *kedushah*, the holy dimension of existence.

We often forget this intergenerational, vertical plane of Jewish peoplehood. It's hard enough for us to feel meaningfully related to people who lived only a century ago. We are children or grandchildren of immigrants, many of whom wanted only to embrace the new world and shield us from the past. Many, if not most of us, would be hard-pressed to describe our great-grandparents' lives or values.

We are as detached from the future as we are disconnected from the past. We can hardly imagine what technology will look like five years from now, let alone visualize

what life will be like for our grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, or the generations beyond them. We live in a society which champions the nuclear family, and doesn't promote responsibility or generosity towards those outside our own constellation.

But today, on Rosh Hashanah, we open our eyes to the widest possible angle. We begin a new year acutely aware of our connection to millions of Jews around the world, Jews of the past, Jews of the future. We remember each one of us is part of a family much larger than our own. We see the entire sky, not only our small part of it. We recall that we have a past and a future to which we are responsible. And we remember that this is how we experience the sacred.

For generations, the synagogue has been the primary context for experiencing both these horizontal and vertical dimensions of Jewish life. In synagogues, our predecessors learned to expand their sense of self, to experience other people's *simchas* and *tzuris* as their own, to support each other through losses. In synagogues, our ancestors built communities to transmit Torah and *mitzvot* and primary values which link all the generations together.

In synagogues, whether they were parents or not, our ancestors understood themselves as custodians for all Jewish children, as trustees for a Jewish future beyond their lifetime. They imbibed the core Jewish value of *tzedakah*, learning how sharing our material wealth connects us with a larger reality. In synagogues, Jews learned to experience others' needs as their own. And that's why in synagogues, Jews have found *kedushah*, a sense of holiness and a sense of wholeness.

Most of us are painfully and acutely aware of the absence of three key pillars of this community whom we lost over the past year – Don Menzi, Valerie Troyansky, Bert Linder, *zichronam livrachah*. Among the many wonderful qualities I believe Don, Val and Bert shared and embodied was an innate understanding of this sacred dimension of community, of seeing oneself as part of a web that includes others who may not be directly related to us, but whose future rests in our hands. They built this community not only for what they personally needed but for the needs of others, people they knew and loved, and people they realized they might never even meet.

A synagogue isn't a service center. A synagogue that caters to individual consumer needs isn't a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community; it's just a loose, temporary alliance of individuals and families addressing their own particular desires. There's no lasting meaning, there's no *kedushah* or holiness in such a congregation.

You and I have the opportunity to reclaim the vision of the synagogue as a community linking us to a larger sense of self. In such a synagogue, we learn to welcome newcomers as extensions of our family, not as intruders in our space. In such a sacred community, regardless of whether or how little we know someone, we stretch ourselves to experience their *simcha* and their *tzuris* as our own. We compromise our personal tastes to recognize the presence of others.

A sacred community by definition includes people at every stage of life – infants, toddlers, school aged children, teens, college students, young adults, singles, young parents and older parents, midlife adults, retirees, adults navigating the joys and challenges of the second half of life. In sacred community, our material contributions necessarily are out of proportion to our direct, personal benefit. In sacred community, we share generously to benefit children who may not be our own. In sacred community, we don't feel burdened by obligation; we feel blessed to be part of something so much larger than our own infinitesimal piece of the sky.

In the Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem, mirrors and a few candles create the impression of millions of stars, one for each murdered Jewish child. In a real sense, each of us is a parent to these children, whose stars were just beginning to shine. And each of us is a trustee for the unborn generations whose stars have yet to emerge from the night sky, the stars beyond our view.

Every Jewish generation since Abraham and Sarah has learned that wherever we may be, we can always see the stars. Every generation has learned to find meaning and holiness simply by raising our eyes and remembering that we belong to an infinite, unfolding reality. Our predecessors, like Don and Valerie and Bert, learned to live in the flow of history, to acknowledge our debt to the past, to give of ourselves to ensure a future for those who will follow. May that blessing be ours as well.

Each Saturday night we search for a third star signaling the end of Shabbat and reminding us it's time to make havdalah, time to get back to repairing our broken world. We pray:

Ha-mavdil bein kodesh l'chol, chatoteinu hu yimchol,
May the One who distinguishes between holy and profane
forgive our sins;
zareinu v'chaspeinu yarbeh ka-chol v'kakochavim balailah,
May God multiply our descendents and our wealth
like the sands and the stars in the night sky.

Ten days from now, at the end of Yom Kippur, which falls on Shabbat, that third, distant star will again break through the darkness and call us back to the world of creation. As we walk out into a new year, may that night sky guide us, as it guided our fathers and mothers, to build a community worthy of being called holy. May those stars remind us of our connection and our obligations to those who came before us and to those who will come long after we're gone.

Ha-mavdil bein kodesh l'chol, chatoteinu hu yimchol,
In this new year, may God, who helps us see the sacred dimension in life,
forgive us for seeing only ourselves, for losing sight of what is holy;
zareinu v'chaspeinu yarbeh ka-chol v'kakochavim balailah,
May God write us into the Book of Life, that we might appreciate and bring honor to
all our stars, past, present and future;

May we write ourselves into the Book of Life,
that our lives might add to the brightness in the darkness above.