

“Finding Our Voices in the New Year”
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Shabbat Shalom, and Shanah Tovah. On *Rosh Hashanah* morning, just before the service, a little boy was standing outside the entrance to the sanctuary. He was focused on a large plaque that was hanging by the door. The plaque had many names on it as well as American flags mounted on both sides. The boy couldn't take his eyes off the plaque. The rabbi noticed the boy's staring and approached him. “Rabbi”, asked the boy, “What's this?” “Well”, said the rabbi, “It's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service.” Sadly, the boy turned to the rabbi and asked, “Which one? *Rosh Hashanah* or *Yom Kippur*? We all know our services are long -- hopefully, not that long.

Many generations ago, there was another rabbi. This rabbi would travel from town to town offering his teachings. While the rabbi was teaching, his carriage driver would attend to the horses, making sure they were fed and watered, and ready for the journey to then next town. The driver noted that the rabbi would always offer the same teachings and would always get the same questions to answer after the teachings. The driver paid careful attention and eventually learned all of the rabbi's teachings and the answers to the questions that the rabbi was asked. One day the driver asked the rabbi if, just one time, he, the driver could give the teaching instead of the rabbi. The rabbi thought about it and said, “OK.” When they reached the next town, the driver dressed up as the rabbi and gave a brilliant teaching. Then came the questions. And they were the same questions that were asked of the rabbi so many times before. He answered every question. But then, someone asked a question he had never heard asked of the rabbi before. And there he was - stuck. What to do with this question? He thought and thought and then he responded. “This question”, he said, “This question....This question is so simple, I'm going to ask my driver to answer it.

The story gives us one way to respond to a difficult question - pass it off on to someone else. The question for this Rosh Hashanah morning is a difficult one. And, unlike the rabbi's driver, I'm

hoping that each of us will struggle some with the question, as a way to begin the New Year.

In today's Torah portion, it says that Abraham and Isaac went to the place that God told them. The next verse begins with, "On the third day".....Abraham saw the place (for the sacrifice) from afar. The obvious question, what happened for the first two days? The text doesn't say. What did Isaac say or ask if anything? Did they have the first ever-recorded football discussion where Isaac asked, "Hey dad, How about those Rams?" I imagine Isaac asking, "Where are we going, Dad, or, "How much further is it?" Or as many of you parents and grandparents know, the question, "Are we there yet?" Nothing is stated in the text. Then, Abraham took the wood for the offering, "And placed it on Isaac, his son." I imagine Isaac asking, "Hey dad, why are you putting the wood on me? Why do I have to carry it? Can we switch? You carry the wood and I'll carry the knife and the stuff for the fire." Isaac doesn't say any of those things. He is silent. Where is Isaac's voice? That's the question for this Rosh Hashanah morning. Where, is Isaac's voice?

Isaac only speaks once in the entire portion. "Here is the fire and the wood, where is the lamb for the offering?" I suppose if you're only going to speak once in the story, this is not such a bad place to do it. When Abraham responds with, "God will see to the lamb for the offering, my son," what is Isaac's response? Isaac is silent. Don't you think he'd say something like, "Uh, What do you mean, Dad? I don't understand what you said. Could you explain it?" One commentator said that Isaac may have known at this point that he was the sacrifice. If this is true, why not, "Uh, Dad you're not planning to sacrifice me, are you?" Or, how about, "What is going on here? Are you crazy?" Isaac is silent. Where is Isaac's voice?

"They came to the place that God told him. And Abraham built the altar there." What is Isaac feeling now? Abraham arranged the wood. Is Isaac afraid? And he bound Isaac his son. Does Isaac feel betrayed? Scared? And Abraham placed him on the altar on top of the wood. What is Isaac thinking and feeling during all this? Abraham says nothing and asks nothing. Where is Abraham's voice? What's even more difficult is that, once again, Isaac is silent says nothing. Where is Isaac's voice?

Do you know how old Isaac is in this story? How many think Isaac is under 10 years old? 10-20?, 20-30?, 30-40?, 40-50?, on social security? Historians calculate that, in this story, Isaac is 37 years

old - not 7 years old -- 37. How could Abraham, an old man, place Isaac, his 37 year-old son on an altar, without Isaac going along with it? What happened inside Isaac? Where are his questions, his objections, his struggles, his outrage? What happened to his voice?

“And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slaughter his son.” This would be another good moment for Isaac to speak. Is he terrified, shocked, or traumatized so much that he can’t speak -- the first-ever recorded case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? Maybe Isaac is resigned to accept his fate or, as one commentator noted, even ready to help his father carry out this unthinkable act. Even so, the question remains, where is Isaac’s voice?

And when the angel of God intervenes, and says, “Do not stretch your hand out against the lad nor do anything to him”, and Isaac is spared, what happens between Isaac and Abraham? Do they embrace, talk, weep, fight? The text doesn’t say. When Abraham sees a ram caught a thicket by its horns, and sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac, does Isaac say, “Thanks, Dad, that was really a close one.” Or, “I sure do believe in angels, now.” Or, how about “You are really sick, and I’m leaving.” Once again Isaac does not speak. His silence is deafening.

And what’s happening with Isaac at the end of the story? The story concludes with, “And Abraham returned to his young men.” The obvious question - where’s Isaac? In the text, there is no mention of Isaac returning so we conclude that Isaac did not descend the mountain with Abraham. And, according to the text, Abraham and Isaac never talked to each other, again.

In the story, we don’t hear the voice of Isaac’s fear, anger, relief, betrayal or even love. We just don’t hear it, because Isaac is silent and doesn’t speak up. I have nothing against silence. And, certainly we all experience, at times, the power of silence, when words are unnecessary or might even detract from, or interfere with, an awesome or intimate moment. However, when silence becomes a style, a way of life, as it may have been with Isaac and Abraham, we miss an opportunity to heal the hurt in our relationships. So just as with Abraham and Isaac, I wonder what it’s like for each of us to have something really important to say and not be able to say it.

A similar question is asked by that well known Torah scholar, Reb Paul Simon of Garfinkle. What is the sound of our silences? Just think for a moment if you had something really important to say to someone, like the person next to you, and for whatever reason, you just couldn't say it. You would look at each other, and look at each other, and look at each other, and not say it. What you might hear in that moment is the sound of silence. That moment may be pleasant or peaceful. But often, those moments are awkward, uncomfortable, and filled with tension. I think we're all aware of that tension in our own relationships. The woman who is angry about her husband's emotional distance, and is afraid to tell him. The husband who feels hurt by his wife's criticism, and is too proud to tell her. The teenager who is pained by the exclusion from his friends and wouldn't dare tell them, and the friend who is confused by her friend's sudden rejection, and is too hurt to ask about it. We've all heard the expression, "the tension between them was so thick you could cut it with a knife." It's a particularly fitting metaphor for today. So, as we begin this New Year, the more important question is not, where is Isaac's voice? It's, where are our voices? Where, are our voices?

In the 1960's a generation of us found our voices. We were disillusioned and angry about the war in Vietnam, and the oppression of women, African Americans, and other minorities. Individually and collectively we spoke up in favor of equal rights for all people and for all people to be able to live in peace. Today it's amazingly similar. In a kind of biblical Back to the Future, it's once again the 60's - the 5760's. And we may still be disillusioned about yet another war, and the oppression of women, African Americans and other minorities. Maybe it's time for us, once again, to find our voices.

Because, I believe, at times, we're all Isaac. Whether at work, school, in our families, with friends, in our communities, we all know what its like to have something really important to say and to be stuck in our silences. As a result, just like Isaac, we go along with whatever is happening, without questioning it, or objecting to it, or saying something about it. And we also know how many opportunities to make a difference we've lost by being silent. The siblings whose hearts are filled with long standing resentment, the couple that can't share their pain with each other because each one needs to be right, and, of course, the father and son, or any other close relationship, that's been damaged by so much hurt or betrayal that they no longer speak to each other. All of these present opportunities for us to find our voices and to speak up, and maybe that speaking up can begin to heal our deep wounds.

Who knows how we can change the world when we use our voices to speak up. Think of the things we would say and the good works we would do if we used our voices more in this New Year. We would speak out when we heard a racial slur. We would say, “I don’t want to hear your gossip” We might say, “maybe it’s worth it to give you land so we can live together peace” Maybe we would all say more often, phrases like, “I need you”, “I love you”, “*Hineini*, here I am for you.” Maybe we would all say more often, phrases like, “No, I don’t like that”, “I disagree with you”, “I feel afraid”, “Can we please talk about this?” And maybe we would all say more often, “I’m so sorry that I hurt you”, “Can you forgive me?” and “I’m so grateful to have you in my life.”

You know, as I was working on this sermon, I figured out what the most troublesome part of the Abraham/Isaac story is for me. It’s not what happens in the story. We all know we do hurtful and horrible things to each other all the time - especially to the people we love. That’s just part of our nature. That’s why Yom Kippur is a whole day. Think about it. If we were nicer to each other during the year, on Yom Kippur, we’d be out by noon. So, what pains me the most, is not what happens between Abraham and Isaac. It’s what doesn’t happen between Abraham and Isaac. They don’t talk about what goes on between them. Abraham doesn’t say, “I’m so sorry about what I did. I was so crazed by my relationship with God. I know I hurt you. I could have killed you. I’m sick with pain over what I did. I so much want to be your father again.” And Isaac doesn’t say, “I am so hurt and angry, rageful. How could you ever think of hurting me like that? I don’t know if I can ever forgive you. But, it’s a start that you came to me and said what you said.” Keeping our pain inside can lead to physical and emotional illness, bitterness, resentment, and distance. It’s through the dialogue, the dialogue, that resolution, healing, and transformation can happen.

Having said that, I have one word of caution. Be aware that using your voice is not a license to tell all at any cost. I have seen much damage done in relationships under the umbrella of, “I just want to be totally honest with you.” Saying what you need to say can be hurtful to the other if mistimed, or if the other person isn’t ready or able to receive it. Sometimes too much honesty on the table breaks the legs. Part of finding and using our voices involves doing so in careful, respectful, and responsible ways.

Well, eventually, Isaac found and used his voice. It was just not with his father. It was too late for Abraham and Isaac to reconcile. It’s not too late for us. It’s not too late for us to use our voices to

Speak up. And, maybe speaking up will help us to reconcile with those whom we love, by working towards forgiveness, which, after all is one of the themes of these High Holy Days. It's not too late for us. The gates are just opening for us to do this very important work.

With the recent two-year anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the ongoing bloodshed in the Middle East, and the insanity of recent handgun legislation, it is understandable that we could be in shock, or feeling great pain, or helplessness or rage. "What can I possibly do to make the world a better and safer place?", you might ask. We can't place peace in the hearts of those who hate. God has to do that. What we can do, is awaken out of our passivity, find our voices, and begin to speak up. Then, the sounds of silence become the sounds of dialogue, the sounds of struggling together toward resolution, the sounds of healing, the sounds of peace. May we learn from Isaac as we begin this New Year. May our *teshuva*, our turning toward the good, be to "stretch" out of our silences. May we find our voices and speak them with respect and kindness, and use them for good. And maybe, with God's help we will all hear how different this New Year will sound. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. *Shanah Tovah*.