

Rosh Hashanah Dvar Torah on the Akedah

Given at Shir Hadash, Newton, MA

September 6, 2013, Tishrei, 5774

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This document was created by editing the manuscript I had in my hand as I gave the dvar. I have tried to make it reflect more closely what I actually said.

A few minutes ago, we called up an Aliyah for anyone “who knows why they are here today”. As of yesterday, I would have thought I knew. But in the middle of the night last night, I decided to change the slant of my dvar. So everything is up for grabs.

Reflecting on Rabbi Rachel’s dvar yesterday, I realize that what I want to do is start a conversation with you. I want to try to interact genuinely with you, and that means revealing what forces drive me. For me, that means telling you about a time I was told by God, in my mind, to do something extreme. This event still drives me. If you like, it is my own Akedah moment. But I don’t really mean this to be about me. Perhaps this will encourage some of you in discussion to reveal what drives you.

The written dvar I have in my hand here is pretty detailed. Some of the abstractions at the beginning are there as stage setting for the story I will tell you. I suppose they are partly there just to try to show you that I share a world view that I think many of you have. I will try to cut out some of the unnecessary details.

OK, here goes.

I Power and Politics Stemming from the Akedah

For centuries, we have sought ways to turn the power of stories like the Akedah into constructive inspiration. But what is constructive inspiration to some is destructive to others. The story of Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice his son is foundational to all of the Abrahamic traditions, but in vastly different ways. A traditional Jewish interpretation takes the story fairly literally as recounting that Abraham passed the test of complete allegiance to God and that, because of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, his descendants are blessed and shall someday “seize the gates of their foes,” as the angel swore the Lord declared at the end of the story. For Christians, the Akedah foreshadows God sacrificing his own son. To many Muslims, it is Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, whose mother was Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar, who was the object of sacrifice and from whom they are descended.

The psychological power that God had over Abraham’s mind in the story has been amplified to a power that drives conflicts to the present day. Much of that conflict is even associated with the site of the story, which tradition has it is the location of the Temple Mount, the Holy of Holies where the High Priest communicated directly with God. At this same spot now is the dome of the rock where many Muslims believe Mohammed ascended to heaven. The Temple Mount also has great significance to Christians because of the stories of Jesus challenging the priests at the temple.

II Backlash, Understanding, and Reconstruction

Since 9/11, there have been some strident voices, the so called “new atheists” who have reacted to the kind of religious fervor that drives so much of our policial and military action. They have made a forceful case against belief in God. But many have pointed out that the idea of God won’t go away. Some even go so far as to say that it is embedded in our DNA. Many people who lack the God gene, who have a basically secular scientific worldview, respond to the calling to reach for something higher by seeking a better understanding of the mysterious powers that drive our tribal minds, implicitly hoping to nudge the world towards finding ways which inspire the soul spiritually while still being compatible with rationality.

For example, philosopher and novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein wrote a novel, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, in which the main thesis of the protagonist is that “the emotional structure of religious experience can be transplanted to completely godless contexts with little of the impact lost”. This is actually a topic of an ongoing discussion here at Shir Hadash. For example, Larry Gillick gave a dvar in July of 2011 in which he talked about how we can engage with the stories in our tradition like works of fiction.

Toward the end of his dvar, Larry says:

There is something broadening and powerful about inhabiting the mental universes of past generations but we must also strengthen our connections with our own time.

III First Comes the Chewing

I could go on now to tell you some insights I think I have about those mental universes of past generation in which the idea of God is a driving force. But I think it will be more honest of me to tell you something of how that force drives me and of why the Akedah seems very real and very relevant to me. As I said before, I will tell you about a time when I heard the voice of God who told me to do something extreme.

I guess I'll keep in this next part, since it is a cute anecdote to help me warm up to telling my story.

I'll warm up by telling you about a conversation I had with my wife, Denise, while I was struggling to prepare this dvar. What I heard from her was a scientist's observations about the mental state of others that are driven by something more primary than rational thought. Denise told me that she had learned a lot about rodents through close observation of my son's pet guinea pig, Furble. She saw how much happier and relaxed Furble is when he is chewing on something. And he is so much more comfortable when his immediate surroundings, even what he is lying in and walking on, consist of chewable things. Denise captured this psychology in the line:

First comes the chewing.

This struck me as a great first line for a book. It is also a good principal to keep in mind for Shir Hadash event planning.

Thinking about our chewing pet rodent reminded me of a story I wrote in elementary school called "The Rat that Saved the World". The story is told from the point of view of the people receiving the orders from the US president to press the button to launch a nuclear weapon. The button doesn't work, thereby averting nuclear calamity. I thought it would be fun to have my son rewrite this story from the point of view of the rat who chewed through the wires, thus saving the world. The first line of the story could be: First comes the chewing.

Looking back, perhaps this story was an early sign of my tendency for eschatological thinking and writing. Perhaps this tendency was my way of coping with my father whose thinking was driven by a sincere desire to make the world a better place at the cost of considerable personal sacrifice. But his thinking may have bordered on the messianic.

I adapted by choosing to study mathematics and physics. This provided me a path to understanding hidden realities, while still not confronting the confusing realities of my own life.

In 1995, when I was a professor of mathematical physics studying geometrical quantum field theories, I was particularly stressed by many realities of life that I wasn't dealing with in a practical way. I went on the anti-depressant Prozac just before going to Denmark for a conference. It triggered a manic episode in which I spoke with God and realized that my father was indeed the messiah.

Manic episodes and strong religious experiences leave behind a residue in the mind. This was not something I could simply walk away from.

Sixteen years later, I did come back to it. In the summer of 2011, I wrote a book: "Off the Deep End: Diary of a Mathematician"

IV On Rosh Hashanah It Is Written

I am now going to tell you about some things that happened when I was finishing the draft of my book over High Holidays two years ago. That year, my wife, our kids, and I attended High Holiday services at the reconstructionist synagogue Dorshei Tzedik, that once upon a time branched off from Shir Hadash.

Going into the High Holidays, I was nearing a state that might be described as religious mania. That mental state had arisen after months of intense focus on writing, chronic sleep deprivation, several psychological catharses, and a stream of coincidences that seemed miraculous. An observation I had made earlier in the summer about the book *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* had led to my first “religious experience” when writing my book. The night before the first night of Rosh Hashanah, I decided the body of my book was finally done. As a sort of pseudo-scientific test, I had been holding off on counting the number of chapters of my book. Now that the book was done, I had the computer count the number of chapters for the first time. There were 36, the same as the number of chapters of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*. Observing this and the outcome of another similar test pushed me over the top and made me feel I had come as close as possible, without overt supernatural intervention, to having proof of the existence of God woven into my book.

I paced and thought throughout the night in my basement while the rest of the family slept upstairs. The notion that we can create our own realities seemed very real to me. It seemed like I had passed some sort of test just by not crawling up inside my own mind to live happily ever after in some internal fantasy world. I was actually proud of myself for not doing so, for choosing to stay in this world to try to help. Still, I had a notion of going to another level of reality, one closer to God, sort of like passing through a trap door to a world unknown. That voice of God I had heard in Denmark came in my head once again and asked if I would like to go directly to Him. The voice was gentle. It was clearly coming from my own mind, an advanced case of an imaginary friend. I declined the offer and tried to quash that internal voice. But then the voice came back. This time it didn't feel like a game, but God talking directly to me, offering for me to come closer to Him immediately. I didn't doubt that this was a real offer. I was afraid to go. I felt as if God might take me that moment. I fell to the floor in terror, crying uncontrollably, “I'm not ready. I'm not ready. I want to stay here.” Once I regained control of myself, I realized how vain it was for me to be proud for choosing to stay in this reality as opposed to being thankful for every day that I get to stay here.

That evening, on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, I had in mind the words “On Rosh Hashanah it is written” from the Unetanneh Tokef as I handed the Rabbi a note that I had written during the day. The note would become the last page of my book. Part of it read:

My final message is to God.

It's a couplet.

It is ready just in time for this day of the year when we blow the *shofar*:

God, let me know just a little more of your secrets.

God, let me stay on Earth just a little more.

V On Yom Kippur It Is Sealed

The next day, exactly two (Hebrew calendar) years ago today, when discussing the Akedah, Rabbi Toba said that, in contrast to the traditional interpretation of the Akedah, she thought of it as the one test Abraham failed. Coincidentally, across town at about the same time, Muriel Gillick was delivering a dvar at Shir Hadash in which she also said that, “if God was testing Abraham, then Abraham failed the test”. I had silent tears of agreement in my eyes. In fact, I had just told God, in my mind, that no matter what, even if I was sure that the He was the one true God speaking directly to me, there is no way I would even consider following such a command.

The next thing that happened was that one of the members of the congregation organized a re-enactment of the Akedah. She selected one person to play each part in the story. Each of the actors was encouraged to say what their character was feeling or thinking. Afterwards, the discussion was opened up to everyone. I made one brief comment that I pictured Abraham having a conversation with God in his mind. No one seemed to react to my comment or notice my strong emotion. One woman commented that she pictured Abraham’s wife Sarah as the angel who held Abraham back.

That night was another sleepless night for me. I thought about the mysterious nature of reality that quantum mechanics implies. About how we are all subject to constraints the world puts on us, and yet we do create our own realities. I invented a whole theology in my mind that unified my understanding of physics and the Abrahamic faiths.

Then, what I interpreted as the voice of God in my head uttered the phrase: “Rebuild the temple.”

My wife was my angel that morning, talking me down from going to the study session at Dorshei Tzedik hoping to talk about rebuilding the temple.

I spent the rest of the High Holidays that year editing my book, adding footnotes summarizing much of physics, while at the same time documenting points that I could later refer to as having mystical religious significance.

On the day leading to Yom Kippur, I thought of the words “On Yom Kippur it is sealed” as I sealed the first copies of the draft of my book in envelopes to mail out; as I submitted a message to the “book of life” website saying “I pray that I will have the courage to follow through on an important project”; and as I sealed into an envelope a motivational piece of writing whose crucial lines were:

Rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

This should be done as a partnership with the whole world.

Perhaps it should be done symbolically.

Perhaps it should be done physically.

But it should be done with love for all.

VI Discussion

I won't take more time now for more words to influence how you might interpret this. I trust in this community to respond wisely. I will just close with a "stirring" injunction:

Let us open our minds to endless possibilities and come together in warmth and love.

Perhaps I have left some of you a little taken aback. I won't say speechless, because I know that's not possible at Shir Hadash. I look forward to learning from what you have to say now in discussion. I'll come around the room with the microphone for comments, just as Rabbi Rachel did yesterday. Don't forget to say your names to help us form community.

About ten people made very interesting and heartfelt comments. I won't try to reproduce those comments here, but I'll mention a few things I said in direct response.

- Thank you for sharing some of your own thoughts and experiences that bring what I have said into a communal discussion.
- I have thought a lot about both my dad and me receiving signals.
- I think of some of the experiences you are mentioning as "preternatural", meaning they don't appear to be explainable within our current best understanding of nature but will presumably someday be explainable as natural phenomenon.
- When God first spoke to me in Denmark, he opened with what I interpreted as a joke: "Don't eat apples." After that, he said, "Do Better," and "Listen to me." When I came home, I talked with a friend who is well versed in Judaism. She said that it was basic in Judaism to first "Do Better." "Listen to me" is secondary.
- I referred in my dvar to the fact that there is still a lot of mystery about the fundamental nature of reality that is left open by quantum mechanics. Perhaps the Talmudic debate you referred to can be resolved by understanding that the Lord was clever enough to lay down physical laws that still leave Him room to influence us.
- I agree that Abraham Lincoln was inspired. He was actually quite versed in and moved by religion. His famous line, "A house divided by itself cannot stand," is actually a quote of something Jesus said in the New Testament, in a different context obviously.
- Thank you for saying that rebuilding the temple as a place of love for all is a beautiful metaphor.
- I agree that it is important to have some powerful symbols to provide a hope for peace.
- I have spent the past two years since the events I told you about trying to get perspective. But I have talked to essentially no one about the over the top part. Sometimes we go through periods where we need intense internal focus to figure out things for ourselves before we can get closure and open up to conversation with the rest of the world.