



SERMON ROSH HASHANAH: WHOSE RAM IS IT ANYWAY?

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Thursday 21 September 2017
Stevenage Liberal Synagogue

- 1 I think Rosh Hashanah is about blinking.
- 2 Two lorries full of dynamite speed towards each other on a single-track road. If a horrible explosion is to be avoided, one of them is going to have to veer off onto the grass verge – but, of course, neither driver is willing to do so. Then, Driver A has a wonderful idea: he unscrews his steering wheel and throws it out of the window. Driver B, seeing this, realises that now she must be the one to pull over, because Driver A physically can't.
- 3 That scenario comes up time and time again in writings about conflict resolution theory.¹ The idea is quite logical although counter-intuitive: if you publicly bind your own hands – in one sense weakening your control over the situation – you can show others that your resolve is, literally, unbreakable, and thereby come out on top. It's the thinking behind time-controlled locks in banks: "Staff have no access to the money in this safe."² By relinquishing control over its money, the bank ends up more likely to keep it from thieves.
- 4 But in this morning's parasha, we see the 'missing steering wheel' technique applied not figuratively, to bind a negotiator, but literally, to bind Isaac.



- 5 Abraham had no intention of sacrificing his beloved son. He was acting in the confidence that God would not let him go through with the deed. He left his servants at the foot of Mount Moriah after gratuitously telling them, “We will return to you.”³ Abraham knew full well that both he and Isaac would be coming back round the mountain when they came.
- 6 So what did God’s “test”⁴ of Abraham prove? Elie Wiesel suspects that God wasn’t testing Abraham at all – or, at least, not successfully – and instead, Abraham was testing God.⁵
- 7 “It was as though Abraham said, ‘I defy You, Eternal One. I shall submit to Your will, but let us see whether You shall go to the end.’ And God changed God’s mind and relented. Abraham won. That was why God sent an angel to revoke the order and congratulate him; God was too embarrassed.”
- 8 Exciting as it is to be part of a religion where a human and a deity can engage in what is, essentially, a staring contest, and one in which the deity looks away first, I am also very conscious that staring contests are not necessarily the best way to get along with each other. Abraham may have had a knowing smile under his beard (though probably a tight and nervous one), but his mute obedience to God’s order to kill must have terrified Isaac – and it clearly traumatised Sarah, whose next recorded act⁶ in the Torah was to drop dead.⁷
- 9 The consequences of brinkmanship can be painful not just on a personal level. This Rosh Hashanah marks the end of a year with some of the most chilling geopolitical threats in living memory; certainly of my lifetime. Kim Jong-un has been testing North Korea’s nuclear weapons on a regular



basis, and the only reason Donald Trump hasn't been testing America's is that he knows they work already. Seeing this dangerous game being played out on the news is intensely frustrating: the most minor miscalculation or over-bluff by either nation could so easily have disastrous consequences. And the participants know this. Their minds are constantly busy, constantly anxious; calculating the odds, wondering, "What if...?"

- 10 The poet Wilfred Owen imagined⁸ what would have happened had the story of Abraham and Isaac instead been played out by European leaders in the run-up to the First World War:

Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

- 11 I think Rosh Hashanah is about blinking.
- 12 Abraham and God were engaged in a very intense battle of wills, but God was the mature party and blinked first.
- 13 For us, Rosh Hashanah is also an opportunity to blink. To take a step back from the intensity of our daily lives and consider ourselves from a distance. It's a chance to detach ourselves from the stresses of everyday life. Today, we're not at work answering emails; we're not checking our



calendars and deciding whether we can make it to that do at the weekend. We're not wrapped up in the pressures of everyday life, its petty rivalries and incessant demands.

- 14 The Torah tells us that the ram was Abraham's offering to God... but actually, it was God's offering to Abraham. God offered Abraham the ram so that Abraham could stop his racing thoughts – so that he could stop desperately scheming about how he was going to get his son out of this one – and devote himself once more to his spiritual side.
- 15 Every year, the same ram is offered to us. May we all take it and use it to the full. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 21.09.17

¹ See eg Roger Fisher and William Ury's *Getting to Yes*, 2nd ed (Penguin, 1991), 140.

² Thomas C Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1963; repr 1965): 38n.

³ Genesis 22:5

⁴ Genesis 22:1

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God* (Simon & Schuster, 1976; repr 2005): 91.

⁶ Genesis 23:2

⁷ The midrash in Leviticus Rabbah 20:2 suggests, unsurprisingly, that Sarah's death was not entirely unconnected from the safeguarding incident that preceded it.

⁸ Wilfred Owen, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (Wordsworth, 1994; repr 2002): 43