



“Abraham and Isaac – A Missed Apology”

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013

Rosh Hashanah is a holiday of mixed emotions for me. On the one hand there is a certain excitement about coming back from the summer and reconnecting with friends here and starting the year and everyone looks so nice – and on the other hand there is... that ever challenging and ever difficult Torah Portion, the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac. On the one hand there is the lovely Rosh Hashanah meal on a beautiful table, there is the blowing of the shofar and very meaningful music – and on the other hand there is... that Torah Portion – the *Akedah*.

Year in and year out, I try to focus on all that is a beautiful and meaningful on Rosh Hashanah, but as many of you know from past sermons, I find the Torah portion deeply troubling and I, and I know many of you, struggle with the whole picture of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, no matter the reason.

This year, using the tactic of avoidance, I decided to jump over the *Akedah* and look instead to what happens *after* the whole problematic story is over. The Torah tells us that following Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac, he goes to Be’er Sheva, where he learns that his wife Sarah has died – perhaps as a result of hearing what her husband did to her son. Abraham mourns her and then, the Torah tells us, he goes on to live a very different life. He has a new family with new children. And, as for his relationship with Isaac, the son whom he led up the mountain, his



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precious child whom he almost killed, about this the Torah is completely silent. Never again do Abraham and Isaac interact, they don't meet, they don't speak, they never see one another – not even one last time.

This post-*Akedah* story leaves me first and foremost feeling so very sad for Isaac. I am heartbroken imagining him estranged from his father. We all want our parents to be part of our lives forever. And I hurt for Abraham too. We know from earlier stories in the Torah that Abraham truly loved Isaac. Isaac was the special son for whom Abraham had yearned. I am sure he carried the scar of this event with him until he last days. How tragic for both of them.

As I contemplate this portion in its extended context, a new message is uncovered for me. In this text I now see a connection to the most prominent theme of our High Holy Days – repentance. The story opens with the sentence that “God tested Abraham...” Could this have been a test *not* about faith or Abraham's ability to stand up to God, but rather a test of Abraham's willingness to ask forgiveness, could we read this story as one of atonement or in Hebrew, of *teshuva*?

Perhaps the *Akedah* is our reading for this holiday in order to show us Abraham's missed opportunity - more accurately his missed responsibility - to offer an apology to his son? In this story a relationship is destroyed not only by a confusing and seemingly hurtful act, but more



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significantly by the absence of Abraham’s expression of regret. I wonder... did Abraham think that because God asked him to sacrifice his son, there was nothing for which he needed to apologize? Perhaps he wanted to apologize but couldn’t or maybe Isaac had disappeared. We don’t know and our *Midrashim*, which often help us to imagine what has happened between the written lines of the Torah, don’t seem to be interested in taking up this narrative challenge.

If this story is really about apology, you may wonder why we don’t read it on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Wouldn’t that be the natural fit? On Yom Kippur our work is centered mostly on forgiveness and if we wait until that day to apologize we will likely be entirely too late. *This day* is the beginning of a time of mending and healing and so I suggest to you that *this day* we consider the *Akedah* as a call to us to do what Abraham could not and did not do – apologize for the deed that damaged his relationship with his beloved son.

Sometime ago, during my years in rabbinic school, as an earnest young rabbi-to-be, I started a tradition of phoning my parents and brothers before Rosh Hashanah and offering them sort-of a ‘genetic apology.’ The phone would ring and I would say: “Mom, I just want to say that if there was anything I did over the past year that hurt or offended you in any way, I sincerely apologize.” By the third year, I couldn’t get



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past the first few words before she would join in with my little pronouncement and then yell over her shoulder: “Rob, its Amy on the phone with the apology call.” Rarely did our conversation go much further than that call, but sometimes they did. I did hurt and I did offend. And what I learned from that yearly call (which I still make) is that there are times when I am not aware that I have transgressed or hurt someone’s feelings and I need to humbly acknowledge that. I have learned that apologies can be complex, they often require many conversations and forgiveness cannot be expected immediately. While my yearly gesture has become a bit of a family joke, it is not a joke to open the door wide enough to allow someone you love to tell you that they are carrying a wound that you, perhaps unintentionally, inflicted.

I know that this room is full of loving and caring people, but not one of us here is free from the need to offer an apology. We all have had words jump out of our mouths ahead of our brains and hearts that hurt another’s feelings, humiliate them or misrepresent the truth. We have acted selfishly or thoughtlessly in our not so proud moments. Can you remember doing such a thing this past year? A well-placed sincere apology is about making things right for those we have harmed as best we can. Even if we did not mean to offend, we might have done damage and that damage is our responsibility this day and every day.



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Let me begin. I, like Abraham, have neglected to heal relationships because I have been unable or unwilling to apologize. Many years ago I gave a sermon on today's Torah portion which upset one member of the Temple very profoundly. He wrote a harsh letter to me. I didn't respond. From that point on our relationship was strained at best, and eventually he and his family left the Temple for this, and I suspect, other reasons. I regret that I didn't apologize - not for the sermon - but for allowing our differences of opinion to become more important than our relationship. His letter, albeit angry, was a request for engagement. I didn't respond maybe because I felt hurt or because it was too scary to be challenged and change. I think of this often as I read '*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha... for the sin we have sinned against you by our stubbornness. Al chet shechatanu lifanecha... for withholding love from our family and friends.*'

I hope I have confronted my many errors since then more successfully, but I know that there are mistakes I still must address and there are others of which I am not aware. I didn't realize that you might have been expecting a phone call; I didn't do as much as I could when I heard of your news. I missed the main message of a story you shared and lost the chance to connect to you on an important matter.

In the Talmud (BT Yoma 87a) there is a story of Rabbi Zera. Another rabbi offended him, really hurt his feelings. But Rabbi Zera didn't want to



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lose the friendship. He didn't want to be forever upset with his colleague. So each day he found a reason to walk nearby this person who offended him. He hoped that the other rabbi would see that he wasn't too angry to grant forgiveness. Rabbi Zera went out of his way to show that he was approachable and that he wanted the injured relationship repaired. I too would happily repair a relationship that I may not know has been wounded by my actions. I hope you, like Rabbi Zera, will give me that chance.

Perhaps much of the work of apologizing is difficult because we live in a world where regret is a diminishing commodity. Our world is full of non-apology apologies. Just think about your experience listing to Anthony Wiener, Lance Armstrong, Bill Clinton, BP, Paula Dean, Rush Limbaugh, Tiger Woods, Ryan Braun...the list is huge. Politicians, scholars and athletes, Popes and plain folk all seem to be able to publically acknowledge a misdeed but do they really apologize? Somewhere along the way the ordinary act of saying, “I was wrong” with sincerity has become beyond what we can be expected to do.

This is not only in the public realm. How many of us have received one of these half apologies? *“I’m sorry that you misunderstood me...I’m sorry IF I offended you... I’m sorry you feel that way...I apologize in advance if...I’m sorry but I am also a victim here.”* These efforts are incomplete,



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conditional, vague, passive and redirected. In all of them the offended person is left standing there wronged a second time without any sign that the offender understands his shortcoming and has resolved not to repeat the offense. For good reason, these apologies have no traction.

It is really hard to apologize. Many of us don't want to revisit our mistakes. It's painful and shameful and it exposes our flaws. And what if I reach out to you to offer regret and you turn away? That's real rejection! That's scary. Sometimes it's easier to live with a wedge in a friendship rather than experience the vulnerability associated with admitting our misdeeds. This, I believe, was Abraham's great mistake. If only he understood that the key to unlocking the power of healing lies in a sincere and well-placed apology.

Judaism, of course, has known this for centuries. Our tradition has a blueprint for seeking and granting atonement which was developed over centuries of practice in screwing-up our relationships and trying to set them right again. In his medieval work the *Mishnah Torah*, Maimonides included *Hilkot Teshuva* – The Laws of Repentance and they have been a guide for our people ever since.

Last year I read Aaron Lazare's book called 'On Apology.' I was only a little bit surprised that although he lived 800 years after Maimonides,



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his book presents the exact same essential steps to offering a sincere apology.

If Maimonides and Aaron Lazare could have met Abraham in Beer Sheva for some really strong Turkish coffee the whole story might have turned out differently. They surely would have coached Abraham through the key steps in asking forgiveness.

The first step in apologizing is to recognize our offense and also to recognize its impact on the person hurt. *“Isaac, I love you so much and I did a terrible thing to you. What was I thinking when I held a knife over your head. You must have been terrified and confused and now you are probably really angry. Even if it was God who asked me to do this, I should have never considered offering you as my sacrifice.”*

We also have to show we truly regret what we did. *“If only I could turn back the clock. I would have insisted that God find another way for me to show my faith. I should have never jeopardized our relationship. It just wasn’t worth it.”*

We have to actually ask for forgiveness and be prepared to do whatever it takes to mend as much as we can. *“I don’t know if it is possible for you to forgive me, but I hope you will consider it. I realize I have to rebuild your trust. Please let me back into your life.”*



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Finally, an apology is not really complete until, after resolving to refrain from the transgression in the future, we do indeed refrain from repeating the offense when the opportunity arises.

These steps may seem obvious to us, but when we examine our past apologies, who among us can say we have gone the full distance in this journey towards healing? Can you recall the last time you asked for forgiveness? Was it a quick drive-by type or did you go beyond “I’m sorry” and talk about the impact of your actions and how you might change things for the future. What about the other side? Can you recall a time when an apology from a friend or parent or spouse would have made all the difference? Someone sitting near you right now may be hoping that you will start this conversation soon, I suggest before Yom Kippur.

A while ago I did a wedding for a friend. Under the *chuppah*, before the couple came forward, the groom’s dad turned to his wife and very quietly said: “I’m really sorry.” I had no idea what he was referring to – had he been late for the photos or was this about something bigger, a past transgression that hung between them. They both cried through the entire ceremony. I suspect their tears weren’t only about their son getting married. Apologies are acts of commitment, healing and love.



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Two millennia ago, somewhere between Abraham and Maimonides, our Rabbis wrote: Train your tongue to say, “I’m sorry.” I have discovered this to be immensely important. The more I have apologized, the better I have become at it. It’s a bit like exercise. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. Open up your heart and you find it stretches wider. Take responsibility for your errors and you are less likely to repeat them. Repair a wounded relationship and you find that relationship becomes stronger, more resilient, more treasured.

How tragic that Abraham did not have access to these truths. But we can see a new purpose to reading this sacred story now, as we begin our season of reflection, repentance and repair. Perhaps the idea is that we listen to the *Akedah* and after the service and throughout the next week, *we* are left to imagine the next chapter. The near sacrifice is over and Abraham leaves the mountain. *We* are invited to turn this story and Abraham’s life into a moral tale - a troubling beginning but a compelling end. We imagine father and son healing, slowly.

And what about us? Each of us is Abraham in some way and there is someone sitting nearby to us, or living across the street from us or working at the desk beside ours who is Isaac, waiting... hoping... we might open the door and put words to a mistake we made or a hurt we caused. Will Yom Kippur be a day of forgiveness and healing of will our



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unacknowledged offenses hover in the air – unresolved – pushing us farther from one another?

This season calls us to turn the stories of our misdeeds into moral tales. Apologies are sometimes misunderstood as endings. But that is not so. A true apology is among the most graceful and profound of all human exchanges. When it is sincere, it is not an ending but a new beginning. And this is what Rosh Hashanah is all about.

Shanah Tovah.