

ROSH HASHANAH 5784

Our Ram – Our Purpose

His face, so beautiful and so familiar. His eyes, set wide, are both wise and sad. His mouth straight and serious. Legs, muscly and taut. His brown slicked back hair is thick and bristly. I can see him struggling in the bramble. I imagine him at the altar – alert, focused, compliant.

I am speaking, you may have figured out, about the ram. The one in the Torah portion assigned to Rosh Hashanah that we will read in just a few minutes. The one Abraham finds at the last possible moment and offers up on the top of the mountain in place of his son Isaac. I imagine Abraham sacrificing him, holding his horns that rise up like a bouffant hairdo, using that knife he carried up the mountain along with the wood and the rope. Soon the animal's sturdy legs collapse under him - our ram, so beautiful and strong, his face so human.

In 33 years of High Holy Days, I have never spoken about 'our ram.' The story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, is full of complexities; there are so many challenging messages, so many disturbing themes. I've given many sermons about Abraham, a few about Isaac; I've speculated about God in this story and given Sarah a voice, but I never thought about the ram. He is, after all, the overlooked and unsung hero of this story. It is only because of him that our people live. Had Isaac died on the altar, none of us would be here today. How could I have neglected the Ram? We owe him so much!

Just as a reminder about this story – the Akedah: Abraham is called by God to bring his son Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah ostensibly as a sacrifice, a demonstration of Abraham's loyalty to God. For three days they walk to the mountain, saying very little, Abraham engrossed in the task. At the top, Isaac is bound up, the knife in Abraham's hand poised above his son, when, thankfully, an angel intervenes. Jolted from his intense focus, Abraham 'lifts his eyes' and sees our ram caught in the thicket. Our ram becomes the substitute for Isaac who, now freed, can go on to become one of our patriarchs.

33 years of wrestling with this Torah portion, and I only now see that perhaps the character from whom we have the most to learn is not the devoted Abraham, nor the submissive Isaac - but the Ram.

Eager to learn more, eager to better understand what we might glean from this new lens, I started, no surprise, with our tradition. Lo and behold, there are a number of texts just about the ram – all of which provide great insights and wonderfully relevant messages as we make our way through the rituals of Rosh Hashanah and embark on the New Year.

The first text I found is a midrash from the Mishnahⁱ. It imagines that as God completed creating the world, in the very last hour of the sixth day, just before the first Shabbat began, God crafted 10 special items – each of which would play a critical role in the unfolding of the story of humanity. Can you guess these special items? Think - the rainbow that appeared after Noah’s flood, the staff that Moses raised parting the Sea of Reeds, the whale who swallowed Jonah ... and yes, our ram – the very one we read about today. Think about it – if our ram was indeed created in the 23rd hour of the 6th day, then we must understand that God never intended Isaac to be sacrificed. From the very beginning of time, this was the ram’s role: to be a substitute for Isaac at the altar; to be placed and then found by Abraham. Can you imagine him, waiting nearly 2000 years to fulfill his Divine purpose?!

This is certainly revelatory, but for me, and maybe for you too, a new question arises: if the Ram was always intended to be the substitute sacrifice, how and why did it end up caught in the thicket? Rams are majestic creatures – strong and agile as they climb up mountains and tread on narrow rocky paths. Do we really think such a beast could end up ensnared by some thorny bush? And, more significantly, didn’t our Ram know his purpose? For eons, he awaited this moment, how was it possible that he might miss this chance to fulfill his God-given objective?

Luckily another Midrashic textⁱⁱ provides an answer. These rabbis imagine that as the ram set off to carry out his assignment, an angel who wanted to disrupt God's plans, pushed our ram into the thicket! Can you picture this? This troublemaker-angel wanted to sidetrack the animal forcing Abraham to actually go through with sacrificing Isaac. The midrash says, he distracted the ram, but the ram, our wise ram, did an amazing thing! Knowing well his mission, he stuck out his hoof to attract Abraham's attention. He was determined to accomplish his intended purpose and to ensure that Isaac's life was spared. The Torah says: "Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the ram and offered him up in place of his son."

Our ram – for I do feel he is ours - knows himself and moves directly to fulfill his purpose. What an inspiring deed! All of this leads me back to the question of how this day might be different if we changed our focus away from Abraham and Isaac and shifted it to our Ram? Maybe this Torah portion, and the rituals of Rosh Hashanah, call **us** to connect, as our Ram did, to a purpose in **our** lives, to discern a moment when we might bravely stick out our hoof making a difference in someone else's life or the trajectory of an entire people.

In so many realms our world is in chaos. Every morning we read of another act of violence, another environmental disaster, another political scandal, another breakdown of democracy. On a smaller scale, in our own communities, our offices, within our families we see discontent, failed systems, valueless decisions, loved ones struggling, even suffering. It's overwhelming and difficult to discern our role in changing the direction of the story and to know when to step up or stick out our necks to disrupt the disturbing and devastating events that are happening before us. Today we are asked: How can we be like our ram, – the unsung hero of our New Year's story?

As I was pondering this idea, another text came to my mind. Have you heard of the best-selling book - 'The Purpose Driven Life?' It's written by evangelical minister, Rick Warren, and helps individuals to uncover their purpose in light of the Christian tradition. Like many rabbis I read his book to glean inspiration from his passion and insights from his methodology. No

surprise it is steeped in a particular kind of Christian theology. But there is much to learn from Pastor Rick (as he calls himself.) With laser-sharp focus he identifies what our ram in the Akedah seems to have known: that we humans need to be driven by purpose. Because if we are not, we are likely driven by other urges or emotions, like guilt or anger or fear or materialism or the need for approval. In some important ways, Warren's book has a clear message that I see as very Jewish – our need to do the work of looking into ourselves and, like our ram, focusing on our purpose and using that purpose to guide and inspire our actions.

Is all this talk about purpose making you anxious? I don't mean to overwhelm anyone, but I do want to invite you to join me in this exploration of this significant and timely theme.

We know that our Ram had a clear sense of his purpose from the moment he was created, but most of us, probably almost all of us, don't. Our ram's purpose was not only clear- it also had life and death implications for the Jewish people. Few of us imagine the impact of our purpose this way. Doing so would be daunting! Our ram gave his life for his purpose. I'm not in any way suggesting any of us would or should. If you are like me, I suspect that there have been times in your life when you did feel connected to a sense of purpose or a mission and many more times when you did not. If I asked you to turn to the person sitting beside you and talk about your purpose – well.... that might not be so easy or comfortable. It might not even be so easy if I asked you to tell yourself what your purpose is.

To put your mind at ease, let me clarify that for most of us, including myself, purpose isn't some grandiose, ethereal thing – ending world hunger or reversing global warming. It's something personal we can carry around within us – a self-organizing value or belief, an essential quality or hope that gives direction to our lives. It's true that many of us can't often put our finger on our purpose although we sometimes sense we are close.

I have heard about those few people who know their purpose from an early age (I'm not one of them.) *Your niece who brought frogs back to the pond, collected stray cats, put out*

winter food for squirrels, no surprise she became a veterinarian. I know of others whose sense of purpose came through a life altering event – some moment of success or some moment of challenge or even pain. After my childhood friend faced her addiction and went to rehab, she joined the board of MADD, devoting countless hours and years of her free time to fighting alcohol abuse. Although also an accomplished history professor, she recently told me that this is the most fulfilling and rewarding work she does. For some, purpose is folded into their profession. For others it is not. Feeding our families. Coaching young leaders. Building homes. Bringing art into the world. Purpose is expressed in many forms.

I understand – you still may feel unsure. I get it. Don't fret. Allow me to share an inspiring idea that might be helpful here. Ikigai (Ee-Key-Guy) is a Japanese concept meaning - A Life with Purpose. (Iki- life, Gai- Purpose) First written about in the twelfth century, Japanese scholars explain that Ikigai exists at the intersection of three different aspects of our human experience.

Imagine a Ven diagram with 3 overlapping circles. The first circle holds your talent – what you are good at, your special ability, your gift, or your superpower. The next circle holds your passion – what you care deeply about, what you love. That thing that makes you excited, energized, all fluttery and emotional. In the third circle is a need – something outside of yourself that is broken, incomplete, requiring repair. It could be a world need but maybe it is the need of a small subset of our community or even of just one other person. In the space where these three things (talent, passion, and need) intersect sits Ikigai – Our Life Purpose.

I love this concept because I can visualize each of these realms – I do have a passion, and some talent, and I know I can connect these personal features to something outside of myself. When we approach purpose through this lens, our Ikigai becomes clearer, more accessible. Big or small, broad, or narrow, each of us can visualize our task. We know our talent; feel our passion and see a need to which we can respond.

Maybe you are thinking – So Rabbi, tell us, what is *your* purpose?? Of course, writing this sermon forced me to reflect on this. Using the lens of Ikigai, I see it this way: My talent has to do with *connecting with people*. Most of you know I'm a huge extrovert, but beyond that, I feel emotionally connected with almost everyone and this is a gift. My passion is *meaning making* which is something I started doing long before I became a rabbi. And in terms of a need outside of myself, well the world obviously has many problems. I believe that some of these problems are rooted in the lack of connection, understanding and empathy people have for one another. This is the need to which I feel called. This is the need where my talent and passion can make a difference. This is what I know to be my purpose.

I realize that coming to a place of clarity about purpose isn't so easy. There are times when we might have a strong sense of one realm – maybe we know our talent – but not so much our passion. Or maybe we are drawn to a need, but don't see a unique skill we can apply to that. Social scientists say that for most people, purpose grows slowly and incrementally. They also say that many of us don't have only one purpose. As our lives change so do our values and then so might our sense of purpose. Aging and life experience help. Making space to be reflective is key.

This is where Rosh Hashanah, the Akedah, the focus on our ram, can offer us a gift. Through our rituals and liturgy and music, through the peacefulness of these special days, we are encouraged to do this work. We are invited to go into ourselves, to sit with our own complex emotions, our vulnerabilities, our memories, our values, and our hopes and expectations, and find, deep down within us, our purpose, our own, individual, self-organizing resource that sits at the intersection of our talents, our passions, and the needs of our world. Today is the day to embrace this opportunity and even to visualize how this discovery or affirmation of purpose might change you.

As with our majestic ram, our purpose could guide us along life's paths and perhaps one day up our mountain. When we find ourselves struggling with a challenge, when we are caught in some thicket, thwarted by life's unexpected forces, it can provide us with the courage of

intentional action. Even more, today, our ram inspires us, pushes us, to do the at-times-scary and always brave act of sticking out our hoof; of being a disruptor of a narrative that needs a new direction. It demands that we stick out our necks for something about which care deeply; that we insert ourselves into a situation that is going wrong; that we, in some large or small way, save someone's life.

This is of course why on Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar, made from the horn of a ram, our ram. Its piercing blasts disrupt our thoughts and prayers and call us to step up and step out. Today, let its sound fill your ears and your heart, opening you to your purpose:

Tekiyah – reconnect with your talents.

Shevarim – clarify your passion.

Teruah – see a need to which you can respond.

Tekiyah Gedolah – know your purpose, let it guide you in the year to come, and be ready to stick out your hoof to make difference.

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ⁱ Pirke Avot 5:8

ⁱⁱ Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 31:11