EMPATHY
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Rosh Hashanah Day Sermon 5774

Why? Why this one? Why are we reading this story in the Torah? Every year we gather, not just here but Jews gather around the world, we put on our New Year bests, we take off from work, we cook and prepare a special meal and we come like a biblical pilgrimage to sit in shul and the story we tell, year in and year out is of a father who secrets away his son early in the morning, without telling the boy's mother, his wife, and then takes him to a mountain top, binds him with rope and holds a knife to his throat. I don't get it.

We could read anything; we are as some of you may feel – a captive audience – is this our punishment?

Noah would be nice. It has cute little fuzzy animals.

The Ten Commandments – now THERE'S a good story, a top ten list, easy to remember – they even made a movie!

We could read of Jacob and Esau's reunion and reconciliation – that's a message for these High Holy Days about the importance of family and confronting hurt feelings.

Why this? I truly don't get why we need to hear this of all lessons from the Torah on this day? First there is the premise – that God would test a person's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son. And second and perhaps more troubling the suggestion that a model of Jewish faith is to believe in a God that would ask such a thing of a human being.

And third, there is no doubt, not in our mind eye's or in God's, that had the angel not called out to him

"Abraham, Abraham" – he would have taken the knife and done the horrible deed and if the angel had not intervened, that deed would have been a mitzvah! An act commanded and sanctioned by God.

How many of us, hearing this story year after year, want to say to the person sitting next to us, "If a man did such a thing today to his son, let alone if he had tried to justify it by saying God told him to do it, they would lock him up and throw away the key, or much worse!"

So why ***do*** we read this story? Let me suggest that maybe we read it because it is so incredibly extreme – and yet so obviously possible that we must challenge ourselves to understand why Abraham, why Issac, why Sarah, why God would act this way.

We read it because it demands… empathy. What Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler described as, "seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another."

We read this story because we will **interact with** people as enthralled as Abraham was at that moment – blinded by faith – be that faith in God, money, power, authority, or a political ideology. People who act with such self righteousness that they think the laws of humanity, let alone common decency do not apply to them. Think of political extremists or religious zealots. Before we write them off as irrational, remember Abraham, remember why he got up early in the morning. His story is a lens through which we can see theirs more clearly.

We ***know*** Isaacs, people whose past traumas color their present days and on into their futures. Remember, decades later it was a diminished Isaac who was literally and figuratively blind to the scheming and trickery of his wife Rebecca and his sons Jacob and Esau. When we see a parent who plays favorites with a child, or who is withdrawn and absent from their child's life, before we label them as terrible parents – empathy compels us – remember Isaac! We are all, for better or worse products of our own childhood experiences – what is present is so often an echo of our pasts.

We read this story because **we are friends with** people like Sarah, a wife who has been deceived by her husband, who wakes up to find her world torn to pieces – her trust invalidated and beyond recovery. The very next *parasha* after the angel saves Isaac tells of Sarah's death – it implies that this ultimate

betrayal by the man she loved broke her heart and her spirit, took away her will to live.

How many stand on that threshold like Sarah? They can't trust their spouse anymore. Where is the wonderful person they married? Do they walk away? And what will become of them if they do – how can they go on living when everything they lived for was a lie or a deception? Sarah's torment is real, it is current, it is sadly happening to people we know and care about. Her story illuminates their reality, maybe our reality.

We read it also because if we are perceptive, if we pay attention in life, we will encounter angels!... like the one that called urgently to Abraham to withhold the knife, called to him not once but TWICE! The first time he only heard his name, the second time he

listened. What changes in us that we go from 'I hear you' to 'I'm listening to you'?

Have you ever failed to be receptive to good advice or an criticism when it was offered in your own best interest? Who among us has not? We hear but we don't listen. Abraham almost missed it. He was so intent on his course of action, as ruinous and destructive as it would be that the Angel had to call out twice to get his attention…"Abraham! ….**ABRAHAM!!"** - to get him to listen.

Sometimes ***we are*** that angel for another. Calling out to save a friend from a terrible mistake. We may have to yell and scream to get their attention, to get them to not only hear but to listen. And they may hate us for it – but ***empathy***, standing in the shoes of another sometimes compels us to take that dramatic step and… help.

Which reminds me – as an aside, of comedian Steve Martin's line about empathy: "Before you criticize a man, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, when you do criticize him, you'll be a mile away ***and*** you'll have his shoes."

We read this story because it challenges us to have empathy. To see the characters with empathic eyes, to listen to them with an empathic ear and understand them with an empathic heart.

Empathy is not only the key to understanding the Akedah, it is the essence of what it means to be a Jew. Hillel said it most succinctly, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." Every religious tradition has its version of what has come to be known as the golden rule.

But the Jewish construct demands that I step outside of myself and make this assessment not sometime, but EVERY time I'm about to interact with others.

That's not easy to do – there is the small issue of ego that often gets in the way.

Rav Yitzchak Meir of Gur observed that the greatest darkness exists when we can't see each other - when we can't appreciate the other's pain. He was commenting on the 9th plague, *hoshech,* darkness a plague that was second only to the death of first born children.

We read in Torah, "And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days: They could not see one another, neither did they rise anyone from his place..." (Exodus 10:22-23)

If we never ***see*** the need in the first place, we won't move, we won't lift a hand to help, not even a finger – we practice blind indifference.

This Torah portion cries out to us – LOOK, OPEN YOUR EYES, SEE! Look what human beings are going through, look what they are doing, what they are feeling. Judaism commands – NOTICE them, have empathy for them, for each other, judge with empathy, act with empathy, treat each other with empathy.

Empathy is why we will fast on Yom Kippur; so that we will understand the pain and the hunger of those who do not have a choice whether to eat or not.

Empathy is why this congregation turns no one away because of financial need. Because they could be us, indeed for many of us when we were just starting out, just starting a family, a career, they were us. Temple Sholom had empathy for us then, and we will continue to have it for those who enter these doors – even if that means we have to give a little more.

Empathy is why I say proudly from this bima that if you are an interfaith family trying to have a Jewish home and raise a Jewish child – you are welcome here at Temple Sholom. We support you, value you and embrace you. Because it's the reality of the Jewish world we live in and our doors, arms and hearts are open to you, not closed.

Empathy is the essence of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew means to feel empathy for the world and the people in it, to understand its tragedies, because they have happened to us and we are commanded to never forget that we too were once slaves in the land of Egypt!

Empathy is the very meaning of God's name that we proclaim on these High Holy Days. We say, *Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v chanun Adonai.* / "The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious." It too is a verse that comes from the book of Exodus, shortly after the plagues during the story of the Golden Calf. Moses is bereft and despondent over the betrayal by the Jewish people, he feels as though he has been bullied and rejected by them at the moment he needed them the most, God comforts him and empathizes with him. God stands in Moses' sandals and says, 'Its not about me, it about you,

Moses you feel abandoned by the people you risked so much for.' It's a maternal moment for God. He comforts Moses as a parent comforts a crest fallen child – no matter there age. You hurt and I weep.

The name *Rachum*, or *Rachamim* is a lens into the importance of Empathy in Judaism and to the very nature of God. Its root is the word *rechem*, which means womb. Empathy in Judaism is to feel for another as though they were your own child.

It is not enough to merely say, "that person is a fellow human being and I should help them," it is not even enough to say, "that person is my brother and I should help him." No, our tradition commands us to see every person as God sees them, as though they issued from our womb, to say, "that person is somebody's child," because everybody, including --

no! ***especially*** -- the homeless person you will pass as you're shopping downtown ***is*** somebody's child.

Rachamim / Empathy requires that as Jews, as an extension of God's maternal empathy, we must help them! For we are all have the same parent, we are all children of God.

We say on these High Holy Days that God sits on the throne of *Din*, of Judgment. BUT really according to tradition there are two chairs, two thrones. Before God sits on the throne of judgment God first sits on the throne of *Rachamin* and feels empathy and compassion for our lot in life. Before God judges us, God tries to understand us. It is an amazing image and a profound example for us all.

Think about it for a moment; **(come off bema)**

From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur God comes and sits down beside each of us, puts an arm around our shoulders and says, "tell me about how you feel, tell me about how you hurt, tell me about what you did, I want to understand, I care and I am listening." ***That*** is empathy. Before we judge another, understand them! How many of us are guilty of just the opposite? Of judging first and understanding second… if at all?

A story: When a nineteenth-century Eastern European *shtetl* was beset by a siege of freezing weather, the local rebbe needed to raise funds to heat the houses of the town's poor. He set off for the home of the town's richest man, and knocked on the door. The man, a follower of the rebbe, answered and invited him in. The rebbe declined and said that he only needed a minute or two of the man's time and they could talk on the doorstep. The rebbe then

started to ask the man general questions about his family and his children, small talk. The man, who had come to the door in his pajamas, began to shiver and his teeth began to chatter. "Will the rebbe please come inside he asked again?"

The rebbe said no and began to ask the man questions about his business. The man was now visibly shivering from the cold and again said, "Will the rebbe please come inside and tell me why he has come to my house?"

The rebbe remained outside, but told the man, "I've come to ask you for one hundred rubles. We need the money to warm the houses of the poor."

"And if I promise to give it will the rebbe then come inside."

“Yes” said the rebbe.

“Then I’ll give the money right now! Just come inside my home I am freezing!”

After the rebbe followed the shivering man into the house, the man opened his safe and gave him 100 rubbles.

He asked the rebbe, ”if you knew all along that you were planning to ask me, why didn’t you come right away and ask?”

The rebbe answered, “If I had come in as soon as you opened the door, you would have escorted me to a fine chair in your living room and brought out a glass of hot tea for both of us. We would have warmed ourselves by the fire, and when I would have asked you for money to heat the houses of the poor, you

would have offered five rubles, maybe ten. But standing outside, you experienced for a few minutes the bitterness of the cold that the poor are experiencing all the time. I wanted you to be feeling that bitter cold when I asked you for the 100 rubles."[1] **(return to bema)**

It is a story of empathy, but it has a troubling subtext; for it is not until the man feels the bitter pain of the cold himself that he is compelled to act on behalf of the poor. He could not understand the needs of the poor, and therefore he could not empathize with them, only when he was victimized by the same cold was he moved to empathize. We shouldn't have to be victimized in order to empathize.

We shouldn't have to experience divorce, mental illness, death of a loved one, a disabled child in order to recognize that pain and provide comfort!

We shouldn't have to ***be*** lost and alone in order to help our spouse… when they feel….. lost …and alone.

We shouldn't have to ***have*** a gay child in order to empathize with the ongoing struggle for gay rights and acceptance.

If the standard for empathy is that we have to be victimized in order to empathize, then I guess we will have a whole lot more poor and hungry, and wounded, and sick, and lonely, and depressed and bullied in our world before we can have fewer. As Gandhi famously said, "an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind."

The mitzvah of *rachamim*, of empathy, requires more from us than that. In my personal experience the hardest thing to do is to understand a situation from another person's perspective; but that is exactly what empathy requires, what Judaism commands. It's why we read the Akedah again, year after year after year. Because this is hard, it's hard to get it. It's hard to see the person and the situation as though we were standing in their shoes. *Vahavtah l'reyecha kmocha,* you shall love your neighbor as yourself, why does the text say, *kmocha*, as yourself? Because they ***are*** as ***we are***.

We are at times like Abraham - blinded by articles of faith.

We have been Isaac – traumatized by our past.

We have been Sarah – broken and demoralized.

And if we pay attention to those around us, if we are more 'Observant Jews' observing, seeing what is hidden by shadows, by darkness each of us can and ***will*** be the Angel for another.

Notice other people and the challenges they face in life, understand them before you judge them. Put yourself in their shoes, see the world through their eyes, treat every person you meet as though they were your own child and be an empathic expression of God in the world.

To be a more observant Jew as I am defining it means that every time you encounter a person in crisis be they a friend, family member or a complete stranger, treat them as you yourself would want to be treated, *vahavtah l'reyacha kamocha*, love your neighbor as you your self want to be loved.

To be a more observant Jew means that in this New Year and in every year stand in the shoes of the person beside you. See the world from their perspective, understand them before you judge them, and when necessary ***be*** the angel who wouldn't give up until he'd rescued Isaac AND Abraham, do the right thing, the RIGHTEOUS thing, the Jewish thing – act with empathy.

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[1] Joseph Telushkin, Moral Virtues