

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish center
Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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The last hundreds years have been pivotal ones for technology and science; man arrived on the Moon and communications took a giant step forward.

Nevertheless, the last hundred years weren't great ones for the history of the human spirit. The Holocaust destroyed many of our existing parameters, and the State of Israel –in spite of its great achievements- couldn't fill the lack of faith and spirituality among the Jewish people throughout the world, or even within Israel itself.

The Torah neither came from Zion, nor the word of Hashem from Jerusalem.

If there is a word that can define our time in matters of spirit, it is *cynicism*. People don't believe in God or in other people.

Even though most of the Jews around the world today live in prosperity and safety, this doesn't renew their faith in God.

The motto of our time seems to be, "My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!" (Deuteronomy 8:17).

As Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Starosielce taught us, *"It is easy for a poor man to trust in God because in whom else could he trust? And how difficult it is for a rich man to trust in God. All his wealth is telling him 'Trust in us'"* (Simcha Raz – Pitgamei Hassidim).

On the other hand, many liberal synagogues have not yet found a solution to this state of cynicism and lack of faith among their congregants. People feel good at our services. In them, they find friends, a nice environment, a new vision of American politics, and good dinners, but they don't find God.

Most American (and also South American) congregations are trying to find revolutionary programs to attract Jewish senior citizens, young couples, singles, and children to Judaism. Every single congregation in the world is trying to be more creative than the other, in order to bring back the lost "customers" that number more and more each day.

I do agree that we need to find a really revolutionary way to deal with the emptiness of our Jewish and human soul; and I believe I found what this revolutionary way is.

I am convinced that, if today there is something really revolutionary in the world it is to believe in God.

And I don't mean just to declare that we believe in God (most Jewish and non-Jewish people are ready to declare that), but I mean to really believe in a transcendent power that reigns over the universe; to believe in a simple way, as we used to when we were children, with innocence and pure faith.

I also mean to come back to the ancient rituals and to a simpler way of living our lives. As Rabbi Nachman of Breslav teaches us, *"Steer clear of sophistication and cleverness; they add nothing to coming closer to God. All you need is simplicity, sincerity and faith"* (The Empty Chair).

Today we read in the Torah a wonderful story of faith, maybe the most powerful story of faith ever written: the story of a man whose faith in God was so great that he was ready to sacrifice the most important gift in his life.

Much has been said about the "Binding of Isaac" and it is not my intention to talk today about Abraham and his faith, but to turn your attention to three verses in our story that can teach us the nature of faith. In these three verses, the hero is not Abraham, but his son Isaac.

We read in the Torah:

"And Abraham took the wood for the offering, and placed it on Isaac, his son. He took in his hand the fire and the knife, and the two of them went together. Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'Father –' and he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?'" (Genesis 22:6-7).

The commentary points out that *"until now Isaac did not know the true purpose of the journey, but as they walked toward the mountain with no animal in sight, he suspected the nature of the test, and he asked this probing question"* (The Stone Chumash).

Isaac had faith in his father. He loved him and, as we read in the Torah, *"The two of them went together."*

However, something happened, and doubt erupted in Isaac's heart. Isaac saw that something was missing: *"Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?"* Isaac doubts and asks for an answer. Abraham does not have all the answers, but wants to keep the dialogue going.

"And Abraham said, 'God will seek out for Himself the lamb for the offering, my son.' And the two of them went together" (Genesis 22:8).

The answer was not so convincing. To accept this answer in the loneliness of the mountain, you need to have a great faith. As the commentary points out, *"The much younger Isaac could have resisted or fled easily, but he walked on together with Abraham"* (The Stone Chumash).

In order to continue walking with his father, Isaac needed a great deal of trust, trust in his father and trust in his father's way.

Doubting is not the problem. Even Isaac doubted when he didn't see any lamb. Even Abraham doubted when God promised him a son at age one hundred. The challenge is to maintain the dialogue and the trust. In other words: to keep walking together.

Like a small child, I would like to say to God: "Dear God: I don't understand You, or your ways, but I like your company and I want to be close to you and close to your commandments. Like Isaac with Abraham, I want to keep walking together with You"

To conclude: To believe in God is a wonderful thing you can teach yourself and teach your children and grandchildren. If you come back to a simple and pure faith in God, you will feel happiness and plenty of spirituality. And by the way, you will start doing something really original and creative at the beginning of the third millennium.

Rosh Hashanah is a wonderful time to start. Let's just give it a try!

And may God bless every one of you and your families with health, and joy, with peace of spirit and sustenance, with a good and sweet year.