

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5769

The road is very pretty - said the boy

The road is very hard - said the youth

The road is very long - said the man

The old man sat by the road to rest

The sunset dyes his white hair with gold and red

The grass shimmers at his feet with evening dew

The last bird of the day sings above,

Can you remember, how hard, how long the road was?

You said: day follows day, and night - night.

The days progress - you said in your heart,

and you saw evenings and mornings in your windows,

and you said, there is nothing new under the sun."¹

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the creation of the world, when God, Almighty King, sits on His throne of mercy, counts and recounts, scrutinizes and judges His entire creation.

At the core of the religious service of Rosh Hashanah we find the Torah reading. And what is the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah? Is it the first chapters of the book of Genesis, which describe the creation of the universe? Or is it in the book of Isaiah or Ezekiel, where the Prophets describe how the celestial hosts enthrone God with songs of praise?

Not at all! The reading is taken from chapters 21 and 22 in the book of Genesis, and it tells us a story of country life, a story of a husband and wife and a son born in their old age, and a stepson and a concubine. It is a story of love and concern, but also of jealousy and fear. It is basically the story of

¹ Leah Goldberg, End of the Road Songs

one man and his family, one man and his own travails, one man who could be any one of us here today.

It is the story of Abraham, who needs to be awakened.

"And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1), an Abraham who needs to be called to action, an Abraham who believes that nothing else in life could surprise him, or amaze him, or scare him...

Abraham experienced countless tribulations during his life. He was taken away from his homeland, from his family and from his parents. In return he had only a promise, which took time to materialize. He had to fight powerful kings and he had to plead with God on behalf of the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which didn't deserve or appreciate his concern. He plowed an arid land, and was forced to descend to Egypt in search of food. He had a first son with Hagar, whom Sarah his wife commanded him to send away.

Finally the miracle arrived: a son in his old age, a future at last! In Isaac he placed all his hopes.

Abraham had a difficult life. Why call him, then? Why does he need to be awakened, to be shaken? Doesn't he deserve, perhaps, to live his last days in tranquility? Why bother a poor old man who only wants a bit of peace?

What happens is that God has still something to teach Abraham: If there is something Abraham cannot allow himself, it is to sit down by the road to wait for death to take him away. It doesn't matter how old is he. It doesn't matter if he is 40, 60, 80 or 100 years old.

We cannot let ourselves die. We cannot sit down to see things happen in life without participating in them. Even though we sometimes lack the strength, even though we don't have the energy we used to have ten, twenty or fifty years ago. Even if we have struggled enough already, we should not permit circumstances to conquer us, or fear to paralyze us.

*And here you are, aged, old and gray
and your days are numbered, increasingly precious
And you know, each day is the last under the sun
And you know, each day is a new day under the sun.”²*

And so we too, like Abraham, are called day after day to respond “Hineni” – Here I am! We too - like Abraham, are being awakened, day after day, test after test, shock after shock, and surprise after surprise, to give testimony that we are still alive, that life goes on and that we need to be part of it.

And if this is true every day of our life, it is even more so on Rosh Hashanah, a day which encapsulates the potential of the entire year ahead.

Why do we sound the Shofar? What is the Shofar sound supposed to accomplish?

The Sefer HaChinuch tells us that we must understand the nature of human beings. Human beings are creatures from the physical realm, we are only aroused and inspired to action by something stirring, something that will cause us to snap out of the ordinary routine. We see this concept in practice at a time of war: In order to stir up the troops, trumpets are sounded, in hope that this arouses and motivates the soldiers to action. On Rosh Hashanah, we do the same. We “awaken” by means of the Shofar.

Abraham was awakened indeed, and now the test is over.

“And an angel of God called to him from heaven and said: now I know that you are a God-fearing man” (Genesis 22:11-12).

Rashi offers a midrashic dialogue between Abraham and God:

Abraham said to God, “I will explain my complaint before You. Yesterday, You said to me (ibid. 21:12): ‘for in Isaac will be called your seed,’ and You retracted and said (ibid. 21:2): ‘Take now your son.’ Now You say to me, ‘Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad?’” (Rashi on Genesis 22:12)

² Leah Goldberg, End of the Road Songs

Abraham doesn't understand God's ways. He doesn't know how to assimilate this emotional rollercoaster: "Take your son!" "Don't take your son!" "Bring him up!" "Bring him down!"

Abraham cries: "Make up your mind, God! If You want to be kind, be kind; if You want to be cruel, be cruel, if You want to bless me, bless me; if You want to curse me, curse me; but make up Your mind! I cannot live all the time with ups and downs, and ups and downs. I don't want any more surprises. I want to know what to expect, I want to be able to predict what life will bring me tomorrow!

But the angel of God says to Abraham: "Now I know that you are a God-fearing man," implying: "Now I know that you are a God-fearing man, but regarding tomorrow, who knows! Today you passed the test. Tomorrow I may present you with another one, with a different one."

What is life if not an emotional rollercoaster of ups and downs?

God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am!"

Here I am, even though life itself isn't easy; here I am, despite the fact I don't understand your ways. Here I am, standing in front of you, ready to hear your voice again; ready for the next test, ready to live fully each day, each hour, each minute you are going to give me as a gift.

May each sound of the Shofar awaken us to the sacred presence of the divine and may we be able to respond, "Here I am!" to the call of life itself. And may God bless us and our families with time to enjoy shared experiences, with health, sustenance and peace, with a good, sweet and blessed year!