

From the Rabbi's Desk

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Hillcrest Jewish Center

Today is the Birthday of the World!

**D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah**

**5785**



The story tells us that it was a test, but of course, the old man didn't know that. He just heard the Voice that called his name.

"Here I am," he replied.

It was not the first time the Voice spoke to him. He even remembers the first time, over 60 years ago. The Voice had told him to pick up his wife, his nephew, his belongings, his entire life, and leave his country, his birthplace, and his father's home, and go to a "place." Which place? He was not told.

The place he arrived at was far from a land flowing with milk and honey. He and his wife suffered a famine and the envy and enmity of the locals. He also suffered the ingratitude of his nephew, was engaged in a war that wasn't his, and above all, he and his wife were childless.

Abraham trusted the Voice. According to his wife, perhaps too much. His intuition told him the Voice was real, not just in his head; and then the Voice delivered. Yishmael, first, and then Isaac was born. True, it was more complicated than that. His wife forced him to expel Yishmael and his mother. He didn't like that, but the Voice had told him to listen to his wife.

And then the Voice, again.

"Here I am," he replied for the ...how many times he didn't remember.

*Take your son -said the Voice, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah; and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:1

The old man wasn't sure he had heard correctly; but the Voice was the same Voice; the same Voice that had guided his life until this point, the same Voice he trusted, the same Voice that got him in trouble in the past, the same Voice that promised, the same Voice that delivered.

He didn't understand the Voice's logic. It didn't make any sense. After all these years of waiting...He couldn't tell his wife. She would stop him or die from distress.

*Early the next morning he got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day he looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."*<sup>2</sup>

Actually, the servants were his son Yishmael and his trusted steward Eliezer, but the story, for some reason, likes to call them that way.

When the old man told them to stay at the foot of the mountain and wait, they didn't show any curiosity. They didn't say: "Can we go with you?" or "Can we worship with you?" Nothing. They were told to stay at the foot of the mountain, and at the foot of the mountain, they stayed.

Father and son were climbing the steep hill silently. The father took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

As the two of them went on together, the son broke the silence. He looked at his father and in a respectful way he said to him: "Father?"

Here I am, son, the father replied.

The old man was thinking.... I got used to reply, "Here I am." First to the Voice, and now to my son...

But the old man couldn't think for too long, because his son's question pierced him like the knife he was carrying in his hand:

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 22:3-5

*"The fire and wood are here," the son said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"<sup>3</sup>*

Of course! What was I thinking! The boy is a smart boy. He is not even a boy any longer; he is thirty-three years old and asks good questions.

What should I tell him? Whatever I tell him, he will turn his back to me and start walking back to the camp; but the boy wants an answer..

*"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."<sup>4</sup>*

I tried to be as ambiguous as possible. What else could I have told him? I didn't want to scare him, I didn't want to lie.

Did the boy figure out that he was the lamb? He must have! But if that was the case, why did he continue to climb the mountain together with me? Why did he hold my hand tight, hinting: don't let me go, daddy...or perhaps: I won't leave you, daddy. We are in this together. I am not like the ones you left at the bottom of the mountain, I will continue walking with you, climbing with you...

Do I have questions, daddy? Of course! You taught me to ask questions! Didn't you tell me how you challenged the Voice before I was born? I can even remember the words: "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ... Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"<sup>5</sup>

*So, I did ask the question, daddy, I did ask the question that was weighing on my shoulders like the heavy wood I am carrying up the mountain. And you answered: God will provide, my son. What else can I say? You trust the Voice and I learned from you to trust the Voice myself. After all, we have been together in this since the beginning.*

I know I can run away, daddy. I can turn back, leave you alone with your knife, your fire, your questions, and your faith. I could join the others at the foot of the mountain,

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:7

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 22:8

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 18:24-25

but I won't. I am not going to leave you, daddy, because I too believe, that somehow, God will provide.

Dear friends...By now you know the end of the story. At the end of a journey that seemed endless, God indeed did provide, and father and son descended the mountain even more together than they had climbed it.

It wasn't easy afterwards. When the old lady didn't see the boy that morning, she died from distress, and the old man's neighbors thought he had lost his marbles.

Then, the old man died, and the boy died as well, and the boy's son went down to Egypt and his descendants were enslaved by an evil tyrant.

To be honest, they all knew about the Voice, but most of them had lost hope; and then the old prophet brought a message of deliverance and took them out of Egypt.

Since then, we, their descendants have been together on this fantastic, albeit not always easy journey. We have been together through water and fire, literally and figuratively. We have been oppressed by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. They burnt our homes; they exiled us from our land. Over 2000 years they didn't give us respite. Christians and Muslims, Cossacks and Nazis. Almost every people under the sun; every country that was and is, has their hands stained red with our blood.

We had a few ups and many downs; but we continued climbing together. Together we are still responding "here I am" to the Voice that is calling us not to go up, not to stay at the foot of the mountain, not to give up.

We are the descendants of the old man and his son, who despite the many questions, fears, and tribulations, continued climbing the mountain, together.

Around us many called us names. They say we lost our way; they say we became murderers ourselves. Our children are being harassed at school, many smart people, intellectuals, professors, human rights activists, people we admire, are turning against us. Many of our old friends are telling us it is time to turn back, to stop

climbing this steep uphill mountain...They even say the Voice never existed, the first old man was never promised a land, they want to shake our belief, our commitment, our faith...

But we gather our strength and tell them: it won't happen! We will continue climbing the mountain, we will continue keeping the faith, we will hold fast to the Voice and its message.

Like the old man did 4000 years ago, we will continue to say **הִנְנִי** - Here I am! Like the old man with his son, we will continue walking together, despite all the questions, uncertainties, challenges, and doubts. Despite the pain and the suffering we experienced this past year, we are not giving up on our millenary journey; despite the loneliness and the isolation, we are not giving up on the Voice we know is real. We also know, from 4000 years' experience, this too shall pass.

And when we finally make it together to the other side, those of us who answered the call will look at ourselves in the mirror, filled with pride, saying one more time: Here I am, here I was, here I will always be!

**תכלה שנה וקללותיה, תחל שנה וברכותיה** - May the year end and with it, all its sadness, mourning, and pain. May the new year begin and with it, its many blessings.

May we continue answering the call, despite the questions, and the challenges. Let's not give up, let's continue walking together.

**לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכְתְּבוּ**! - May all of you and your loved ones be inscribed and sealed for a year of peace and joy, meaning and fulfillment, for a good and sweet year.

Amen