

Nessiyat Avraham: The Test of Avraham

Shana Tova!

Every year, I think to myself, if Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the creation of the world, then why don't we read *Bereshit*? Why not the beauty of the seven days of creation story and the creation of the first humans, or even the story of Adam and Chava, or even the story of Noah—the “re-creation” story after the flood? Instead, we read Akeidat Yitzhak, the binding of Yitzhak. On the birthday of the world, we get... child sacrifice? Why do we read this on Rosh Hashanah?

So, when Rav Claudia invited me to offer a teaching about this, I decided this year is the year I find a meaningful answer to this nagging question. I discovered what the Mishnah says should be read on Rosh Hashanah, which is *not* what we read yesterday, and then the Tosefta cites a different reading, which is what we *did* we read yesterday, and then fast forward to the Talmud, where we get the practice of TWO days of Rosh Hashanah, and so we learn that we read the Akeidah on the 2nd day.

So, I guess “because the Talmud says so” is the answer, but that's highly unsatisfying.

However, I then realized this answer and the others over the years were unsatisfactory because I wasn't asking the right questions. My real question is, why *aren't* we reading these stories of creation? What do we get from reading this here on Rosh Hashanah that we would not get from reading accounts of creation? And after many *rashei Hashanah*, I finally have an answer that satisfies me, and I want to share it.

But first, let me tell you a story...about this parking ticket.

I was on a walk a few weeks ago, listening to a playlist, getting my heart rate up. I walked by a parking ticket on the ground. And the thought arose inside of me, “It would be nice if you paid this ticket for a stranger.”

I laughed off the thought and kept walking. That would be a nice thing to do. But I wasn't going to do that.

But then, as I was walking away, I felt this...I don't quite have a command of the English language to describe the sensation in my body, but it was a dreadful, not-painful pins and needles sensation that intensified as I kept walking. So I stopped. I walked back toward the ticket and thought, "I'm not paying this random ticket! I have my own parking tickets to pay!" And then I felt, I didn't hear, I *felt*, "pay the ticket."

So, I picked up the ticket and I started walking again, which didn't feel weird anymore. So, I entered the ticket number, and 19 OTHER tickets popped up for the same offense: an expired inspection sticker, dating back to January of 2023, which means this person has been driving around with an expired inspection sticker for almost 3 years!! How would my paying this one ticket make a difference? I thought, "I'm not spending \$40 dollars on this!" I felt the feeling again, "Pay the ticket."

So, I was about to put in my card number and then I thought, "What if this stranger somehow can see my payment info and use my info to empty my bank account?? This is crazy, I definitely shouldn't do this!"

Again, I felt the feeling, "pay the ticket."

So I paid the ticket.

I tell you this story because it helped me understand that we're actually not reading Akeidat Yitzhak, the binding of Yitzhak, today. We read that in Parshat Vayeira in the yearly Torah cycle. Today, we read Nessiyat Avraham, the Test of Avraham, and what that has to offer us about how to be in relationship with the God we are choosing to crown today on Rosh Hashanah. Same story, different focus.

In the first creation story, the seven days, the humans and God are not in relationship. They do not speak. Our rabbis teach that they were created back to back. They were not in relationship with each other nor with God. In the garden story, God says, *lo tov heyot adam levado*. It's not good for a person to be by themselves. *e'eseh lo ezer k'negu*. I will make a helper to be opposite him. And in this statement, God was revealing what God desired from this relationship with humans. God knew it was no good being alone, because God was alone. God knew it was important to be in relationship, because even being back-to-back, the human was still alone. And not speaking, God was still alone. God desired an *Ezer K'negu*, a helper and an opposite. God did not get that from Adam and Chava. They let outside influences poison their relationship with God. They weren't able to just say "yes" and do the thing that was being asked of them, nor was Kayin able to just trust God and say "yes." Noach was able to be a helper to God, but he didn't push back, didn't challenge God. But Avraham! Avraham helped God just said yes! Lech Lecha, YES! Because, as it says in 15:6, "*Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*" He trusted in God's plan and God's timing, even when it looked hopeless and unbelievable to our eyes. This that we read was not Avraham's first test. It was the 10th. And through them all, he trusted. *Ve'he'emin b'Adonai*:

1. God tells him to leave his homeland to be a stranger in the land of Canaan. "*Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
2. Immediately after his arrival in Canaan, there's a famine. "*Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
3. The Egyptians take his wife, Sarah. "*Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
4. He faced incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
5. He married Hagar after not being able to conceive with Sarah. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
6. He circumcised himself at an advanced age. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
7. Again, Sarah is taken. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
8. God tells him to send Hagar and his son away. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
9. Ishmael becomes estranged to him. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God
10. And finally, God tells him to sacrifice Isaac. *Ve'he'emin B'Adonai*," He trusted in God

And in the matter with Sodom and Amorrhah, Avraham was in loving relationship with God and spoke with God from a place of deep humility, to challenge God. “This is not the God I know, one who would sweep away the innocent with the guilty.” This is the relationship that God desired; this was the purpose of creation. To be known, to be seen, to no longer be alone.

Ve’he’emin B’Adonai, but what do we say when we wake up each day as a part of *Modah Ani, rabbah emunatecha*. Great is your faith in ME, God! You have the vision, I have the hands. We will be in this relationship together. *Hineni*. Here *I* am. I’m saying yes. And we trust that if we do our parts to the best of our ability, then God will do God’s part.

On Rosh Hashanah, we crown God, we say *Hineni*. Here *I* am, all the parts of me, the questioning parts, the fearful parts, the not quite ready parts, *I* will just say yes to you. *I* will do what I am asked without concern for the outcome, without *worry* about the outcome. Because that’s not mine to deal with. I trust. *Ve’he’emin B’Adonai*. When Yitzhak says, “Abba, I see the fire making stuff, but where’s the sheep for the offering, Avraham responds, “*Elohim yireh*.” God will see. *Lo ha-seh le’olah, beni*. The sheep for the offering is with God. I just have to walk up the mountain and bring you along. God will handle the outcome. I’m doing my part, and I leave the rest up to God. We are not in control. Unlike that old bumper sticker, God is NOT my copilot through these tests of life. God is the pilot, in the cockpit, locked behind bulletproof doors. I’m in the back, in economy coach! I don’t know how to fly a plane!! My job is to watch the people doing the safety demonstration, read the booklet, and keep my seatbelt fastened and tight low across my waist. The same is true here. Read the instructions, i.e., study Torah. Pay attention to teachers and guides who know more than me and observe and pay attention to what they suggest I should pay attention to. And tighten my seatbelt. Having an active prayer and spiritual life. That’s all I can control. Everything else is up to the Pilot. On Rosh Hashanah, we’re saying God is our pilot. *Elohim Yireh*. God sees. We just have a little window to look out the left side of the plane. We don’t even know what’s happening on the right side. Or behind the plane. Or above it. *Elohim Yireh*.

Sometimes, though, when we’re getting off after the flight, we get a glimpse into the cockpit. And as I was walking back home after paying this ticket. I got a glimpse into God’s cockpit, to remind me that I don’t know how to fly a plane, and I only have my little window.

Perhaps that person was about to get a boot, and because I reduced their ticket load by 1, they would NOT get a boot, would be able to drive to somewhere they're desperately needed. OR, without the boot, they can depart that parking spot so someone who needs to park there can be in that exact spot for whatever reason. But also, maybe this is someone I unintentionally wronged and to whom I was indebted 40-ish dollars. Maybe it's the grandchild of someone my great-grandparent owed a spiritual debt to. I don't know why I can't fly the plane, but I know that fiber of my being called out to me to do this thing. So, even though it made NO sense, I did it. Because that's what was being asked of me.