

From *Hineni* to *Kehillah Kedosha*

I am honored to speak today about the connections I see between our Torah portion, the Akedah or “the binding of Isaac,” and meaningful worship here at Shir Tikvah. In case you’re wondering, what led to my standing before you today, it all goes back to Facebook. Last year I responded to an open-ended question posted by Rabbi Latz on Facebook about what we find meaningful in the experience of worship. After we discussed my response, the rabbi invited me to share my thoughts with the congregation. I approach this subject from my experience as a drama critic and as a teacher and director of theatre. This may seem an unlikely position from which to consider spiritual matters. I will say, however, that one thing a study of theatre and dramatic literature teaches us is that parents cannot bind their children. Whether it is the Capulets and Montagues in *Romeo and Juliet* or the actual Mr. Poquelin, father of the brilliant French playwright and actor Moliere, who desperately wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and become the official supervisor of the king’s upholstery and carpets, we observe that children will make their own choices in spite of the ideas and desires of their parents. On a broader level, what I bring to this talk from my experience is the literary critic’s attention to metaphor, the teacher’s interest in learning together, and the theatre director’s commitment to collective creativity.

My starting point for considering the Akedah is the word *hineni*—in English, “I am here.” God calls out to Abraham, and Abraham responds, *hineni*. This word, which is repeated four times in the Akedah and many times throughout the Torah, implies more than just a passive statement of location. It signals, in the words of Rabbi Gershom Bernard, “an openness and responsiveness to an urgent call.” It indicates an active state of spiritual readiness. The mission on which Abraham embarks in response to God’s call, however, involves another human being, his son Isaac. As they ascend the mountain, Isaac calls out urgently to his father, and Abraham responds to his son with the same word: *hineni*. We can understand this paired call and response as a metaphor for our human state. Abraham is divided between the call of God and the call of his beloved son.

We can make space in our own lives for a meaningful spiritual experience if we approach worship in a *hineni* frame of mind, prepared to be fully present and engaged. Our reality, of course, is that we, like Abraham, are always divided. We have multiple claims on our attention: family, friendship, work, current events, and our own individuality. It is difficult and sometimes

impossible to attend fully to any single claim. Rare is the moment when we feel undivided, but a sense of wholeness is central to what we seek in worship. Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested that “we should be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.” Judaism is based on the concept of one God, and the *hineni* response shows us a path to wholeness.

Abraham’s arrival on the mountain, suspended between God and Isaac, constitutes what could be called a profoundly teachable moment. In addition to the human dimension of the conflict, and its resolution in the understanding that God does not demand human sacrifice, this moment provides us with an important truth on a metaphorical level. Isaac, the child miraculously given to Abraham and Sarah, stands as a potent symbol of the future. I have seen this story acted out as a play, and Isaac, as always with a child on stage, compels our attention and alerts us to an element of unpredictability. The child, caught in the bewildering world of adult actions, witnesses the present and physically embodies the future. Abraham, in obedience to what he understands to be God’s will, binds the child. In the end, however, God substitutes the ram as the sacrifice, and frees Isaac to live. The inherent message here is that we, as humans, cannot bind the future. Even if our attempts to control the future are based in obedience to God, we will find that the future, like a child on a beautiful spring day, skips away from us and takes its own course.

We must, of course, try to influence the future. Facing a host of pressing problems including racism, environmental damage, international conflicts, poverty, and destruction of life and freedom by tyrannical powers, we have an urgent responsibility to work on eliminating or alleviating these problems for the sake of a better future. But we simply cannot bind the future. On Rosh Hashanah, when we attend to the sound of the shofar, which calls us to action, and recite the poem “Unataneh Tokef,” which describes our encounter with the coming year as “awesome and full of dread,” we are made aware of our hopes for the future, our responsibilities toward the future, and its fearful possibilities. **We**, however, do not have to endure the suspension between hope and fear alone on a mountaintop; we experience it together, as it has been incorporated into a central ritual of our faith.

Ritual developed in ancient societies as a communal expression of our uniquely human identities, fears, and hopes. Ritual provides a sense of belonging and continuity. Ritual, especially at crucial junctures in human life—birth, coming of age, marriage, death—is a

powerful means of assuring communal support and the continuation of important values. Ritual's power consists in its familiarity. Rabbi Harold Kushner has said that "Judaism is less about believing and more about belonging." Familiarity with the prayers and the pattern of the service assures us that we belong, connecting us with Jews around the world and throughout history. This connection helps us face the awesome moment of confronting God, the ultimate other, and accepting God's amazing gift to us of a new year. Though we no longer burn animals on altars, entering fully into ritual does demand some sacrifice. We must devote to it a portion of the finite and precious span of time that constitutes our lives. We must also, to an extent, sacrifice our individuality, not seeking personal recognition or asserting personal preferences, in order to join our presence and our voices with others in community. These are the gifts we bring to worship.

Our congregation incorporates performance as well as ritual into our worship. Performance differs from ritual in that ritual involves the participation of all those present, while performance divides the assembled group into performers and audience. Our congregational leaders and choir perform for us by means of prepared sermons and rehearsed music. Sermons stimulate our minds with specific ideas. Music brings our emotions to the surface and enriches appreciation of our traditions and life itself. Though we have means of recording songs and speeches, the live performance can never be repeated in exactly the same way; its transient nature may remind us of the poignant transience of our own lives.

Our leaders, who have special responsibility for these performances, contribute most to meaningful worship when they reveal their authentic selves, as they did during the Erev Rosh Hashana service when they shared personal and very moving thoughts on prayer. They are most effective when they lead by means of how they lead, as much as with the words and music they provide. The great American folk singer Pete Seeger provided an example of this kind of leadership when he movingly led the assembled crowd in "This Land Is Your Land" at President Obama's first inaugural. The 88-year-old Seeger had lost the beautiful singing voice of his younger days, but the crowd responded to his still-energetic spirit forged in the long journey of a life dedicated to realizing the promise of "this land. . . made for you and me."

The conditions for meaningful worship occur when performance and ritual are in harmony. Too much emphasis on performance could promote passivity through the artificial unity of quiet listening, rather than the genuine unity of praying with one voice. Over-reliance on

ritual could lead to an absence of stimulating ideas or inspiring moments specific to our time and place. The two should work together, with the ritual giving emotional expression to enduring values, while the performance brings intellect into play and gives us unique moments of beauty that evoke the transience of our lives. As a congregation, we should continually nourish both the performance and the ritual sides of our worship, employing both the familiar and innovative, in order to create together the conditions for meaningful worship. We should engage in thoughtful conversation about the forms and substance of worship with the aim of telling our story and expressing our values truly and inclusively. This conversation should be ongoing, open, and participatory.

Worship, as Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman emphasizes, is a creative act. Thus, we should not expect to receive meaning passively. We ourselves must create meaning out of the words and patterns in the worship service. Each individual will create a meaning that is personal to her or to him, but within a sense of community that in itself constitutes an essential dimension of worship. We become a *kehillah kedosha*, a holy community, when “I am here” becomes “we are here,” and together we praise the source of life, celebrate our collective energy, affirm our common values, and ask for help to confront our challenges. Moments of this kind of unity, when hearts are attuned to our community and simultaneously full of personal joy, pain, and hope, are fleeting but profound. When we are fully present, experiencing our own thoughts and feelings and attuned to the thoughts and feelings of others, that is when worship is most like theater—a purposeful and powerful merging of energies in which everyone plays a part and in which there truly are no small parts. Worship also has much in common with education, expressing our yearning for perfection while never achieving perfection. We cannot reliably program or choreograph moments of meaningful connection; all we or our leaders can do is feed the roots of such connection through genuine sharing, and hold to the belief that such moments will occur—often in unexpected ways.

As a *kehillah kedosha*, we realize our complete purpose when worship troubles us and in this way serves as a springboard to action in the world outside the sanctuary. As we hear the shofar and consider the year ahead, we cannot know for sure where our response will lead. That thought brings me back for a final look at the troubling story of the binding of Isaac. The Torah scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg emphasizes the indeterminacy in Abraham’s situation. He

does not receive the full instructions immediately; instead, the aspects of his task are revealed to him piece by piece. Yet he starts on the journey without knowing its end. Many of us have embarked on such journeys in recent years, sharing with others in Minnesota and throughout the nation vital work toward overturning injustice and alleviating suffering. We do not know what opportunities and challenges the new year will bring, but renewal through the sharing of tradition and values strengthens and inspires us to embark on the journey without knowing exactly where it will end.

L'shana tovah.