

RH Shacharit 5773 - "Your future is now and it is your chess game to win"

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"Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday."

Thus read the bright blue and green bumper sticker attached to the Honda Civic stopped in front of me. I took a good look, and then a second look. In fact, the nature of bumper stickers and LA traffic allowed me to stare at these eight words for a solid five minutes.

It isn't a new statement, I have heard it before. It isn't the only pithy quote I have heard about time, either. But for some reason, sitting on San Vicente Blvd with a traffic light out ahead and no foreseeable movement forward by the cars in front of me, the words struck a chord.

We talk a lot about time and our perception of each end of the time spectrum – we talk a lot about the past, we talk a lot about the future. But we don't really talk all that much about the present.

We are built on our experiences of the past; we are built on our history. It forms our narrative, our identity. Our story and who we are has a lot to do with what has happened to us and what we have happened to and the stories we tell about that journey. This is why conversations with new people often involve so much personal history questioning – we are working to see what we have in common, what is shared about our histories.

Our story as a Jewish people is shaped by a long history, and over the years, historians have found various ways to tell their version of Jewish history. The events they omit and those they choose to emphasize and the way that they portray those events affects how their readers understand Judaism. Early 20th century historian Solo Baron argued that Judaism was far better off prior to the Enlightenment and the Emancipation that came with it. In his version of history, the Jews were safer, happier, and healthier in the ghettos of the 18th century than they were once they became citizens of the countries in which they lived.

In other words, looking back never grants us a full picture. What Baron's image failed to include was the emotional and mental destruction that ghettoization caused.

History can be dangerous in this way; often it only tells one side of a story, one version of the history. But nevertheless, the past and our variously nuanced perception of the past is a large part of what shapes and defines us.

This morning we read about one of these definitive moments of the Jewish story: the Akeidah. The Binding of Isaac, one of the more deeply disturbing biblical stories, has been used throughout Jewish history; the martyrs of the 1st Crusade liken themselves to Abraham and Isaac, Holocaust literature uses pieces of the narrative of the Akeidah to tell the narrative of the camps. In the last 60 years, modern Israeli poetry has especially focused on the Akeidah as a metaphor.

In her book *Profane Scriptures*, author Ruth Kartun-Blum identifies four “players” in the story of the Akeidah: the Author of Command to sacrifice Isaac, the One who Binds, the One who is Bound, and the Ultimate Victim. She then goes on to explore how various poets over the years have read their own personal or political agendas into these four characters, imbuing the Akeidah with entirely new lives and meanings.

The past here is being used to help write narratives, to help make sense of modern realities. Israeli poet Ra’aya Harnik, writing as the mother of an Israeli soldier, places herself in Abraham’s shoes and her son in those of Isaac. In her poem titled I Will Not Offer, she writes:

I will not offer
My first born for sacrifice
Not I
At night God and I
Make reckonings
Who can claim what
I know and am
Grateful
But not my son
And not
For sacrifice

Harnik’s poem is that of a woman sending her son off to fight for Israel, a woman simultaneously grateful to and angry at God. The story of the Akeidah allows her a lens from which to tell her story. That story is made more powerful by the use of a lens so familiar to all of us.

Long before modern Hebrew existed, the medieval commentators spent much time on the Akeidah as well; but they were merely trying to understand it. They were especially

concerned with the chronology of the event. Their confusion makes sense, as the story begins with a statement of time:

“acharha’dvarimhaeleh, haelohimnisa et Avraham.” After these “words”, God tested Abraham.

After WHAT “words”?

The commentators needed to know what had happened before that made it important for the Torah to include the word “AFTER”. They needed to make sense of the timing of events in order to understand the bizarre story taking place in the “present” of the Akeidah moment.

Our main man Rashi explains that the reason we have the phrase “After these words” is because God has an exchange of words prior to the binding of Isaac scene. Those words are not in the Torah, so the text gives us a clue by including the phrase “after these words.” Luckily for us, Rashi knows where these missing words are – they are found in a conversation between God and Satan that is described in the Talmud. According to that Talmudic account, Satan criticized Abraham, saying:

“Your Abraham? He’s not so righteous. Out of every meal that he has cooked, he has not sacrificed to you, even once!”

God replies, of course, in defense of Abraham: “Are you kidding me? Abraham doesn’t need to sacrifice a deer to me! Listen – I know how righteous and faithful Abraham is – his son is the most important thing to him, and if I were to say to him ‘sacrifice him for me’, he would not hesitate.”

This, according to Rashi, gets God’s proverbial foot stuck in God’s proverbial mouth. As a result, “after these words, God tested Abraham.”

In this way, Rashi makes sense of this truly difficult event in Torah by painting Abraham as a truly righteous man who did indeed love his son and was only being tested by God because God needed to prove Abraham’s righteousness to Satan.

Rashi would have appreciated my bumper sticker: “Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday”. Today is a result of that which happened yesterday.

So what about tomorrow? What about the future?

Well, the future is scary, because it is uncertain, especially in Judaism. We do not know what it looks like; we have no guarantee even that anything will take place at the time it is supposed to. PirkeiAvot, The Ethics of the Fathers, instructs us to repent one day before we die. One day before we die? How can we possibly know when that is?

We can't, according to Rabbi Eliezar, whose students asked: "does a person indeed know on what day he is going to die, so that he might repent [the day before]?" He said to them: "all the more should he repent today lest he die tomorrow. He should repent again tomorrow lest he should die the day after that. Thus all his days will be spent in repentance."

In short, no. No one knows on what day he or she will die. Which makes it important to consistently be ready for whatever may come next.

It is for this reason that I have trouble with another bumper-sticker style statement: **"You are the leaders of tomorrow!"**

Throughout my work with teens, I have heard this phrase countless times. It comes mostly from guest speakers, from policy-makers and activists, from people who are working hard to make change, who want to instill passion in my participants, who want to get these teens involved in something.

You are the future, they say – you are the leaders of tomorrow.

But if you tell me I am the future, I feel no desire to be anything TODAY. When someone tells teenagers that they are the leaders of tomorrow, it gives them the impression that they needn't be, maybe even SHOULDN'T be, leaders of today.

When you put the future too far into the future, you never arrive at that future.

So, the past is formative but only gives us spotty information about the actual events that occurred, and the future is scary and uncertain. Great.

What do we do? How do we plan for tomorrow when we do not know on what day we will die? How do we help create a future that is intentional, a future that we want to be a part of?

The answer is twofold: we must think in the short-term and also in the long-term. More importantly, we must move "the future" to "today."

It's a bit like a chess game – the goal, of course, is to win. But to reach that long-range goal, you must plan your moves carefully and you must also be flexible, ready to adjust your planned moves when your opponent makes a move you did not anticipate. Most importantly, you must constantly check the long-term goal against the short-term goal and vice versa. If you make a move without the overall goal of winning in mind, you are making it harder for yourself to win. Similarly, if you overlook the small steps that you must take in order to win, if you do not plan each individual move to advance you toward your goal, you will probably lose.

Which brings me to my third and final bumper-sticker-style quote of this sermon:

"Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift. That's why we call it the present."

I would amend this quote, just a teensy bit, so that it reads "this **MOMENT** is a gift, that's why we call it the present." The future arrives daily, hourly. We can't escape it, and we cannot linger in the present. By the time we have lived each moment, it has passed into the past and we have moved into the future.

But we can be intentional. We can use our past and current experiences to help create and improve on what our future moments look like, both in the short term and in the long term.

The trick is, as we plan each of our small moves toward the future, we must keep in mind the larger theme, so that these small movements propel us toward the big chess win, whatever that may mean for each of us individually.

May your opponent be worthy, and your game be long. And may you win.

Shana Tova.