

ROSH HASHANAH DAY SERMON
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It is a truism in the real estate business that there are three things that matter when you go to buy property: location, location, location! I'm sure that is the case, but I also think that location can play a key role in the success of other endeavors. In particular, location is crucial to storytelling. Think about composers like the Gershwin Brothers or authors like Harper Lee or Willa Cather. In their work, New York City, a small American town, or the plains of the American heartland are as much alive as characters and lyrics. It is rare that that this occurs in the Torah—every place our ancestors travel seems almost interchangeable. This is especially true if you do not study every parsha often and so closely that you analyze the Hebrew meaning of each place. The only places that I can think of which people might recognize easily and that come up in our tradition many times are mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Moriah. Today, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read about the Akedah, the near-sacrifice of Abraham's younger son Isaac. The setting of this occurrence, "eretz ha-Moriah," is only mentioned once, but it captured the Jewish imaginations for generations. In honor of its

connection to Rosh Hashanah, Moriah is worthy of our attention and consideration, teaching us to appreciate a place just as much as we remember what happened on its soil.

Let us start with the word Moriah itself. The definition of a place in the Bible often serves as an interpretation of what happened there. The origins remain somewhat murky—nobody is positive about what it means. Some suggest that it means “vision,” from the root to see—mar’eh. Abraham’s vision is connected to the place he went at God’s command. In Midrash Tanhuma, the rabbinic authors see Moriah’s name origin in connection to Torah and teaching—Moreih, the place teaching comes out of, the place of instruction. Some claim that connection to the Hebrew root “or” the word for light. Just from the word itself, it is clear Moriah signifies many things: teaching, light in the world, vision, and a somewhat high mountain.

In Parashat Vayeira, we just read that Abraham received the command to go sacrifice Isaac at Moriah, a three-day journey from their home. For those who are unfamiliar, here’s a brief synopsis of the story: God puts our patriarch Abraham’s faith to the test by asking him to sacrifice his only son. His example is held up in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the ultimate example of faith and devotion to God. This

could be the most important moment for Moriah. The location of this sacrifice, the place where Abraham answered the call to be loyal without question, is noteworthy to be sure. Mount Moriah also provides a source for our shofar, a horn crafted from a horn of the ram like the ram Abraham actually sacrificed in Isaac's place. The Midrash teaches us another understanding of the sacrifice of Isaac and of the shofar. The story is told that Ha-Satan, the angel who serves as the Divine adversary and is generally a troublemaker, went and told Sara what happened at Mount Moriah. However, he left out the ending! Sara assumed that her son died on that mountain, and her wails and cries were heard for miles around. The echoes of her despair are heard in the blasts of the shofar's ancient cry.

A thousand years after Isaac's brush with divinely commanded death, King Solomon built the First Temple in Jerusalem. The historical record in Second Chronicles (3:1), found in Ketuvim or the Writings, specifically says that the building began on Mount Moriah. After no mention for generations, suddenly Mount Moriah reappears as a significant spiritual site. Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher and rabbi who we will study in our Adult Education class at temple this year, claims that the altar for the sacrifices of the Jewish people needed

to be built on the site where the purest sacrifice almost took place—the altar Abraham built on Moriah for his son. Only on Mount Moriah can it truly be a house of service. This logic does not exactly work! The tablets of the Ten Commandments were placed in the innermost sanctum of the Temple, the holiest spot in all of Judaism. If the law and the commandments were so important, why not build the Temple at Mount Sinai, the place where our covenant between God and Israel was sealed? The midrash teaches that Mount Moriah's supremacy lies in its connection to the sacrifice we mentioned earlier. Even though laws regulated the sacrifice and taught the Israelites how to prepare sacrifices for various occasions, the act of sacrifice itself created a paradigm for Jewish worship. Sacrifice should come from one's heart and soul; it should be spontaneous and full of passion. Law lies in the head, in the performing of repeated actions, in rules. Sacrifice requires us to give rather than to take or even to receive, as the Israelites received Torah at Mount Sinai.

In fact, a well-known folktale expands on this theme in an even deeper way. Nobody knows the original source for this story, and it appears it passed orally from teacher to student for generations, with the first written version found only in the 18th or 19th century. I will

share it with you now, not because it is simply a lovely story. This story resonates with every single audience I share it with, and I believe it truly speaks to the heart of our Jewish values.

There once were two brothers who lived in the land of Israel. One had a wife and children, the other did not. They lived on opposite sides of a hill in the middle of the land their father had left them. The brothers were happy, quiet, and satisfied with the portions that they inherited from their father. Together they worked the fields with the sweat of their brows.

And the harvest came. The brothers bound their sheaves and brought them to the threshing floor. There they divided the crops of the field in two parts equally between them, and left them.

That night, the brother who had no family lay upon his bed and thought: I am alone...but my brother has a wife and children. Why should my share be equal to his? And he rose from his bed, went stealthily out into the threshing floor, took a pile of wheat from the stalks of his own sheath, and added them to the sheath of his brother.

That same night, the other brother turned to his wife and said: "It is not right that we have divided the crop into two equal parts, one for me and one for my brother. He is alone and has no other joy or happiness, only the yield of the field. Therefore, come with me, my wife, and we will secretly take from

our share and add to his." And they did so.

In the morning the brothers went out into the threshing floor, and they each discovered that the sheaves were still in equal piles. Each one decided to himself to investigate. During the night, one brother before the other brother, rose from his bed to repeat his deed. This continued over the entire season of the harvest, with each brother wondering at their equal shares! One night, they rose at the same time and they met each other in the threshing floor, each with his sheaves in his arms. Thus the mystery was explained. The brothers embraced and kissed each other, overwhelmed at the love and selflessness between them.

God looked with favor on this threshing floor in land of Moriah where the two brothers conceived their good thoughts and intentions for one another...and the children of Israel chose it for the site of their holy Temple.

I am always moved by this story. Every time I tell or hear it, I can feel a shift in the energy of a room. The core values expressed in this story are ones we all aspire to uphold: family first, selfless love, rejoicing in the successes of others, sharing. The two brothers story may or may not be true, and is it found in some renowned rabbinic source. That does not

matter to me. What matters is that it teaches us about the importance of Moriah and our own lives.

So what does Mount Moriah mean exactly? What is the significance of its location in Jewish faith and history? I think the answer lies in the Hebrew word itself, but not in the way one would expect. Moriah- from m'oreih in Hebrew- is the place of instruction, of teaching. This is not just because of its connection to the Torah itself or the Temple. The events that occurred on Mount Moriah teach us how to create holy interactions between people and between people and God. One midrash even says that for this reason the dust that made up Adam, the first human, came from Moriah. These lessons are a part of us. From Abraham, we learn the struggles of a person of faith. Sacrifices will be required of us. We learn that when life tests us, the outcome all depends on how we respond to the challenge. We learn from Sarah about loss and grief. From Isaac, we learn about recovering from trauma, the dangers of following blindly, and acting in circumstances beyond our control. From King Solomon, we learn about the significance of a holy place. The Temple in Jerusalem held both the instructions of the law and a place for personal worship and sacrifice. Our relationship with God needs to come from a spontaneous, moved

heart. The rituals we perform should come from love. The two brothers teach us to appreciate the value of what we have. We learn the power of familial love and of choosing to put others needs first. We learn that a place where two brothers embrace in joy and generosity becomes a holy place.

As the new Jewish year begins today, I invite you to take the lessons of Moriah with you. It is customary at this time to begin the process of self-reflection or *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, accounting of the soul. When in the past year have we put lessons into action, learning into practice? What moments caused us to miss the mark, to make a meaningful ritual one of rote practice, or choosing to be selfish over sharing with others? We would do well to try to live up to the “torah” of Moriah. Moriah is not simply a name we need to memorize from the text. It is a symbol of all that we as Jews must remember to uphold. The value of sacrifice, the power of Divine encounters, the importance of love, and a sense of obligation in the world. Let the new year be a one of learning and teaching the lessons of Moriah for all of us. We can climb Mount Moriah, ascending to a new understanding of what we hold dear and how we should act in the world.

Shanah tovah