

Shana Tova,

When Rabbi Maltzman emailed me to ask if I would introduce the parsha on the second day of Rosh Hashana a couple of thoughts came to mind. My first thought was, "Is it halachically acceptable to say no to your rabbi when he asks you to do a favor on one of the holiest days of the year?" I didn't think so.

My second thought was "He must know that I usually don't go to shul on the second day of Rosh Hashana, so this is his way of getting me here." Very clever, Rabbi.

Well, I am here **AND** I am introducing the parasha, so hopefully this means that I will get two gold stars in the **great sticker book of life.**

Today we read The Akedah, or Binding, of Isaac, which is among the most unforgettable and visually compelling stories in the bible. Abraham, commanded by God, wakes up early in the morning and takes his son, Isaac, to the top of Mt. Moriah with the intention of sacrificing him on the altar to show his devotion to the Lord. As the story opens, he packs up his donkeys, his son, his two male helpers, the various items he will need to do the deed and he gets underway.

As a girl, this parasha always interested me because of its pathos and suspense. I was not really so much concerned with the fact that the boy, Isaac, was tied up on the altar and ready to be slain by his father; after all, I had an annoying younger brother, so the thought of a boy tied up with rope was somewhat ... palatable.

Instead, I was intrigued by the ram. I could visualize the poor animal struggling in the bush, its horns caught fast by the thick, prickly briars surrounding the makeshift altar. I could hear the animal bleating in terror, the frantic thrashing of its hooves rustling the dry undergrowth and cracking against the rocky surface of the hilltop. I felt sorry for the ram and understood that perhaps there was a lesson to be learned about empathy towards our fellow creatures.

Now, when I read the story, I read it with a woman's eye. A mother's eye. I still feel sorry for the ram, but I discern a deeper meaning in its plight. In the parasha we read yesterday, Sarah is a compelling and vibrant main character; she gives birth to Isaac after laughing at God, she is joyous, proud and just slightly boastful about her and Abraham's geriatric miracle baby, and during Isaac's baby naming she commands Abraham to drive out her handmaid Hagar and her son, Ishmael, into the wilderness. In contrast, today's parasha offers no mention of Sarah. Or does it? I think it does, and powerfully.

I imagine the dawn breaking somewhere in Haran. Sarah is in her tent and there is just beginning to be a faint glow at the bottom of the opening flap where the sheepskin hangs just above the dusty earth. The corners of the tent are still thick with darkness, but Sarah begins to stir. She opens her eyes. It is quiet. Too quiet, she thinks, as she sits up among the pelts made warm by her body. Morning usually brings the lilt and lightness of Isaac's voice mingled with the deep timbre of her husband's as they prepare for the day. Where is the sound of her beloved child? She listens. There is an unnatural stillness that raises the hairs on the back of her neck. A slow but steady tightening begins in her chest, a tightening that becomes an intense burning exploding upwards into her neck, her head.

Her face, her hair feel like they are on fire. Her body pitches forward and she is gone, flying, soaring over field, rocks, and up the mountain searching with her eyes, frantically, for her beautiful boy. And then, after what seems like an eternity, she sees him bound and unmoving, Abraham standing over him, pale and shaking, a glint of metal in his hand; but she can't reach Isaac. She is caught, held fast by something. She struggles and screams in terror as she holds her hands out to him but Abraham does not see. "Take me. Take me, instead" she cries out to Abraham.

I see in the ram's story, Sarah's story. I see her guilt over separating Ishmael and Hagar from their family. I feel her sense of betrayal as she understands what Abraham means to do. And I feel her agony as she is unable to protect her child. Perhaps it is her soul that becomes ensnared and ultimately sacrificed in the desire to secure life and happiness for her son. The vision of Sarah's tortured soul embodied by the doomed ram tears me apart and lends a poignancy to the portion that I only appreciate now. I wonder too if perhaps the entire episode is a terrifying nightmare brought about by Sarah's intense and contradicting emotions; love, jealousy, anger, remorse, delight and anguish.

In the next portion, we read that Sarah dies, and though it is many years after the attempted sacrifice, we hear nothing more of Sarah's vibrant and joyous character. So I wonder, did the terrible incident of the akedah diminish her very being? Does she, in a sense, cease to be – her soul ultimately extinguished on the top of Mt. Moriah?