

## "Growing Up"

Sometimes I feel like a resident of Chelm, the city in eastern Poland near the border with Ukraine. The world around me challenges the rational and natural course of life, of the way we think, of the way we make sense of the world around us. And I end up feeling like I am a child again, living in a world of fantasy. Somehow the city of Chelm became more than a place, it became a group of people, a group of naïve individuals for whom reality is a world of folklore and comedy, and colossal misunderstandings. A world that feels something like the fantastic world of the childhood mind.

You may have heard one of the stories of Chelm, the story of Feyvush the Jew from Chelm who travels to the big city, to Warsaw. When he goes to shul in Warsaw he stands with a group of fellow Jews listening to the shammes pose a riddle, "Who is the son of my father but not my brother?" The room is silent. No one answers. The shammes says, "It's me!" Feyvush later returns to Chelm and when he enters the shul there he gathers his lantsman together and asks them the riddle, "Who is the son of my father but not my brother?" The Chelmites cannot answer, and so Feyvush proudly answers the riddle for them, "It's the shammes in Warsaw!"

It seems sweet to live in a world in which the wrong answer, the innocent misdirection, is sufficient, a world in which the stakes are lower. When we were younger, it was all right to live in a world apart, for our minds to be taken up in, Terabithia, the Wonderful World of Oz, the magical world of Harry Potter, or Super Mario Land...

And then at some point, early for some and later for others, like Dorothy at the end of the Wizard of Oz, we "woke up"—although the imaginary residents of Chelm will likely remain in their own world forever.

But we developed enough self-awareness to notice that we were wearing one black sock and one blue, though we still sometimes make this mistake. We developed enough self-awareness to make appointments and study for exams, to have more serious dialogues and share what we are thinking, to take responsibility for others and ourselves. And throughout our lives we continue to develop this self-awareness that comes along with more complex thinking and additional responsibilities that we have.

Coming to this point is not easy. Sometimes even after we can think more clearly about ourselves and our place in the world we can lapse back into the comfortable rhythms of routine, into the sense that life is predictable and so is the way the world works,

to the point that when something new or different comes along it is a shock to our system and we cannot adjust, having retreated back in to a more child like world in which things go according to a simple plan. I used to have this feeling in college or Seminary when a class was canceled. Despite my surprise free time, it felt strange that I had the freedom to use the next hour and a half for myself.

When we think about the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, the central story of today's reading from the Torah, we often focus on Abraham. The chapter we read (past tense) this morning begins after all with the words Ve'ha'elokeem nisah et Avraham, God tested Abraham. Traditionally, he is the focus. Last year I challenged us to see the story from the perspective of the ram caught in the thicket, and this year I would like to look at the story through the eyes of Isaac.

There is a tradition that Isaac was 37 years old at the time of the binding, but I'd like to begin with the understanding that he was an adolescent. He was in the primetime of beginning to become his own person, beginning to struggle in the boundary between the world of childhood and the self-aware and responsibility-laden world of adulthood. Isaac appears to be old enough to help carry the wood as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner suggests, but young enough to still want to please his father. Also, notice that Isaac, like any good teenager, does not hesitate to ask his father about what's going on. And he had to be light enough that Abraham could pick him up and put him on the altar. This view is supported by the Midrash (Brabbah 56:8) in which Isaac states that he is a "bachur" a young man, older than a small child, an adolescent.

The story of the Binding of Isaac can help us to see life as a progression, from the fantastic world of the childhood mind, through a time of awakening and self-awareness into adulthood. The story can help us to then make sense of how we navigate through our adult lives when we often find ourselves lapsing back into an earlier mindset.

All the elements of this story transform into powerful symbols of life and the road toward personal growth when we view it through the lens of growing up, through the lens of the difficult transition that we make from childhood to adulthood. Isaac represents the childhood mentality on the border of adolescence and adulthood and the struggle of forging our own identities. Isaac is bound, not by straps or ropes, he is bound to his old self and fearful of what lies ahead. Abraham represents the adult world that his son is preparing to enter. The altar, the mizbe'ach, represents the transition between the world of childhood and the world of adulthood. The knife on the altar is no longer a weapon but a

means to an end. The love of Abraham for his son makes it clear that although the Torah states Abraham raised the knife to take his son's life, that perception could only have been the perspective of the storyteller looking on.

Abraham according to our new viewpoint could only have raised the knife for one reason, to cut the same bonds that he placed on his son's hands and body. These bonds of attachment that he must sever in order to allow his son to grow up. Abraham cuts him loose, and cuts him free, allowing him to fly away into becoming his own person.

And when we consider that most of our classical thinkers explained that God tested Abraham only for him to demonstrate his righteousness, we can take this more benevolent view of Abraham. Few thinkers expected that Abraham would have been prepared to actually sacrifice his son. Our approach to this story, thinking about it as a passageway toward maturity, allows us to see that Abraham was a parent who like most is somewhat reluctant to allow Isaac to grow up and on the other hand knows that he must allow him to grow up, to become more independent, to take responsibility for his own life. Abraham knows he cannot teach Isaac everything he needs to know.

God tells Abraham that Abraham does not need to do anything to his son who is there on the cusp of adulthood. God has created this unique moment to give Abraham the opportunity to begin to let go. We know this because the Torah says nothing about Abraham untying his son, and so it is natural to imagine that the only possible use of the knife was to cut the bonds that he created and then to offer the ram as the sacrifice. And these bonds, though tight, were the bonds of love that held parent and child together, bonds that sometimes feel restrictive and sometimes do feel comforting, bonds that nonetheless had to be cut for Isaac to continue to grow. But Abraham is not severing the bonds of love with his son. We know that God tells him to take to Mount Moriah a son whom he loves. He is cutting the bonds that hold Isaac back, and allowing him to be out there in a world that is not as safe and sheltered as life in the tents of his parents.

And a curious feature of the story suggests that Abraham did cut him free in a physical way as much as in an emotional way, Isaac took on the responsibility that maturity requires by choosing a new path in life that would allow him to grow as an individual (pause) he went off to school. Many of our college students are with us this morning and we welcome you home for the holidays. You know how the change from high school to college is a big change for you, and for your families as well.

The commentator Chizkuni notices toward the end of this episode that after God gives Abraham a blessing, the Torah tells us, "Vayashov Avraham el ne'arav..." Abraham returned to his servants. Vayashov, Abraham returned, but where was Isaac? Chizkuni brings a teaching from the Midrash that Isaac went to study Torah at the academy of Shem, one of the ancestors of Abraham.

And so we can see that even within the traditional understanding of our portion, that Isaac was ready after this difficult moment to seize the day and begin the next portion of his life.

This moment though was bittersweet. Transitional moments in our lives, even positive ones, can be difficult and can be moments of loss. And we know that adolescents and parents come into conflict, conflict that comes from the young person's desire to establish himself or herself and the parents' responsibility to continue to care for the child. A conflict of this type happens between Abraham and his son, as we see that the Torah records no conversation between Abraham and his son after this episode.

Perhaps this silence reflects the way that children and parents sometimes cannot communicate with one another. We know that sometimes we talk past our parents and they talk past us, or we find ourselves not listening to friends or co-workers, or talking past them. Perhaps we do not even listen to bat kol, the small divine voice inside us that acts as our conscience. And in this way we allow ourselves to drift back into childhood or teenager land, worlds like Chelm in which awareness and responsibility seem to not exist or are less important.

This year let us commit ourselves to living in the spirit of Isaac. Let us commit ourselves to taking the opportunity to continue to grow as individuals, to maintain and extend our self-awareness and responsibility for our actions, to be cognizant of our connection with those around us. It does feel easier when we lapse into another world, when it seems that things are all right or that problems will be resolved on their own, but it denies that people need our help in this world. It is no fantasy that there is domestic violence and child abuse in our communities across the country, and it is very real that our young people use and sometimes abuse alcohol and drugs. We cannot overlook the fact that there are thousands upon thousands of refugees who flee each year from violence in different parts of the world, people who need care and support. We cannot today name nor pledge to tackle all the problems that face us or the world, but one of the messages of Rosh Hashanah is that we are responsible for our actions. We are responsible for how we

behave both when it is easy to do the right thing and when it is not easy to do the right thing.

Living in the spirit of Isaac means constantly reminding ourselves that we must bear responsibility for our actions, for our decisions, for what we say; even when what we do, what we decide, and what we say hurts someone else. We are human beings, and often when we act even with good intentions we end up causing hurt. And we must also bear responsibility for when we do not act, when we choose to avoid making a decision, and for when we do not speak up.

Rosh Hashanah is a special time in our lives, a holy time in the Jewish calendar, a defining moment in our relationship with God and with other people each year. In a way it has all the trappings of the innocent and magical worlds of our childhood fantasy and way of thinking. Round challahs and honey, the sounds of the shofar, the smells of the holiday kitchen, special clothing and the mystery of prayer, music, and introspection. It is a world unto itself.

(slow) But the Binding of Isaac, The Akedah, and Isaac's role in it, when we view the story as a story of growing up, a story of looking at the world through a more mature lens, it is a story that helps to balance the magic of this time with the reminder that when these holidays pass, when we become wrapped up in our routines as much as we were once wrapped up in Middle Earth, or the Land of Oz. We still must carry the message and meaning of this day with us.

And at the same time, I would be remiss if I did not encourage us to never forget the innocence of the stories and worlds of youth. These things can comfort us and remind us of sweetness in the world that we may have forgotten, like the Castle on a cloud that Cosette describes in her song in *Les Miserables*. We certainly must stay firmly grounded in this world, as we find the strength within ourselves to make this world a place in which we can find trust, in which we can expect responsibility, and both seek and grant forgiveness.

And while we search for a firm grounding for our feet, we can still be like the people of Chelm who built their synagogue without a roof so that their prayers can reach up to heaven.

Shana Tovah u'metukah...