

Rosh Hashannah Derasha (Sermon)

5767 (2006) Day 2

"The Two Walked Together"

Sunday September 24, 2006

The story of the Binding of Isaac is one of the most fascinating stories there is. It leaves us with so many questions. One of those questions is exactly what Isaac thought. Did he know what was happening? Did he have suspicions? The Torah tells us that as they went towards the mountain where Isaac was to be sacrificed, Abraham had Isaac carry the firewood, while Abraham carried the knife and the fire. The Torah tells us, "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹ," *the two walked together* (Gen. 22:6). But then, Isaac got to thinking, and began to put two and two together:

"Wood . . . check. Fire . . . check. Animal Hmm. No animal. That doesn't make sense. Up on the mountain, there's probably some brush, so we don't really need the wood. But dad brought the wood, and even asked me to carry it. Fire, well, dad can rub two sticks together with the best of them. But dad brought the fire. Up on the mountain, there probably aren't any animals suitable for sacrifice. But, dad did bother with bringing an animal. And so, Isaac did what most children do. He asked his father:

"Father?"

"הֲנִנִּי בְנִי" (hinneni, veni) here I am, my son.

"Here are the fire and wood, but where is the sheep for the sacrifice?" (22:7)

"And Abraham answered, 'the Lord will show us the sheep for sacrificing, my Son.'" (22:8)

Was Isaac convinced? Did he believe his father - did he believe that his father expected to find an animal for sacrifice later? Or did his suspicions remain (see e.g. Rashi on 8:22 saying that Isaac knew he was headed to the slaughter)? We don't know. The Bible, perhaps deliberately, does not tell us. But what the Bible does tell us, is that the the journey continued on just as it had begun. For a second time, we are told, "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹ," *the two walked together* (Gen. 22:8).

There are many lessons to be learned from the story of the binding of Isaac. One of the most important is highlighted in the phrase "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹ," *the two walked together*. This phrase teaches us how important it is for parents to share religious experiences with their children. It also teaches how much influence a parent has on on a child. Isaac may or may not have known what was going to happen. But he trusted his father, and so, *the two walked together*.

There are those who would say that a parent's influence is a thing of the past. But study after study proves otherwise, demonstrating that parents have a lot of influence on the most important issues, such as drugs, sex, smoking, etc. Children do listen to what their parents say, and watch what their parents do. And that example becomes vital in how children make the decisions they make, and how they become the people that they become.

The lesson of "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹ" is resoundingly true in the area of a child's religious upbringing. And so, like Abraham, we have a responsibility to match our children's religious development with our own growth in Judaism. Now the good news is that we, unlike Abraham, do not need to be willing to sacrifice our children. If anything, what we need to do is make some sacrifices on behalf of our children. Raising a child to participate in Judaism is a choice that we

should make not only out of a sense of religious obligation, but also out of concern for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of our children. A couple of studies will demonstrate what we already know:

- A UCLA study showed that college students who didn't participate in religious activities such as study of sacred texts or attending religious services were twice as likely to suffer from poor mental health or depression as the students who did participate in religious activities --They're also more likely to feel overwhelmed by the demands of college life--And they're twice as likely to start drinking.

(Source: http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-10-26-spirituality-study_x.htm)

- A Columbia University study found that adults and teens who consider religion very important and who attend religious services weekly or more are far less likely to smoke, drink or use illicit drugs.

(Source: <http://www.stnews.org/Research-1959.htm>, referencing "So Help Me God: Substance Abuse, Religion and Spirituality," a report published by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University).

Now, I don't mean to say that we should practice religion simply to keep ourselves off drugs and to protect ourselves from mental breakdown. Judaism also gives us a sense of responsibility to others - a dedication to charity and justice. And religion is certainly no panacea either. There unfortunately is a drug problem, for instance, in Jewish day schools and yeshivas. However, the data indicates that religion does serve an important role in a person's wellbeing. The Rabbis told us that the purpose of Torah and Mitzvot (commandments) is לצרף בהם את הבריות - to refine humanity with them (Genesis Rabbah 44:1). These studies demonstrate that religion can indeed do that job. And so, we must walk a spiritual journey with our children not in order to sacrifice them, but in order to uplift them.

One of the most fascinating questions I get as a Rabbi is whether it is better to be a good Jew, or a good person. The question always strikes me as off the mark. First, it presumes that there is such a thing as a good Jew who is not a good person - a notion which I resoundingly reject. It suggests a dichotomy between those two personas, rather than a symbiosis. Have you ever asked if it is more important to be a good person or to be a good athlete? Of course not. So, why do parents look to involve their children in athletics? They do so, I believe, because they believe some of the life lessons that the child learns in athletics - sportsmanship, commitment, discipline, and so on - will help the child grow into a well rounded person. Judaism does this and more. Being a good Jew is a program for being a good person. Studies that show that religious activity tends to affect behavior demonstrate this point.

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׂגִימָם יחדיו says the Bible - make religious development a family effort. That's what it has to be, in order for it to work. If you want your children to value their Jewish identity, then you must do the same. Children don't learn a religious lesson, or any lesson for that matter by osmosis. They learn it by example. And so, for our own good, and for the good of our next generations, we must strive to live more active Jewish lives. We must demonstrate to our children by our actions that Judaism is important to us. There are some who say that they feel Jewish in their hearts. I celebrate that feeling. It is both wonderful and important that Judaism be at the core of our identity. But in order for that to translate to our children, our actions must match our feelings. "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׂגִימָם יחדיו" - if we don't walk on that path, how can you expect our children to follow?

Sometimes, of course, our children disappoint us. Unfortunately, I speak to some people who share with me their disappointment in a religious choice made by their children. "What should I do," they ask. There's an acute feeling of helplessness. What's done is done. But that doesn't mean that there is nothing to do. The answer is the same as always - וַיִּלְכוּ שְׂגִיחֵם יחדו - find more of a role for Judaism in your life. What's done is done, but what we do from now on - that is what is in your hand. Demonstrate to your children that Judaism is important to you not only in determining how you think, but how you act. Make Shabbat dinner and invite your family. Come to shul, and bring your children and grandchildren along. Choose Judaism. Walk more in the Jewish ways. Show your children and your grandchildren that being Jewish is a priority in your life. It is only then that we can truly hope that our children will follow.

וַיִּלְכוּ שְׂגִיחֵם יחדו also tells of the importance of change and growth. Abraham and Isaac may not have been traveling at light speed, but they were both moving. In order for our Judaism to be meaningful, it must be a religion of growth. That means that we must constantly challenge ourselves to do more. This means that even if you think you are doing "enough Judaism," you still need to grow and change. That is one of the most important parts of a religious experience. We want our children to grow, develop, and change. That means that our lives must grow, develop, and change.

I am reminded of an old television commercial which showed a football coach yelling at his players during halftime. "Can anyone block their linebacker?" "Our downfield coverage stinks," etc. etc. He goes on for a while, and then falls silent. One of his players says to him "but Coach, aren't we up 21 to nothing." "That's exactly my point," said the coach. "That's exactly my point. The moment you are satisfied as a football player, we are through as a football team."

Similarly, the moment one is satisfied with one's religious practice, then the genuine religious experience is lost. In order to truly experience Judaism, we must develop within that Judaism. That may mean that for the moment we need to change from going to synagogue once a year to making it once a month. It may mean changing from never studying Torah to attending once a week the Rabbi's Wednesday evening class which he is shamelessly plugging in this very sentence. It may mean going from someone who keeps kosher and observes the Sabbath to becoming a person who makes it to morning minyan every day. There is always room for growth. I'm not asking anyone to run - no one can go from 0 to Moses in 5.3 seconds. But this year, you can go from you to a better you. This, we hope, will make you a better person, and make you a model for your children and grandchildren.

When God called to Abraham for the first time, God said "לֶךְ לְךָ" (lech lecha) (Genesis 12:1) which literally translated means "go for yourself." Rashi explains these words as meaning "go for your own good and your own betterment." Later God tells Abraham that by following God, Abraham would be blessed and his name would be made great (Gen. 12:2). God also told Abraham that he would be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:3, translated loosely). Like Abraham, we must heed the words לֶךְ לְךָ, growing and cultivating our Jewish experience for our own good. Like Abraham, we must learn the lesson of וַיִּלְכוּ שְׂגִיחֵם יחדו - modeling for our children and grandchildren a life that is committed to Judaism. Unlike Abraham, we are not asked to sacrifice our children. Instead, we are asked to lead them in a religion that will uplift their spirits, build their character, and help give them a life of personal blessing, and a life that is a blessing to others. This is, and always has been the will of God. This year, may it become our will as well. And let us say, Amen.

