

Devar Torah (Sermon) for Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 2004
9/17/04

Note: This *Devar Torah* to some extent follows on a theme from the *Devar Torah* on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 9/16/04. Note also that the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah concerns the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22).

Would you do it? Could you do it? If God came to you and said, "I want you to take your son, your only son, the one you love, and bring him as a sacrifice." Would you? Could you? . . .

Well, fortunately, I don't think you have to worry. You see, God doesn't ask the impossible. The story of the binding of Isaac begins with the explanation "וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם, *and God tested Abraham.*" Now, like all tests, we can presume that as tester, God knew that there was the potential for Abraham to succeed, whatever that success may entail.

There is another point that comes out of the story of Abraham - that although God does not ask for the impossible, God does ask the possible. For Abraham, the possibilities stretched the bounds of imagination. That isn't always the case.

A rabbinic legend (Vayikra Rabba Ch. 3), tells the story of one poor woman who brought a small handful of flour to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The priest on duty was unimpressed by this act. *מה בזה לאכל מה בזה להקריב*, he asked. *What is there in this to eat? What is there in this to sacrifice?* After all, the Temple was showered with gifts of fine flour, pristine animals, and precious utensils. What was the point of this poor woman bringing but a handful of flour. That night, the priest was told in a dream *אל תבזה עליה כאילו נפשה הקריבה* "*do not ridicule her, it is as if she sacrifices her own life.*" This priest lacked perspective. Yes, the quantity of her gift was almost negligible. But this woman . . . this poor woman . . . contributing to the Temple from her meager rations. It was as if she had sacrificed her own life.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, each one of us realizes that when it comes to the service of the Almighty, we are all like the poor person in this story. In a few minutes, our *chazan* (cantor) will begin the *musaf* service with the words *הנני העני ממעט* - *here I am, the poor of deed.*" I think we all feel the same way. We, too, say *אבינו מלכנו חננו ועננו כי אין בנו מעשים* (*avinu malkenu chonenu va'anenu ki ayn banu ma'asim*) *Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, because we haven't the deeds.*" We all are poor of deed. So, how can we, the poor of deed, make it through the next year?

We have a lot to learn about our next year from the poor woman bringing that handful of flour. Had that woman thought like the priest, she would never have set foot in the Holy Temple. She would not have brought a sacrifice. So too, we might think that since we are poor of deed, any *mitzvah* we do might, God forbid, be a waste. But no, says God. Every action, every small contribution, when done with sincerity is viewed by God as a personal sacrifice.

We spoke yesterday about the divine qualities of *צדק* (*tsedek*), *justice* and *חסד* (*chesed*), *mercy*. We talked about how important it is to judge each individual based on that person's history and life experiences. As we engage in *תשובה* (*teshuvah*), repentance, we should do the same towards ourselves. Each one of us has our own set of experiences. Life has blessed us with different experiences, different education, different history. As we set goals for ourselves over the next year, we should be sure to take good account of ourselves. Just as God would only us to do the possible, we should only ask of ourselves what is possible. But like the poor woman

bringing the handful of fine flour, we should always strive to do everything that is possible.

Have you ever looked at someone that you really admire - a hero - and said, "I would love to be exactly like that person."? I would love to accomplish all that person has. I wish I were as "religious" as that person. Well, is that fair? Is it fair for you to ask yourself to emulate someone else?

I think this is the wisdom of the old TV commercial for the US Army. "Be all that you can be." There, the Army is saying it straight out: When you come to the Army, we don't ask you to be General McArthur. It doesn't matter if you end up with stars on your sleeves. Just be all that you can be.

The story is told about Zusia, a chassidic master of the 19th century. One day, Zusia met with his followers, who saw that his eyes were filled with tears, and his face was pained with fear. His pupils looked at him and asked in a panic: "What's wrong? What is the Problem?" Zusia explained that he had just had a vision about what the angels would one day ask him about his life.

- "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

- "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"

- "So, what will they ask you?"

"And I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

- "But what will they ask you?"

- "They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"

Rabbi Zusia understood. God didn't want him to be the greatest man in history. Nor the most pious man in history. God didn't necessarily want Zusia to take his people out of slavery, nor lead them to the promised land. For powers beyond Zusia's control might have prevented Zusia from doing those things. God simply wanted Zusia to be the best Zusia possible.

As we look forward to the coming year, and pray for a year of spiritual growth, each one of us should ask the question: "How could I be a better me." There may be things that prevent us from doing everything we would like to do. But no power on heaven or earth can prevent us from being all that we can be.

Many of us, as we enter a new year, make resolutions. We resolve to do better. To pray more often, to do more *mitsvot*. As well we should. But how many of our resolutions fall by the wayside? I think many times that happens because we set goals that aren't realistic. We forget to ask ourselves for the possible, and instead ask of ourselves the impossible. And the truth is, asking yourself to do too much is a sure fire way to make sure that you do nothing at all. Because once we realize that we will not be living up to our hopes, we are riddled with disappointment, and then, we simply give up. So, I ask you all to look at the example of God testing Abraham. As God only asked of Abraham what is possible, only ask yourselves what is possible.

So, what is possible for you? What could you do? Could you join us for services here just one more time next year? Could you join us for a study class? Perhaps you can set aside Friday nights as a family dinner in celebration of *Shabbat*? Maybe you could read the words of

Shema every morning when you wake up and every night before you go to sleep. Maybe eat one more kosher meal.

Some people pray every year on Rosh Hashanah for a year "beyond our wildest imagination." I don't. I pray for a year of possibilities being realized. May we all be blessed with the insight to understand what each one of us is capable of achieving. May God bless us with the strength and resolve to follow God's path, and to accomplish all that is within our reach.