

Rabbi's Column

This is the Rabbi's Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Shanah Tovah!

Having one day of Rosh HaShanah presents us with Torah Reading options.

We can follow an American Reform practice of reading about the binding of Isaac (which is not what I chose to read this year). We can decide to read about the birth of Isaac, which is what many communities worldwide are reading, and what we read earlier. We could alternate between these two readings. Of course, just to flesh out all the possibilities, we could choose option number four – but I did not want anyone to think that I had not considered it at all.

A brief review of all the texts mentioned today is probably in order: We have Isaac being born, Hagar and Ishmael being kicked out of the household, and we have some local leaders verifying their desire for peaceful coexistence on the First Day of Rosh HaShanah.

Isaac goes with Abraham to a mountain where something will be sacrificed. Once we know that sacrificial object is a ram and not Isaac, then Abraham gets some gossip news from the Old Country.

The selected prophetic portions joined to these Torah readings concern the birth of Samuel on one day and the rejoining of the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel on the other. You will notice that there is nothing mentioned concerning Rosh HaShanah in either the Torah Reading or prophetic selections. I will bring this point up again.

Part of today's talk will review some suggested reasons these sections were picked in the first place. I will also mention some of the hot button issues these readings bring up. I will not go into details concerning the hot button issues, since if one of those is yours (as one of those is mine), then you really do not need any further attention paid to it.

My teacher, Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz (not to be confused with his brother, also Rabbi Zlotowitz, who started ArtScroll) stated that using these particular sections was an attempt to one-up Christianity's formative stories. We have an elderly Abraham and Sarah giving birth which definitely seems quite miraculous. We have Isaac. According to one tradition Isaac was indeed slain by Abraham and resurrected by the angels. Isaac then proceeded to get married and have children, which seems a bit different than some other resurrections.

A traditional conceit which connects the day with the reading is to imagine that the appointed time spoken of by the messengers who visited Abraham after his circumcision was Rosh HaShanah, and the connection between the ram used in place of Isaac and the shofar blown on Rosh HaShanah is fairly obvious.

From Tisha B'Av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temples, though Rosh HaShanah, there are assigned Haftarot of consolation which were not picked based on anything from the Torah reading itself, unlike the way things work during the rest of the year. So on Rosh HaShanah itself, the Torah portion that deals with childbirth connects with a prophetic section that also deals with childbirth; the Torah portion in which Abraham finds out a bit about what is happening with the folks back home connects with a prophetic section about reconnecting people.

Some of you might be either young enough or fortunate enough to not know how powerfully Torah texts can bring up other issues. In one of the retreats my seminary held, one session leader held a meditative session to help cantors and others focus on making the Torah environment real. Others with more meditative experience than I had had at that time kept their eyes open to stay grounded. I did not, and the leader evidently used meditation simply as a means to improve his singing, and had therefore seems never to have had an intense experience during meditation. He certainly did absolutely nothing about re-grounding after the experience. I had heard Ishmael crying, and identified quite strongly with the abandoned child. It took me a day or two to remember who I actually was.

The words of Torah are powerful.

Without thinking too much about it, within these two days of readings the following issues can be brought up for an individual: infertility, abandonment, abuse in general, (with several specific examples), distance from family, neighborhood disagreements (with neighborhood very loosely defined), God's impossible requests, and there are probably a few others. Even if we are no longer in the place on the grief continuum that everything around us reminds us about our particular issue, thinking about what the text says can bring us back to a time when grief or powerlessness overwhelmed us. This effect is increased if the secular or Hebrew date is near an anniversary date. Anniversary dates, by the way, are moments when our bodies and psyches remind us that they remember when things happened in the past, even when we try to move on from that particular event.

There are issues that I try to avoid covering in depth, as I have my own triggers.

So, I look forward to hearing your thoughts about what we might do next year for the Torah Reading and Prophetic portion on Rosh Hashanah. In addition to your thoughts on that subject, I also continue to extend my invitation for original poetry relevant to the High Holidays, designed to be recited during part of the service.