

Words of accountability, words of vulnerability

In a reversal of tradition at least where Torah readings are concerned, today's Torah portion is Genesis 22 known as the Akedah or the binding of Isaac. It is a truly horrible story in which Abraham is told by the biblical god to sacrifice his son, to make of him a burnt offering, and in which Abraham acquiesces in the demand. Only at the last minute is a reprieve granted because Abraham has shown his complete and utter faith in that god by his willingness to even consider doing that. Significantly, when Abraham is told of the task, he is silent, muted if you will. Not a single question nor an objection; no negotiating, cajoling or even shaming the biblical god about the audacity of the demand. The story has been treated by our tradition as a statement of complete faith in the biblical god, but it begs the question of why faith would be put in such a character who requires filicide as its precondition. What happened to the Abraham of four chapters earlier, the one we spoke about last week, the one who protested the destruction of an entire city for the sake of ten righteous people unknown to him? Does this not merit the same kind of indignation or an even more vociferous one, at the vulgarity of the request? We read Genesis 22 and wait for him, but he never shows up. This is a story of shrinking and shirking from the responsibility owed to one's child, let alone to a basic sense of decency and humanity. It is a story of losing one's voice when it matters most, when the consequences can be deadly, and if not that, then a

relationship irreparably ruptured. Even after the sacrifice is thwarted, no words of remorse are ever uttered by Abraham. Once again quoting Dr. King, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter most.” The importance of the issue should be reflected in the volume of our voice, in equal measure not in inverse proportion.

Genesis 18 and 22 show us a single character who is a paradigm of polarities, those opposites that reside in each of us, and are observable in the world at large, in order to create a whole. Polarities can be easily understood because the world does not exist as all or nothing. They allow for that liminal space in which we generally live our lives, full of nuance and gray areas. But it is in embracing the polarities that we come whole, living not solely in light nor in its shadow. Like each of us, Abraham is, as the saying goes, full of contradictions. He is a voice for the voiceless and yet voiceless himself. He is the one who challenges the biblical god and yet cowers before him. He is out loud but then silent; protestor turned appeaser. He is worthy of admiration and yet later of condemnation. Our view of Abraham clearly is related to which part of the narrative on which we focus, and as significantly, whether we see any part of ourselves reflected in any part of him, whether we aspire to follow his example or are so repelled as to avoid it.

Today we seek to understand why there are some words that seem so hard to find and even harder to say. We discover ourselves tongue-tied, searching our

mental lexicon for the appropriate vocabulary to verbalize. We may stammer or stutter, utter half-sentences only to try again. No matter the degree of difficulty, though, silence cannot be our default. This is especially true when the intended audience are those with whom we are relational - immediate family, extended family and friends. Silence is its own form of cruelty. Words may sting in their imprecision but at least they offer the possibility of a dialogue, the starting point for a conversation.

Yom Kippur reminds us of at least some of the hard to say words as they repeatedly find their way into our service where we say them out loud, in the presence of others, in our communal setting. With the support of others, we can more easily speak of both the asking for and the granting of forgiveness. But these words are more difficult to say in private moments, one on one, to those who are the significant players in our lives. Phrases such as I'm sorry, forgive me, I was wrong, or I'll make amends, get caught in our throats. They are often hard to articulate, whether mumbled or fully spoken. Perfectly ordinary words in either situation but they all share one characteristic – they are words of accountability. That is where their power lies. Such words force us to be accountable for our actions; they inevitably acknowledge our imperfections and shortcomings. We are uncomfortable at their utterance because they necessarily reflect our failures and how those failures may have impacted others. Words of accountability also

demonstrate polarities: success and failure; comfort and discomfort; self and other. Words of accountability reflect our humanity. Despite whatever we may hope or believe about ourselves, not one of us is perfect. Indeed perfection is an unreasonable goal, and trying to achieve it is a fool's errand. We are better served by the effort of self-improvement and self-actualization because that effort is ongoing and constant. It gives us the space to grow and discern new undiscovered aspects of ourselves. These words are the mirrors of our true selves that often reflect an image that is dissonant with our self-perceptions. Words of accountability are often past facing, but they do not require being mired there, nor to relive it in an endless loop. Instead, we look to the past to plot the future. Actions have already been taken and we are left with the fallout. The adage that hindsight is said to be 20/20 demonstrates that only in retrospect can we see what may have gone wrong, what impact our words had whether intentional or not. Words of accountability require acceptance of self, honest assessment and healing with others. Only then might they be easier to say.

Another category of words that can be difficult to express is that of vulnerability. If words of accountability are connected to our behavior mostly toward others, words of vulnerability are connected to our innermost selves, the place where fears reside. They are words that often risk rejection or that may fail to get reciprocation. They show the risk we are taking by exposing ourselves to

another. I love you; I need you; you are important to me are all words of vulnerability. But paradoxically and at the same time, they are words of strength and courage because they allow us to open ourselves to the potential of both being embraced and being turned away as we seek to interact and connect at the most fundamental level with someone else. Either way these words of vulnerability require that we overcome our fears.

Words of vulnerability are forward facing; they are an invitation to involve others in our lives. They can never be worn out or overused. Repeatedly expressing our love for another can never be wearisome. While we can be so stingy with our words, there is no merit in that. It is a fruitless warehousing of verbal resources that are best when used. Freely giving heartfelt compliments or words of encouragement will never become tiresome as long as they are genuine.

Yet these are not the only kinds of words of vulnerability, words that can often be difficult to say. Expressions of condolence are words of vulnerability because they reach down to our deepest fear and force us to confront our own mortality. We are not prayerful people so offering to keep people in our prayers may ring hollow but saying to someone grieving or facing serious illness that we will keep them in our thoughts is extremely meaningful to them. Consider those times in your own lives when such words have been said to you to be all the evidence you need. Then there are the times when there truly are no words, when

complete inarticulation is itself a silent word of vulnerability. When the shocking and horrific occurs, we do not know what to say because we realize in that moment of learning, in that situation, it could all too easily have been us. A deeper fear and exposure to vulnerability is revealed.

Vulnerability leaves us uncomfortable and out of control; admitting this truth to ourselves is never easy. But expanding our vocabulary to include words of vulnerability renders us whole. Starting from a place of vulnerability, all else follows. We allow ourselves to be completed by another even as we complete ourselves. The root of the Hebrew word for peace is the same as the Hebrew word for completion, shin, lamed, mem; shalom and shalem. Completeness brings us peace; the struggle to achieve a sense of completion is seen in the effort to bring peace to our lives. With each step that brings us closer to that goal, our lives become more balanced and enriched.

On this very day of vows and promises, of seeking forgiveness and granting atonement, we are presented with the opportunity to chart new directions, new protections, and new connections. What we say interpersonally has enormous consequences on how we create the patterns and structures of our lives. We need not choose between the communal and the personal, only between the spoken and unspoken. We can use words of accountability that consider the past as well as use words of vulnerability that look to the future. Interweaving them gives us the

vocabulary of the present. We can wrap ourselves in the verbal tapestry we weave, with its designs of accountability and vulnerability, a fully human design of our own making.