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RH AM 5779 at Kol HanesHEMA

Protest so they Don't Change Us!

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be a father. Maybe it's because we are expecting our second child any day now. If I have to run off the bima, I hope you all will understand. Yet, another reason I have been thinking about what it means to be a father is because of our Torah Portion for this morning, the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac.

What type of father was Abraham? God commands Abraham to "Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you." Wouldn't you have expected Abraham to have reeled with confusion, sadness, anger and fear when God commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac?

Remember, it had taken Abraham and Sarah years to conceive. At 90 years old, it was a miracle that Sarah had given birth to a healthy son. Yet, Abraham doesn't dispute God; he leaves his home immediately—no protest, just silence. I hope that my own father would have put up at least a little bit of protest.

So why is this? We know that Abraham has a voice and can put up a fight against God. Three chapters earlier in the Torah, God seeks to destroy the two sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, Abraham challenges God, pleading with God not to wipe out the cities if he could find fifty or forty or thirty or twenty or ten righteous people among the guilty. Abraham proclaims, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25). This is Abraham's classic protest against what he perceived as Divine injustice. Ultimately, though, we know that Abraham wasn't successful. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the father of our religion shows great character and conviction. So what happened to that voice in the binding of Isaac?

Perhaps, Abraham is depleted, crushed, and exhausted after God destroyed the cities despite Abraham's pleas. He had no influence on the outcome. He pleaded, he marched, and he failed terribly. Why would Abraham want to extend himself again? Perhaps he believes that his protest to save Isaac's life will be futile.

I'm sure many of you know where Abraham is coming from. Why protest if nothing will change? Personally, I've marched, I've gathered, I've argued, I've written letters, I've held signs and little has happened. And, I'm not just talking about our national atmosphere. I speak with many congregants who have shared with me how they have begged their elderly parents to think about moving to a new home with fewer stairs, a place where they are not so alone, just in case something happens to them. I have sat with congregants who have pleaded with their teens to continue their religious education after b'nai mitzvah by sharing with them the importance of Jewish education and what it means for them as parents and hopefully their children too. To be honest, these protests often fail. Parents don't move, b'nai mitzvah students don't continue their formal Jewish education.

So why do we do it? Why do we bother trying?

One reason is that we know that well organized protests do work. Sometimes they take time but protests have power to change. We see a clear example of that in the Torah in the story of Moses and the Exodus out of Egypt. Moses confronts Pharaoh, not once, but 10 times, demanding Pharaoh to "let his people go." With help from God and the plagues, after the 10th time, Moses frees the Israelites from Pharaoh's hold. Pharaoh's policy has changed, the Israelites are free, and have an opportunity for redemption, to live the life they want to live.

Beyond the Torah, we have seen protest work throughout history. Think about women gaining the right to vote. Think about the Civil Rights movement. Think about Stonewall. And,

we've seen protest in action work more recently too. This year, rallies were held across the United States to protest the separation of families at the border. Though we know there are still children waiting to be reunified with their parents, an executive order was signed ending family separation and spurring reunification for the majority of families.

This year, there were multiple teacher strikes across the U.S. These strikes were motivated by low wages, inadequate school budgets, and overcrowded classrooms. From West Virginia to Arizona, educators crowded in their State Houses, where many succeeded in negotiating raises.

Yet, the majority of protests don't result in instant change. This year, in Tel Aviv, 100,000 Israelis gathered in Rabin Square to protest the exclusion of gay men from new surrogacy legislation. Those protesting were angry with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for going back on his word, bowing to pressure from the Orthodox wing of his coalition, and voting against a measure that would have supported surrogacy for gay fathers.

This year, students organized March for our Lives rallies throughout the country in support of tighter gun control. They lifted their voices, they pledged to vote, they prayed with their feet. Yet, so far, little has been done to address gun prevention and school safety and many students returned to their classrooms this September feeling nervous about whether the next school shooting could happen to them.

Even closer to home and on a much more mundane level, commuters have taken to Twitter on a near daily basis to express their frustration with NJ Transit's less than timely departures and arrivals.

So, why do we continue to raise our voices when we know that the majority of protests don't result in immediate change?

Rabbi Michael Adam Latz writes, “We keep marching, we keep protesting, we keep showing up. Because this work is ultimately theological. Protesting, showing up, is a religious response, an Abrahamic response, to injustice in the world. Rising up, engaging in moral resistance is a dynamic act of faith, a theological expression of hope: that our holy Jewish purpose is to close the gap between the way the world exists now from the way the world must be: Overflowing with Divine love and compassion.”

While I would like to say that I’m always ready to stand up, march, protest when I see injustices in my own life or in our world, I’ll be honest, I do not always raise my voice. I make excuses. It is exhausting, I can’t make any difference, I have something better to do.

Perhaps, Abraham’s lack of protest in the Akeida is a cautionary tale for us then. Ultimately, though we know God spares Isaac, yet God does not speak to Abraham again. The relationship between God and Abraham ends. Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People” believes that the binding of Isaac was a test to see how Abraham would respond to injustice after failing to succeed before. If that was God’s intent, Abraham clearly fails; he does not overcome his inability to change minds, he is fearful and pessimistic.

Protesting is a Jewish Value. We are taught one should love protest, for as long as there is protest in the world, goodness and blessing come into the world and evil departs from the world. We are also taught that “Whoever can protest the transgressions of the people of his community but does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his community” (Shabbat 54b). Acts of protest remind those with power about the needs of the vulnerable and creates community devoted to the wellbeing of all.

Elie Wiesel wrote this story in his book “Words from a Witness,” One day a Tzadik—a righteous person— came to Sodom; He knew what Sodom was, so he came to save it from sin, from destruction. He preached to the people. "Please do not be murderers, do not be thieves. Do not be silent and do not be indifferent." He went on preaching day after day, maybe even picketing. But no one listened. He was not discouraged. He went on preaching for years. Finally someone asked him, "Rabbi, why do you do that? Don't you see it is no use?" He said, "I know it is of no use, but I must. And I will tell you why: in the beginning I thought I had to protest and to shout in order to change them. I have given up this hope. Now I know I must picket and scream and shout so that they should not change me." This year, even if we are exhausted, even if we lose our voice, or run out of poster board, may we continue to rise up against injustices, our pains, and our fears that we see in our own lives and those in our communities. To paraphrase Elie Wiesel... protest so those injustices don't change us!