

AS I WAS THINKING ABOUT MY SERMON FOR TODAY, I REALIZED THAT TODAY, THE SECOND DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH WAS ALSO SEPTEMBER 11 – IN FACT THE 17TH ANNIVERSARY OF THAT FATEFUL DAY. INEVITABLY, I THOUGHT ABOUT ANY POTENTIAL COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE EVENTS IN THE TORAH PORTION AND 9/11.

THE TORAH PORTION IS THE BINDING OF ISAAC. WE KNOW THE STORY. ABRAHAM IS COMMANDED TO TAKE ISAAC ON A THREE-DAY JOURNEY TO A MOUNTAIN AND THERE TO OFFER HIM UP TO GOD. THIS INCIDENT IS DESCRIBED AS A TEST, ALTHOUGH EXACTLY WHO OR WHAT IS BEING TESTED IS NOT CLEAR. WHAT IS CLEAR IS THAT BOTH ABRAHAM AND ISAAC ARE DEEPLY AFFECTED BY THIS EXPERIENCE, AND PERHAPS, HAVE LEARNED SOMETHING ABOUT GOD THAT WAS NOT KNOWN TO THEM PREVIOUSLY.

SIMILARLY, EVERY AMERICAN OLD ENOUGH AT THE TIME, WAS AFFECTED BY THE EVENTS OF 9/11. WHETHER YOU LOST A LOVED ONE, A FRIEND OR AN ACQUAINTANCE, THE EXPERIENCE CHANGED US AND, I WOULD ARGUE, CHANGED AMERICA. SOME RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, OF COURSE, BELIEVE THAT THIS EXPERIENCE WAS A

MESSAGE FROM GOD, ALTHOUGH THEY DIFFER GREATLY AS TO THE MESSAGE AND ITS MEANING. SO, IF THESE TWO 'SOURCES' WERE ALL WE HAD – THE TEXT ABOUT THE BINDING OF ISAAC AND THE EXPERIENCE OF 9/11 – WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT GOD?

WE HUMAN BEINGS KNOW THINGS IN ONE OF TWO WAYS – EITHER THROUGH REASON OR THROUGH EXPERIENCE. REASON IS ABOUT IDEAS AND THEIR MEANING. EXPERIENCE IS ABOUT EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS AND MAYBE THE IDEAS THAT RESULT. SOME OF US RELY MORE ON REASON THAN EXPERIENCE IN FORMING OUR BELIEFS AND OPINIONS. OTHER RELY MORE ON EXPERIENCE. SO, WHAT DOES REASON AND EXPERIENCE TEACH US ABOUT THESE TWO INCIDENTS?

ONE CLEAR TEACHING TO ME IS THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ABRAHAM'S FAITH IN GOD BEFORE AND AFTER THE BINDING OF ISAAC. THAT GOD COULD DEMAND THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC AFTER PROMISING THAT ABRAHAM'S LEGACY WOULD CONTINUE THROUGH ISAAC, MUST HAVE SHAKEN ABRAHAM TO HIS VERY CORE. TO ABRAHAM, IT MUST HAVE SEEMED THAT GOD WAS CAPRICIOUS – PROMISING ONE THING TODAY AND REVOKING IT TOMORROW! HOW COULD THAT BE!

ISNT THAT THE VERY ANTITHESIS OF THE IDEA OF GOD IN THE BIBLE – THAT GOD IS NOT CAPRICIOUS. THAT GOD ACTS WITH BOTH JUSTICE AND MERCY, BASED ON PRINCIPLE OF ORDER. WHERE IS THE JUSTICE AND MERCY IS GOD’S DEMAND ABRAHAM TO SACRIFICE HIS SON? AND THEN AT THE VERY END TO SPARE ISAAC, AS IF TO SAY, I REALLY DIDN’T MEAN IT! HOW DOES ABRAHAM RECONCILE HIS BELIEF IN SUCH A GOD. AND ISN’T IT CURIOUS, THAT GOD DOES NOT APPEAR TO ABRAHAM AGAIN IN THE TORAH AFTER THIS INCIDENT? AND WHAT ABOUT ISAAC? IS AS SOME SOURCES MAINTAIN, HE WAS 13 AT THE TIME, WHAT HAS ISAAC LEARNED? HIS FATHER ALMOST KILLED HIM! AND GOD SEEMED TO DEMAND THAT! DOES THE FACT THAT, IN THE END, ISAAC WAS SPARED, MITIGATE AND OVERCOME THE SHOCK AND FEAR THAT HE MUST HAVE FELT AT THE TIME? IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT GOD NEVER SPEAKS DIRECTLY WITH ISAAC, GOD ONLY APPEARS AND IN ONLY TWO VERY BRIEF INSTANCES. AND ISAAC NEVER SPEAKS WITH GOD!

WHATEVER ABRAHAM AND ISAAC MAY HAVE THOUGHT AND BELIEVED ABOUT GOD PRIOR TO THE BINDING OF ISAAC, THEIR FAITH AND RELATIONSHIP CLEARLY IS DIFFERENT AFTERWARDS. I

WOULD CHARACTERIZE THIS CHANGE AS THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE, THEIR FAITH IS NOT AS FIRM OR AS SIMPLE AS IT ONCE WAS.

SIMILARLY, ON 9/11 AMERICA WAS ATTACKED BY FOREIGN ELEMENTS ON ITS OWN SOIL! EXCLUDING THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR, WHICH AT THE TIME WAS AN AMERICAN TERRITORY, AMERICA HAD NEVER BEEN ATTACKED ON ITS OWN SOIL! ON THAT DAY, WE BECAME VULNERABLE IN A WAY NEVER BEFORE IMAGINED OR EXPERIENCED! MANY OF US CAN RECALL EXACTLY WHERE WE WERE AND WHAT WE WERE DOING WHEN WE LEARNED OF THE ATTACKS. THE IMAGE OF THE PLANES CRASHING AND THEN, LATER, THE TOWERS FALLING IS SEARED IN OUR MINDS. WE WILL NEVER FEEL COMPLETELY SECURE IN AMERICA AGAIN! AND AMERICA HAS CHANGED. EVERY SINGLE DAY, THE PRESIDENT AND THE RELEVANT AGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT MUST CONSIDER AND PREVENT ANY POTENTIAL SIMILAR ATTACKS ON AMERICA. AND THIS SITUATION IS UNLIKELY TO BE RESOLVED IN THE FORSEEABLE FUTURE.

THE BIG THEOLOGICAL QUESTION IN BOTH EXPERIENCES IS WHAT WAS GOD'S ROLE IN THESE EVENTS? DID GOD REALLY DEMAND

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC? DID GOD CAUSE OR ALLOW THE ATTACK ON AMERICA ON 9/11? THERE ARE TWO OPTIONS. ONE OPTION IS THAT GOD DID CAUSE OR ALLOW THESE THINGS, BUT NOT TO BE CRUEL BUT TO TEACH US A LESSON, PERHAPS TO CORRECT OUR WRONG OR SINFUL BEHAVIOR. THE OTHER VIABLE OPTION IS THAT GOD DID NOT CAUSE OR ALLOW THESE THINGS. FOR TO BELIEVE THAT GOD CAUSED OR ALLOWED THEM, IS TO ADMIT THAT GOD IS A MONSTER AND NOT REALLY WORTHY OF OUR FAITH.

IF GOD DID NOT CAUSE OF ALLOW THESE EVENTS TO OCCUR, THEN THE NEXT QUESTION IS WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, DID GOD PLAY? THE HUMANIST RESPONSE IS THAT ABRAHAM WAS MISTAKEN IF HE BELIEVED THAT GOD ASKED HIM TO SACRIFICE ISAAC. AND THE HUMANIST RESPONSE TO 9/11 IS THAT THIS WAS HUMAN EVIL PERPETRATED BY ENEMIES OF AMERICA.

BUT THE RELIGIOUS MIND WANTS TO FIND A PLACE FOR GOD IN EVERY EXPERIENCE OR EVENT. SO WHAT COULD A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE OFFER?

IN THE BINDING OF ISAAC STORY, ISAAC IS SPARED IN THE END. A RAM IS OFFERED IN PLACE OF ISAAC. THAT RAM IS THE SOURCE

OF THE SHOFAR THAT WE BLOW ON ROSH HASHANAH. JUST AS GOD SPARED ISAAC, WE HOPE GOD WILL SPARE US AS OUR DEEDS OF THE PAST YEAR ARE BEING JUDGED. GOD SAVED THEN AND GOD WILL SAVE NOW! GOD IS JUST, BUT MERCIFUL.

CAN WE SEE GOD'S DELIVERANCE IN THE EVENTS OF 9/11?

PERHAPS. WAS THE BRAVERY AND COURAGE OF THE PASSENGERS ON FLIGHT 93 IN PENNSYLVIA EVIDENCE OF GOD'S DELIVERANCE? WAS THE BRAVERY AND COURAGE OF THE FIRST RESPONDERS ON 9/11, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO PERISHED WHEN THE TOWERS CAME DOWN, EVIDENCE OF GOD'S DELIVERANCE?

IT IS MORE DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING FOR US TO ATTRIBUTE ANYTHING DIRECTLY TO GOD IN OUR DAY. WE DO NOT HEAR GOD SPEAK TO US DIRECTLY, WE DO NOT SEE GOD IN ACTION. BUT, WHEN WE EXPERIENCE MERCY, COMPASSION, DELIVERANCE FROM TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS – CAN WE DENY GOD'S PRESENCE?

THERE IS PROBABLY VERY LITTLE WE CAN KNOW ABOUT GOD IN OUR DAY BASED ON REASON. FOR EVERY ARGUMENT FOR GOD, THERE IS AN ARGUMENT ON THE OTHER SIDE. BUT EXPERIENCE

MAY BE THE MOST RELIABLE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GOD IN OUR DAY. AND OF COURSE, WE DO NOT ALL HAVE THE SAME EXPERIENCE, SO OUR CONCLUSIONS WILL VARY.

MANY OF YOU KNOW WE HAVE AN ORTHODOX DAUGHTER IN ISRAEL. SHE WAS NOT RAISED THAT WAY. I RECENTLY ASKED HER HOW SHE CAME TO THE RELIGIOUS PLACE SHE IS TODAY. SHE USES THE LANGUAGE OF THE ORTHODOX WORLD, EMUNAH – USUALLY TRANSLATED AS FAITH OR BELIEF. HER EMUNAH HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME SINCE HER TEEN YEARS. SHE SHARED WITH ME SEVERAL FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF HER LATE ADOLESCENCE. SHE DID NOT COME TO HER PRESENT FAITH BY STUDYING AND THINKING – THROUGH REASON. A SERIES OF POWERFUL EXPERIENCES LED HER TO DRAW CERTAIN VERY SPECIFIC CONCLUSIONS FOR HERSELF ABOUT HOW SHE WANTED TO LIVE AS A JEW. I REALIZED THAT FOR HER, EMUNAH IS MUCH MORE THAN FAITH – SHE IS CONVINCED THAT HER PATH IN LIFE IS TRUE! SHE IS CERTAIN ABOUT GOD AND GOD'S ROLE IN HER LIFE. PERHAPS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY SO MANY OF US HAVE ISSUES ABOUT FAITH AND BELIEF IS THAT WE RELY TOO MUCH ON

REASON TO ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS. PERHAPS WE NEED TO
PROBE MORE DEEPLY INTO THE MEANING OF OUR EXPERIENCES.
ISAAC AND ABRAHAM EXPERIENCED GOD ON THE MOUNTAIN AND
IT FOREVER SHAPED THEIR BELIEFS AND RELATIONSHIP TO GOD.
PERHAPS, WE NEED TO FIND OUR MOUNTAIN TO DISCOVER WHAT
WE CAN KNOW ABOUT GOD. AMEN.