

## Rosh HaShanah Torah and Haftarah Introductions

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The threat of losing a child, one of the most horrible traumas one can imagine, provides the key tension in the traditional Rosh HaShanah Torah readings both for the first day of Rosh HaShanah, which we read last year, and for our Torah portion this year, the traditional reading for the second day of Rosh HaShanah.

In Genesis 21, Abraham sends his concubine Hagar and his son Ishmael out into the desert, where they almost perish, saved only when God opens Hagar's eyes, revealing a life-saving well.

In this morning's well-known portion, Abraham stands over his beloved son Isaac, with a knife in his hand, until he hears the voice of the angel and understands that the ram is to be slaughtered in place of his son.

Leonard Cohen's midrash on this story, written at the height of the war in Vietnam, is a song that takes Isaac's point of view. In an interview, Leonard Cohen explained, "This is a song . . . about those who would sacrifice one generation on behalf of another."

There's no draft now, and so we are less aware of the wars that continue to take the lives of young and not-so-young soldiers.

But there is another way that we are willing to sacrifice the next generation, and that is in the way we are not willing to make the necessary sacrifices today for the sake of a livable globe for them ten or twenty or fifty years from now. Yesterday

there was a big march in San Francisco ahead of the international Global Climate Action Summit that starts on Wednesday. Leaders from business, government, and civil society around the world will speak, including Governor Brown, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and other well-known elected officials and celebrities.

It is planned to be “a launchpad for deeper worldwide commitments and accelerated action from countries—supported by all sectors of society—that can put the globe on track to prevent dangerous climate change and realize the historic Paris Agreement.” Some changes are happening already with regard to carbon emissions and other issues, but absent the support of the United States federal government, our states, cities, regions, and communities have to step up if we have any hope of reaching net zero by 2050.

The modern reader does not accept Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, but we fail to recognize the parallels to our own behavior. We must wake ourselves to hear the Divine voice that forbids us to sacrifice our children’s and grandchildren’s well-being as well as the future of our planet.

Jeremiah, at least for me, is one of the more relatable prophets. In part it’s because we know a little more about his life and can admire his persistence and optimism. He is a man of conscience, unwavering in his passion for reform, vehement in his denunciation of corruption. The King, who jails him, also burns the scroll with his words, but Jeremiah responds to that setback by calling his scribe, Baruch ben Neiri, to write it all out again. Though forced by God to foretell the destruction of Israelite society, he also shows confidence in its rebuilding,

buying land in his hometown of Anitot even in the face of imminent Babylonian conquest.

Our Haftarah, like Jeremiah's other prophecies, contains harsh words of rebuke along with reminders of God's love for the people and caring attention, whether it is by providing them with streams so they won't lack water in their trek back to their homeland, or in speaking words of promise, so powerful that we have incorporated them into our prayers, in the *chatimah* of the *Geulah* prayer: "*Ki Fadah Adonai et Yaakov, ugealo miyad chazak mimeno* — For the Eternal has redeemed Jacob and saved him from hands stronger than his own."

The image that persists from this Haftarah is that of Rachel weeping for her children, who pass by her grave on their way out to Exile. Her weeping is effective, as it elicits a promise from God that her children will yet return.

The Midrash presents us with a scene in which each of the patriarchs tries to elicit from God a promise of return but without success. Only Rachel gets God to respond. Why? We are told that it is because of the mercy she showed her sister. She stands before God and asks: "God, whose mercy is greater, Yours or mine? Surely Yours must be greater. Yet I showed mercy to my sister, preventing her from experiencing embarrassment when my father placed her under the *chuppah* in my place. I gave her the secret words that Jacob and I had been speaking to each other, so that he would not suspect deception and cause her to be shamed in front of everyone. Can You do less? Show mercy for Your children, the Exiles of Israel."

I think this text, with its evocation of this story, is chosen for today to help us appreciate the value of the kindnesses we extend to one another, and the power of even the simple mercy one sister shows another. Though the Haftarah focuses on our national history, it also provides encouragement for reconciliation on the personal level.