

AVRAHAM AND THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TORAH READINGS FOR ROSH HASHANAH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

THE TANNAIM: TWO OPINIONS

The Mishnah (3rd or 4th chapter of Megillah - depending on which version you are looking at) lists the special Torah readings for each of the holidays and unique days during the year. Regarding Rosh haShanah, the Mishnah states:

"On Rosh haShanah, we read "And on the seventh month, on the first of the month..." (Vayyikra 23:24 ff.)"

The Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) cites a second Tannaitic opinion as to what should be read on that day (at this time, there was still only one day of Rosh haShanah):

On Rosh haShanah, we read "In the seventh month" (Vayyikra 23)... "others" say [we read] "and God remember Sarah" (B'resheet 21)... (BT Megillah 31a)

The second alternative - to read about the story of Sarah's miraculous birth at the age of 90 - is a bit disarming of a choice. All of the other "special" readings focus around either the laws pertaining to that day (e.g. the Sukkot readings focus on the offerings of each day, as well as the full treatment of the calendar) or of an explicit historical reference (e.g. Pesach and the Exodus story).

What connection is there between the story of Sarah's birthing Yitzchak at an advanced age and the "Day of Remembrance" (Rosh haShanah)?

The conventional understanding is that the Sarah association is based on the Gemara in Rosh haShanah (11a), which states that both Sarah and Hannah were "remembered" on Rosh haShanah. (see, e.g., commentary of Ran to Megillah ad loc.)

There are, however, several problems with this explanation - as will become clear when we look into the Gemara to discover the roots of our practice vis-a-vis the Torah reading on the two days of Rosh haShanah.

II THE GEMARA: THE "TWO DAYS" SOLUTION

The Gemara, in assessing how to "resolve" these two opinions, makes a startling statement. We would normally expect the Gemara to "compromise" and assign each of the readings to one of the

days - let "the seventh month" reading take place on the first day and "God remembered Sarah" take place on the second day (or vice-versa).

This is, by the way, exactly how the Gemara (ibid) resolved a dispute regarding the reading on Shavuot - now that there are two days (outside of Israel), we "fulfill" one opinion on the first day, and the other on the second day.

Regarding Rosh haShanah, however, the Gemara does not take this "path of compromise":

Now that there are two days, on the first day we follow the "others", on the next day, "And God tested Avraham..." (B'resheet 22)

Where did the "Akedah" (binding of Yitzchak) story come from? Why is it suddenly introduced into the range of possible readings here?

Keep in mind that the first two opinions were rendered by Tannaim - and it is highly unlikely and somewhat enigmatic for the Gemara to "overrule" a Tanna, especially when both opinions could have been maintained!

Besides the difficulty with this Gemara, there is an additional problem with the "God remembered Sarah" reading, based on the way that we practice.

The text of the Sarah-Yitzchak-Hagar-Yishma'el story is 21 verses long - which is enough for a complete reading, even if Rosh haShanah falls on Shabbat. Why then do we read the rest of Chapter 21 (vv. 22-34), detailing the covenant between Avraham and Avimelekh? What relevance does that story carry for Rosh haShanah?

To sum up:

We have two questions about the reading on Rosh haShanah:

- a) Why is the Tanna's opinion ignored in favor of the "Akedah" story?
- b) Why is the Avraham-Avimelekh story also read?

To this, we could add a third question:

- c) What is the significance of the Akedah story to Rosh haShanah? (keep in mind that according to the Midrash, that terrifying event took place on the date that would eventually be Pesach - in the spring - and not in the fall).

Regarding this final question, there is no question that the ram, brought in place of Yitzchak, is associated with Rosh haShanah (the Shofar) - but, again, is that enough to justify "overruling" the first Tanna (and the only opinion cited in our Mishnah) as regards the reading?

III REEVALUATING THE "OTHER'S" OPINION

We generally assume, as mentioned above, that the association between the story which begins with Sarah's miraculous conception and birth and Rosh haShanah lies at the beginning - in that she was "remembered" on Rosh haShanah.

There is another way to understand the association - one that is not subject to the challenges raised above.

If we understand the second Tannaitic opinion ("others") as relating ONLY to the birth of Yitzchak - then, indeed, our questions stand. If, however, we understand the second opinion as relating to the entire narrative of the birth of Yitzchak, the covenant with Avimelekh and the culmination of Avraham's life - the Akedah, then we understand the "solution" of the Gemara:

The first opinion is that we read from Vayyikra - a Halakhic section which details the laws of special times in our calendar - including (among others) the day of Rosh haShanah. In other words, the focus of the reading should be similar to that on other holidays - the "practice" of the day.

The second opinion, contradistinctively, is concerned that we read a piece of narrative - (Chapters 21 and 22 of B'resheet - later on we will address the significance of these two chapters). In other words, this opinion maintains that the focus of the reading should be on the "experience" of the day (i.e. narrative), rather than the "practice" of the day (i.e. legislative).

The Gemara's solution was that, now that we have two days, we accept the second opinion and divide that reading into two parts - one for each day - so as to preserve the thematic continuity throughout the two-day holiday.

This already answers the first question - why the first Tanna's opinion was ignored. There was no solution of "one day this, the other that" such as the Gemara effects for Shavuot. On Rosh haShanah, there is a basic dispute as to whether the reading should be legastically-oriented (Vayyikra) or narrative-oriented (B'resheet). Once the Halakhah decided in favor of the second opinion - that reading was simply split into two parts.

Now, we have to address the other two questions, which can be combined into one mega-question: What is the relevance of these two chapters (and now, we have to include the story of Sarah's miraculous conception and birth) of B'resheet to Rosh haShanah?

IV ROSH HASHANAH - THE INDIVIDUAL STANDS BEFORE GOD

Unlike the tenor of the rest of the holidays of Tishri - Yom haKippurim, Sukkot and Sh'mini Atzeret - Rosh haShanah seems to place the individual and his/her relationship with God at the core of the experience of the day. Even though we are crowning God, declaring Him to be King over "all that draw breath into their nostrils" (from the liturgy) - and this declaration is made as a community as well as by each individual - the sense of "judgment" which drives the day is focused on each person as he or she stands alone before the Creator.

Note the Mishnah's statement about the day:

On Rosh haShanah, they all pass before Him like "B'nei Maron" (Rosh haShanah 1:2; see the Gemara - Rosh haShanah 18a for the various interpretations of that phrase).

The Gemara explains that this means (regardless of what the phrase specifically depicts) that each person passes before God - to be judged - as an individual.

This is not the experience of Yom haKippurim, where, although each person confesses his sins before God in a private manner and does Teshuvah to the best of his ability, much of the focus of the day is on community (note the oft-repeated "Ki Anu Amekhah" which depicts the relationship between God and the Jewish people via various real-world analogues).

It is certainly not the same experience as Sukkot - where the focus is almost totally on the community (and the agricultural seasons). Rosh haShanah literally "stands alone" as a time for individual reflection, introspection and solitude - where the individual stands before God in judgment.

When we look through our history, we find that there was only one individual whose entire life calling approximated that which we experience on Rosh haShanah. Unlike Yitzchak, who was trained in the "way of God" by his father; unlike Ya'akov, who had two generations of righteousness and loyalty to God as a model, Avraham was the true trail-blazer of our national (pre-)history. In order for him to succeed at his mission, he not only had to "ignore" his father's lessons (and those of his kinfolk), he had to actively get up and leave the entire environs of his youth (and middle age) and follow God's directive to a "Land that I will show you". If there is anyone whose life is a model for the Rosh haShanah experience, it is Avraham Avinu.

This would help to explain an enigmatic phrase in the chapter of T'hilim which is recited 7 times before the blasting of the Shofar (Ps. 47):

"The great of the peoples are gathered together, the nation of the God of Avraham, for the guardians of the earth belong to God, He is greatly exalted."

Why is God referred to as "the God of Avraham" in this chapter - which is otherwise devoted to God being crowned via the blast of the Shofar (see *infra*)?

Again - it is Avraham's path of solitude and isolation which is the one we must attempt to walk through the Rosh haShanah experience - as will be explained below.

V"ECHAD HAYAH AVRAHAM"

Although we will look at this in much greater detail in the upcoming shiurim on Sefer B'reshet (especially Parashat Lekh-L'kha and Parashat Vayera), a thumbnail sketch of Avraham's life is in order.

Not only did Avraham have to leave his comfortable and familiar environs in order to receive God's blessing - but the demand for repeated isolation and separation from loved ones was the hallmark of his life.

A brief chart will clarify this:

Chapter - Separation from...

- 12- Father's house, birthplace, land
- 12- Sarai (see Ramban here - it's fascinating!)
- 13- Lot
- 16- (temporarily) Hagar (carrying his seed)
- 20- Sarah (again!)
- 21- Hagar & Yishma'el
- 22- (almost) Yitzchak

As you can see, every step of his life was marked by separation from family - from parents, from his wife (four times, counting Hagar twice), from children (twice - and nearly a third time) and from his beloved nephew.

Note also that every one of these separations is accompanied by an increased blessing:

(see 12:2-3; 13:2; 13:14-18; 16:10; 17:5-8; 20:14-16; 21:20; 22:17-18).

In other words, it is when Avraham demonstrates this tragic heroism - the ability to leave everything near and dear for the sake of God and for His promise - that he succeeds.

We can now understand why a segment of the life of Avraham is appropriate to read on Rosh haShanah (the 11 chapters which make up the bulk of the "Avraham narrative" comprises too much text for the purpose). Why then this part - why Chapter 21 (the birth of Yitzchak, the exile of Hagar and Yishma'el and the covenant with Avimelekh) and Chapter 22 (the Akedah)?

VIRASHBAM AND THE AKEDAH

In order to understand the particular relevance of this section of the narrative to Rosh haShanah., we turn to an ancillary question posed by the Rishonim on the first verse of Chapter 22:

It came to pass after these matters...

This introduction seems to indicate not only a juxtaposition in time between the (upcoming) Akedah and the events just mentioned (the covenant with Avimelekh) - but also a causal relationship. To wit, it seems that the covenant had something to do with the Akedah.

Rashbam (R. Sh'mu'el b. Me'ir, 12th century France) suggests that the Akedah was, indeed, a Divine (punitive) reaction to Avraham's signing of the covenant. His reasoning is that since the land of P'leshet (present day Ashdod south to Azzah) is part of the Land which God promised to give him, God was angry at Avraham for signing a pact of mutual non-aggression (which is either unnecessary or makes it impossible to properly take the Land.) Rashbam suggests, based on the Midrash, that the reason that we were later unsuccessful in wresting that part of the Land from the P'lishtim was due to this earlier covenant.

I would like to suggest a slight variation on Rashbam's approach - which will also support the rationale for reading specifically these three sub-narratives on Rosh haShanah.

Avraham's entire path was to be tread on alone; since he was truly "The Lonely Man of Faith". Every time that he tried to become attached to a family member, that loved one was (almost?) taken away - if not permanently, at least for a time.

Now that Avraham and Sarah had their own child (and God approved of sending Hagar and Yishma'el away), it seems that Avraham started "banking on" his future. Note the wording of the covenant with Avimelekh:

"Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my grandchild..." (21:23 - these are Avimelekh's words). Since Avraham agreed to the oath, it seems clear that he (now) felt in a position to be able to make promises about the future and about future generations.

This led to the Divine response of the Akedah - "You think that Yitzchak is yours, is so surely going to be here that you can make covenants and oaths regarding his loyalties???" asks God,;

"Take your son, your only son, the one that you love....Yitzchak!" (22:2).

The inspiration to be found in these lessons is a microcosm - and the apex - of Avraham's spiritual adventure. When he finally gained the beloved son of his old age with Sarah, he immediately was called to exile his other, beloved son (see Rashi on 22:2); when he felt confident that he could pinpoint the one through whom God's promises would be realized, he made an agreement and projected that son's future. At that point, God called him to reject that future and to place all of his faith in God - not in allies, not in this son or the other - but only in God.

That lonely path, the one blazed for us by Avraham, is the one we must each walk when we face God on Yom haDin - the day of Judgment.

We are doubly blessed:

We have the reserves of Avraham's strength on which to draw to enable us to stand alone, if atremble, before the Throne on Remembrance Day.

Our second blessing is that we are not confined to that path; as we leave the path less taken and join

the communal "celebration" of Yom haKippurim, approximating Yitzchak's offering - and then join the entire House of Ya'akov in the Sukkah (hint: B'reshet 33:17).

K'tivah VaHatimah Tovah to all of our Haverim

Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and **Torah.org**. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.