

OUR OWN AKEIDAH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The centerpiece of our Rosh Hashana observance, prayers, and sounding of the shofar is the remembrance of the akeidah - the binding of Yitzchak to the altar and Avraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice him as worship to God. The akeidah has followed us throughout our long history. There have been millions of akeidot in Jewish history and most of them ended in the death of the victim and not in him or her being spared. Yet it is the utter devotion and tenacity of Israel to do God's will no matter what the cost that has sustained us throughout our long and difficult journey through time. Rosh Hashana therefore serves to remind us of the price that may be demanded yet of us to protect our Jewishness and project it into future generations. The tests need not be ones of physical life and death. They are usually more complicated and subtle than that. Overcoming one's own weaknesses and desires, swimming against the current of the prevailing value system of much of modern society and being steadfast in our faith and behavior against all comers and events - these are the terms of our own akeidah. The price of easy Judaism is assimilation and forfeiture of one's Jewish future. Rosh Hashana is uncompromising in its demands upon us. The Baal Shem Tov stressed that a person is judged not only by what a person is at that moment but also by what a person aspires to be. Rosh Hashana is the time for renewed commitment to our higher and nobler aspirations, to dismiss pettiness and selfishness and direct ourselves to the fulfillment of Torah and Jewish values in our lives and our society.

The shofar therefore serves as our call to arouse our better self. The rabbis phrased it thusly: "Let one always arouse one's better nature to do battle against one's evil desires." Passivity in attempting to improve our nature and behavior is doomed to being a failed tactic. Rosh Hashana demands from us enthusiasm in the cause of God and Torah and a willingness to struggle with ourselves - the hardest struggle that we will ever encounter is with ourselves - in order to arouse our better nature and aspire to moral greatness and holy behavior. The shofar is proactive. Its sounds are penetrating and turbulent. It demands and does not soothe. It is the byproduct of the akeidah. But our rabbis have taught us that our prayers on Rosh Hashana ascend heavenward through the medium of the shofar. Only by aspiring to be better and stronger and more Jewish can we hope to have good standing before the heavenly court on the Day of Judgment. The sounds of the shofar therefore goad us towards this goal and achievement in the service of God and humans. In the sounds of the shofar do we hear our own struggles with ourselves to improve and ascend. This struggle is an eternal one but so are its rewards and benefits.

I extend to all of you, my beloved friends at Beit Knesset HaNassi and those around the world as

well who have stood by me in my difficult moment and aided me with your friendship and concern, my heartfelt blessings for the New Year. May it bring us health and prosperity, longevity and harmony. May God bless Israel, His people and land, with peace and redemption .

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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