

REMARKS BEFORE TORAH READING 2nd DAY 5779

Every year on Rosh Hashana we read that terrible, terrifying story known as the *Akedah* – the Binding of Isaac, in which God commands Abraham to offer his beloved son, Isaac, on the top of Mount Moriah as a sacrifice.

In 1967, speaking at a Vietnam protest in Washington, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described how he studied the *akedah* with his rabbi in Poland as a young child.

“Isaac was on the way to Mt. Moriah with his father. There he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat very fast. I actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife and how my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard, ‘Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad for now I know that thou fearest God.’ And here I broke into tears and wept aloud. ‘Why are you crying?’ asked my rabbi. ‘You know that Isaac was not killed.’ I said to him, still weeping, ‘But rabbi, suppose the angel had come a second too late!’ The rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot ever come too late.” And then, lifting his eyes from his manuscript and looking into the eyes of all those in attendance, Heschel concluded: “An angel cannot come too late, my friends, but we, made of flesh and blood, we may come too late” (Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience, 51-52).

"An angel cannot come too late. but we, ... we may come too late."

If there was anyone who could relate to the tale of the *Akedah*, it was surely Rabbi Heschel. He was often compared to the biblical Abraham. William Sloane Coffin, the charismatic Protestant preacher, called him “Father Abraham” and told Heschel, “I am sure the original Abraham, father of us all, looked just like you.”

It seems to me that Heschel, who lost his mother and sisters in the Holocaust, might also be compared to Isaac. The Torah doesn't tell us what traumatic effects Isaac suffered from his ordeal, but we know that he continued to have faith in God.

And Heschel, despite the Shoah, despite his own losses and personal trauma, continued to believe that God loves us. For Heschel, "The greatest heresy is despair, despair of man's power for goodness, man's power for love." The fundamental biblical message, he insisted, is that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore has infinite value and dignity.

Today is the 2nd Day of Rosh Hashanah, the 2nd day of the month of Tishrei in this new year of 5779. Today is also Al-hijra, the first day of the Islamic year 1440, the beginning of the holy month of Muharram – the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. And it is the 17th anniversary of September 11th, 2001 when our lives and our world were forever changed.

I cannot help but be struck by the confluence of these three anniversaries – Rosh Hashanah marking the birth of the world and the start of the 10 days of *teshuvah*, or repentance and returning; Al-hijra marking the birth of a new faith and a similar 10-day period of repentance and introspection, and 9/11.

9/11, which represents, in so many ways, the opposite of the fundamental message of Judaism, Islam and so many other faiths, that we are, each of us, created in the image of God, each of us, an entire Universe. When you destroy another person, you diminish God. Both the Talmud and the Qur'an contain the same teaching: "If you save another human being, you have saved an entire world."

9/11 made us question so many things, among them the role of religion. It made us realize, once again, how religion, like political beliefs, could be perverted to serve evil ends. It made us suspicious of our neighbors. It made us want to lash out; it got us into wars

without end. It brought out the complexities of dealing with terrorism; it made us fearful and confused.

But, as I spoke about yesterday, we also saw people pull together in the face of terrible loss and disaster. We saw folks rush in to help, many of those courageous first-responders losing their lives and their health in an effort to save others. We saw donations pour in; we saw Islamophobia rise, but we also saw an interest in actually learning about Islam, in reaching out to our Muslim neighbors and friends, in making real and lasting connections.

As we prepare to read, once again, the story of the binding of Isaac, I hear Rabbi Heschel's words echo across the years: "An angel cannot come too late. but we, ... we may come too late." In Hebrew, the word for "angel" is "*mal'ach*" which literally means "messenger." Let us resolve on this day, this Jewish and Muslim new year, 9/11/18, to be God's messengers. Let us do what that angel did for Abraham long ago: stay the hand of violence, curb the rush to rash actions, open the eyes to alternative paths, open the ears the voice which calls us to love and heal, not hate and hurt.

Seventeen years on, I offer a prayer on the anniversary of September 11th , based on the writings on my friend, poet and liturgist, Alden Solovy. Please rise...

For those who died in the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Remember the works of their hands

And the message of their hearts.

Grant their families peace and comfort for Your name's sake

And for the sake of those who perished.

Bring an end to violence and terror,

Speedily, in our days.

May their memories be sanctified with joy and love.

May their souls be bound up in the bond of life,

A living blessing in our midst.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of strength for survivors of violence and tragedy in every land and in every age.

To those who died in service to others because of

The 9/11 attacks on the United States.

May their dedication to protecting life serve as a shining lamp of love

And the works of their hands bring us all merit in heaven.

Bless the souls of all who have died to save others,

Civilians and professionals,

The trained and the untrained,

In every age and in every land,

Men and women who answered the call of honor, duty and service.

God of the survivor,

God of the mourner and the witness,

Grant solace and peace to those still held by physical, emotional and spiritual distress from the attacks of 9-11.

Release them from visions of death and destruction, from guilt or shame, from fear or anger.

Bind their wounds with Your steadfast love.

Lift them on Your wings of kindness and grace.

Blessed are those who have found peace.

Blessed are those without tranquility.

Blessed are those who speak.

Blessed are those who stay silent.

Blessed are those who have healed.

Blessed are those who suffer.

Blessed are those who forgive.

Blessed are those who cannot forgive.

Blessed are You, Rock of Israel, Source of hope and comfort.

Amen.

