

**ROSH HASHANA**  
**KNOW YOUR OWN NARRATIVE**

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**Rabbi Vernon Kurtz**

The major story in the Torah reading of Rosh Hashana is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. It is a difficult, complex and enigmatic story that is chosen as the reading for the second day of the holiday, and is actually a completion of the first day's reading. We are familiar with the storyline but its meaning has always been a problem for many of us. My colleague, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, has written that "the story has been embraced by the Jewish community as symbolic of Judaism's existential history. We Jews imagine ourselves as Isaac, with the knife at our throats bound on the altars of our fathers' faith. How appropriate a Torah reading for Rosh Hashana, when the same theme runs as a leitmotif through the liturgy of the day. And how lovely a symbol when the angel calls 'Do not raise your hand against the boy.' Is that not the fate that we, too, pray for?"

The story shows Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son following God's command. When the angel tells Abraham that God does not want the child sacrificed, Abraham sees a ram hiding in the thicket and sacrifices it instead. Thus, on Rosh Hashana, the Shofar is blown to ask for grace from God in recognition of the merit of Abraham and Isaac.

However, the story is told somewhat differently in other sacred literatures. In doing so the authors of this retelling frame the narrative in a contradictory manner. In the New Testament, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, it states: "By faith, Abraham, being tested, offered up Isaac. For having received the promise he was able to offer up his only begotten son... By reckoning that God was able to raise the dead, he got him back – in parable."

Christian interpreters ever since have read the Akedah as a parable of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Saint Augustine, in his "*City of God*" writes: "On this account Isaac, also himself, carried to the place of sacrifice the wood on which he was offered up, just as the Lord Himself carried his own cross. Finally, since Isaac was not to be slain, after his father was forbidden to smite him, who was that ram by the offering of which that sacrifice was completed with typical blood? For when Abraham saw him, he was caught by the horns in the thicket. What, then, did he represent but Jesus, who, before he was offered up, was crowned with thorns by the Jews?"

The story is retold once more in the Koran. Muslims read the story of Abraham's son kneeling in the Islamic prayer posture so that his father might offer him in sacrifice to Allah. Isaac states: "Oh my father, do what you are commanded to do. You will find me, God willing, patient. They both submitted and he put his forehead down to sacrifice him." The narrative shows the story to be cloaked in Muslim tradition as one of the founding tales of Islam.

These are very different takes on an ancient story. The narratives run almost parallel to one another and although they intersect on some of the basic facts, their perception of the truth changed and it was that narrative which their followers digested and made their own.

For Judaism, Isaac survived the ordeal to become the second patriarch. Abraham showed his faith in God to survive the test and was forever rewarded with blessed descendants. For Christianity, it was a parable of death and the resurrection. It showed Jesus to be a true descendant of Abraham and, therefore, deserving of God's chosenness. For Muslims, the story is an Islamic tale showing submission to the will of God. Abraham is the father of Ishmael in the Islamic tradition and transmits his blessings to his eldest son.

Is it really any wonder, therefore, that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have experienced over the centuries times of great conflict, periods of competition and eras of deep-seated hatred and persecution? The same story, the Akedah, may have the same outcome, but it has different retellings and different interpretations. The narrative serves the followers of each of these great religions.

We live our lives by the narratives that we inherit and that we pass on to others. These narratives are the framing points of our lives, our beliefs and our actions. The interpretations of these narratives create community solidarity, faith communities and unity of purpose and mission. Different narratives, even on the same story, create conflicting visions. It is important to know your own narrative and, at the same time, recognize that there are others, as well.

There is a very famous story told concerning the elephant and the blind man. The story goes this way:

“One day, a rajah's son asked, ‘Father, what is reality?’ ‘An excellent question, my son. Come, everyone, we will go to the market place.’ So the rajah and his son went outside and mounted their royal elephant. The rest of the entourage followed on foot. When they got to the marketplace, the rajah commanded, ‘bring me three blind men.’ When the blind men arrived, the rajah commanded, ‘Place one blind man at the elephant's tusk, one at the elephant's leg and one at the elephant's tail.’ When that was done, the rajah said, ‘Describe the elephant to me, blind men.’ The man at the tusk said, ‘It's like a spear.’ The man at the leg said, ‘It's like a tree.’ The man at the tail said, ‘It's like a rope.’ As the men started to argue, the rajah said to his son, ‘Reality, my son, is the elephant. And we are all blind men.’”

If we were to jump some 3000 years from the story of the original Akedah to the realities of today, we would notice that reality is fact, but differing perspectives become the real issue. I would like to suggest this morning that we are involved in a conflict not merely of reality, but of perspectives on that reality. It is essential that we understand both the reality itself, the narrative that is history and, at the same time, appreciate the different

perspectives of both ancient and modern interpreters on these events. It is important to know our own narratives and how to respond to others.

On May 15, 1948, Iyar 5, 5708, Israel was declared a state by David Ben Gurion in Tel Aviv. We all know the story how Israel had to fight for its very survival and that 1% of the population was lost in the war as Israel became a nation state. The Hebrew date, the 5<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day, is a holiday on the Jewish calendar. Here in this synagogue, as in many synagogues throughout the world, we recite Hallel, read a special Torah reading and wish one another Hag Sameach. The day has religious and national connotations in that we are the first generation in almost 2000 years to experience an independent Jewish commonwealth.

For the Palestinians and much of the Arab world, the date of May 15 has a totally different connotation. It is known as Nakba Day, the day of the catastrophe. For the Palestinians, in their narrative, it is an annual day of commemoration of the displacement that followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence of 1948.

The same date, the same reality, totally contrasting perspectives and narratives. While we recite Hallel, they rise up in protest. Where we see the sovereignty of the Jewish people, they claim the displacement of their ancestors and their descendants.

This is not the only calendar date which brings different perspectives. The Six Day War brought the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and most important, Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. When things were at its lowest point, as Israel was threatened by the Arab nations, the victory of the Israel Defense Forces saved the Jewish nation and extended the boundaries of the State of Israel. For us it is commemorated on Yom Yerushalayim, Jerusalem Day, the 28<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, when Jerusalem was reunited allowing us to return to our Holy sites. In this synagogue we recite Hallel and see it as a day of great rejoicing.

Again, in the Arab world it is seen very differently. June 5<sup>th</sup>, the day on which the Six Day War began on the secular calendar, is now known as Naksa Day, the day of the setback. It is a day in the Arab world when protests are held and a day of mourning is commemorated. The same event, the same reality, differing narratives.

This past February, I joined a trip to Bethlehem arranged by Encounter, an educational organization started by a Conservative rabbi, whose mission is: "To provide global Diaspora leaders from across the religious and political spectrum with exposure to Palestinian life." Our group consisted of leaders of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel who met with Palestinian individuals willing to share their narratives with us. Our encounter gave us time with Sami Awad, a Christian Arab and the founder and executive director of the Holy Land Trust, an organization committed to the principles of non violence "to build a future that makes the Holy Land a global model and pillar of understanding, respect, justice, equality, and peaceful co-existence." We met with Sam Bahour of Ramallah, the founder of Pal Tel, the Palestinian telecommunications company, and Shireen Alaraj, a village council member of Al-Walaja.

This was not to be a dialogue per se, we were asked to listen very carefully to the others' narratives so that we could both appreciate our own and see the differences and how they might be surmounted. Sami Awad, came across as a sincere individual who is interested in moving forward Israeli-Palestinian understanding and peace initiatives. Sam Bahour was concerned with checkpoints and the inability of the Palestinian economy to grow because Israel had set up all sorts of barriers. Shareen complained about the physical barriers that surrounded her town and made travel difficult. She felt isolated because of the security arrangements that were implemented for the Israeli settlements. It was both an enlightening and a very difficult day.

There is no doubt that meeting an individual who disagrees with you is much different than simply reading a narrative or listening to a broadcasted speech. While you may disagree with an individual, you can at least appreciate the fact that they are human beings just like you. For dialogue, what is needed is respect for one another. When that is not present dialogue does not occur and we simply end up speaking past one another rather than with one another.

My narrative and my perspective on the Middle East conflict did not change, but it was good to hear from another person their narrative and their perspective for two reasons: One, to be able to respond to their narrative, if necessary, and two, to be able to challenge myself on my own narrative as well. So what is reality? In the end does it really matter? Each of us has a different perspective and our individual narratives cause us to form opinions about ourselves and also the other side. There may never be truth, as defined in the Platonic fashion, there may be only perspectives on the truth just like the elephant and the blind men.

We are at a crucial time in the history of Israel and its neighbors. We are not sure, at this moment in history, where the Arab spring will lead us. We are following the situation at the United Nations with the universal Declaration of Independence for the Palestinians. We are concerned about the actions of Israel's one-time allies, Egypt and Turkey. We must be vigilant concerning the northern border, the southern border and now, as well, the Syrian border. We continue to be alarmed about the activities of Iran. Israel continues to fight both a deligitimization campaign and a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign. And we are following carefully the relations between Israel and the United States and where they are heading.

What are we to do about it? It seems to me that in addition to political, financial and moral support, Israel and the Jewish people need something else as well. It is imperative that we know our own narrative, understand the other's narratives and be able to respond to it. We must continue to grow in our knowledge of the issues. I encourage you, if you have not already signed up, to join with me in the Hartman Institute Lecture Series which will allow us to engage with Israel over the course of this year. I hope that you will be present at our Israel Bond event, our AIPAC lectures, our Jewish United Fund event and many of the other programs that we will be hosting this year on Israel.

I hope those of you who have college students push your students to learn more about Israel and its story. They may not necessarily have to agree with all of Israel's policies, none of us do, but they must understand the foundations of the state and why it is so important to our past, present and future. They must know that for 2,000 years wherever we have been across the globe we have turned to Jerusalem and worked towards a Jewish commonwealth. They must understand that while Jerusalem may be a holy city to other faiths, it is the only holy city in our faith. They must gain the facts that will allow them to appreciate what it meant to establish a Jewish state and what it means to keep it safe. They must learn our history and be in touch with the longing of our people for a Jewish state which now exists in our own lifetime. They have many allies on campuses from Hillel to the Jewish Agency; from JNF to AIPAC; from Aish HaTorah to Stand With Us. Convince them to take advantage of their resources.

Those of us who have the ability to travel to Israel this year must do so. There is no better experience than the reality itself of being in Israel and seeing the miracle of the state and its many challenges. I am ultimately hopeful. To be a Jew is to be an optimist. There is no other way. We need to work for peace even as we prepare for many for many challenges that are ahead of us.

In a new book by the Chief Rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, entitled "*The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning*," he states in his introduction that the faith of Abraham is by any standards remarkable. Abraham, Rabbi Sacks suggests, is the most influential person whoever lived, counted today as the spiritual grandfather of more than half of the six billion people on the face of the planet. Rabbi Sacks recounts the fact that his immediate descendants, the Children of Israel, the Jews, are a tiny people. Yet, we have outlived all of the great empires created on this earth. All of them have disappeared, but the Jewish people live. A persecuted sect, known as the Christians, also saw themselves as the Children of Abraham. "They would one day," he writes, "become the largest movement of any kind in the history of the world." And as for Islam, it has spread faster than any movement in the lifetime of its founder and continues to spread today. All of them trace themselves back to Abraham. As Rabbi Sacks states: "All other civilizations rise and fall, the faith of Abraham survives."

Our hope is that these three great faiths whose history is intertwined with that of the Holy Land and the narrative of Abraham and Isaac, will work together to create an era of peace and harmony. We are not there yet. We have a long way to go and until that time we must be prepared to struggle on behalf of our own narrative. In this day and age nothing is more critical for the life of the Jewish people and the safety and security of the State of Israel.

May we see the day when peace, security, harmony and justice shall come to the peoples of the Middle East and the State of Israel shall shine forth as a beacon for all humanity. May the words of the prophet Isaiah be fulfilled: "For out of Zion shall come forth the Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem." May it come speedily in our day.