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Rosh Hashanah Reflections, 2009

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Last Sunday while the kids were gathering for the first day of Hebrew School, Bennet tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I would be willing to speak at the Rosh Hashanah service. So, immediately, of course my mind started racing trying to think of some way out of it, but, in the end, when Bennett called I felt obliged to respond: Hineni, here I am.

Deep down I think I was pleased. It was four years ago that my family first celebrated a JCSS Rosh Hashanah, and I remember being incredibly moved. When we sang Beethoven's Ode to Joy in Yiddish, well, you had me at: "Ale mentshn zaynen brider".

So, in the spirit of the season I'd like to begin with a confession, not in the sense of apologizing for a year's worth of wrong doings, but more like St. Augustine's confession, i.e., what I believe in, where I'm coming from.

I've always responded to a tale ascribed to the Baal Shem Tov. When his people were in trouble, the tzadik would go to a secret place in the forest, light a special fire, say a particular prayer, and ask God to save his people - which God would do. Then after Baal Shem-Tov passed away it was up to his disciple. This rabbi still knew the location

of the secret place in the woods and still remembered the prayer but he'd forgotten how to make the special fire. He pleaded with God to save his people in spite of this lapse - and God did. And so on. With each succeeding generation something else was forgotten - first the prayer and then the location of the secret forest - until the last rabbi protested to God that all he remembered was the story itself, and he hoped it would be sufficient to save his people - and it was.

Now, the Baal Shem Tov lived until 1760. And the period when his disciples would have been active lines up chronologically with the Jewish emancipation movements of the late 18th and 19th centuries - and with Darwin. The author of the tale tacitly acknowledges that along with these advances there was a proportional decrease in the people-saving magic available to the rabbis. But he also affirms that God will recognize any "turning towards him". As long as a person still calls out to God then the essential ingredient for redemption is present.

Secular Jews - myself included - take the story to the next level, which is that we don't (or can't or won't) plead our case before God since most of us don't believe he exists - you can't be saved by somebody who's not



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there. But for some of us at least, there remains a void. We are, as T.S. Eliot described it, like those "children at the gate who cannot pray and will not go away."

I'm a secular Jew living fully in this world, godless, yet with a vestigial sense of mystery about the whole thing. I hope the JCSS is Big Tent-enough to include people like me.

So what does any of this have to do with Rosh Hashanah?

When I was looking for a topic I first rounded up the usual suspects - and there can be some pretty straightforward secular interpretations of Rosh Hashanah themes: self-reflection, repentance, and forgiveness are all perfectly acceptable topics that can be discussed without reference to God. But there is one subject that's linked in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy to the idea of Remembrance which resists secularization - the binding of Isaac - the myth where God instructs Abraham to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice.

Now, this caught my interest. What, if anything, as secular Jews, does this story have to tell us? Or is it, as the traditionalists would have it, strictly about Abraham's faith in God, his submission to His will - and that's what we need to remember on Rosh Hashanah.

There's of course all that wonderful symbolism. On Passover the blood of the sacrificed lamb shoos away the angel of death when it's painted on the lintels of the Jewish homes. And then on Easter the lamb morphs into the crucified Christ who takes away the sins of the world: "Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi" - and although I love

the music that's come down to us from the Catholic mass, I just can't get behind the meaning.

Some interpreters point to the story of Abraham and Isaac as evidence of the barbarity of our religious past. What kind of perverse God would tempt his loyal follower in this way? But I think to take this approach is to commit the same fallacy as the orthodoxy, i.e., to buy-into a literal interpretation of a symbolic event. If you replace "God" with "the Gods", it somehow becomes more palatable, more Greek-myth-like: "The gods commanded Abraham..."

Other people view the myth as indicating a turning away from human sacrifice - in the end God would not let Abraham slaughter his child. Maybe, but the tension in the story is not that Isaac is human, but that he is Abraham's son, the child of his and Sarah's old age; the one, who in the Jewish if not Islamic tradition, will become a patriarch of his people.

Still, the 800-pound gorilla on the subject of the binding of Isaac is the 19th century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. And Kierkegaard loved Abraham; would rather have accompanied him on his 3-day trip to Mt. Moriah than visit all the capitals of Europe. Yet he knew that if Abraham were a contemporary of his and had Abraham confided to his pastor what God had asked him to do, that he would have been thrown into the loony bin - or worse. Kierkegaard loved the purity of Abraham's faith; a faith that the philosopher could aspire to but never attain. And that's why we like Kierkegaard.



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A great reading of the myth, but not mine. Or not anymore. Kierkegaard was a bachelor; he could have dropped everything to go on that trip with Abraham, but I have a family. Our orientations are different. I had to dig deeper. What does the binding of Isaac mean to me? And what does this story have to do with Rosh Hashanah and remembrance?

I thought about my own children. I don't believe in God, but I do believe in miracles. My children are my miracles. Probably shouldn't be talked about too much; sometimes less is more, but when my first-born, James, came along something happened to me. The reality of his life somehow diminished the sting of my death. And unless the Theory of Natural Selection keeps you warm at night, then why this is so is not immediately obvious: Bernie begat Ron who begat James and Teddy who begat...

All this ceaseless generation on the face of it seems futile. But it doesn't feel that way. We love our children, and they provide us with our only window on to immortality. Not the other-worldly, pie-in-the-sky kind, but the bred-in-the-bone-and-the-blood kind.

If Abraham slays Isaac then there's no one to remember him, and no one to remember us. We all instantly vanish like a switched-off light.

For me, the day after the President of Iran once again calls the Holocaust a "mythical claim", the majesty of Abraham's faith takes a backseat to the mere fact of Isaac's survival.

Here's a beautiful passage I found in the "machzor" of the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture:

"Remembrance is not merely an excursion into the past. The central theme of Rosh Hashanah is the power of memory itself. Memory defies oblivion, breaks the coils of the present, establishes the continuity of generations, and rescues human life and effort from futility. It affords the only true resurrection of the dead. The act of remembering is thus in itself redemptive. If, on the one hand, it involves a chastening assessment, it involves on the other, a comforting reassurance. Rosh Hashanah is at once a day of judgement and a new beginning. If it looks backward, it does so only on the way forward; and its symbol is the trumpet of an eternal reveille."

Ron Frank is a current JCSS member.