The Sounds of Silence
Rosh Hashanah, 13 September 2007
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It was 40 years ago, on Rosh Hashanah 1967, when I first led Rosh Hashanah services. I had recently returned from a year of study at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and I had just entered Rabbinical School. The Hillel Rabbi at Cornell University, Morris Goldfarb, invited me to lead services for its Reform community. In the morning, I preached my first sermon on the Akedat Yitzhak: not too bad, as I recall.

Now there is no need to argue or demonstrate the extraordinary richness of this chapter from a literary, philosophical, and historical point of view. But can one continue to say something new about the parashah even after 40 years? It is, to be sure, something of a challenge.

There is, however, something new about my preaching here this morning. The liturgy of the American Reform movement is different from that of British Reform – closer to British Liberal – and it uses only one Torah reading, Genesis 22. The passage from *Nitsavim* that we heard as a second reading is actually used in American Reform for the morning of Yom Kippur. This is therefore the first time I have had the opportunity to preach on the Akedah in juxtaposition with that great passage from *Nitsavim*. But they are so totally different: one about the specific dynamics of a relationship between God, a father and a son, the other about the relationship between God and an entire people. Is there any connection?

I believe that there is, and it is expressed in the last phrase we heard read: *asher einenu po imanu ha-yom* : “those not present with us this day”

(Deut. 29:14). Now I am not speaking of Jews who don't show up for Rosh Hashanah morning services; that's a different problem. Rather, I am asking, Who are the ones who are *not present* in the Akedah narrative? Who is missing from this story that is so crucial to our experience of Rosh Hashanah? Which are the voices that are *not heard*, that are *silent*? The phrase from *Nitsavim* reminds as that these too are important, these too are part of the covenant.

The first person whose absence from the narrative is so blatant as soon as we begin to think about it is Sarah, the mother of the intended sacrifice. If we accept the biblical chronology literally, we must conclude that however memorable it was for Abraham to father a son at age 100, it was far more extraordinary for Sarah to bear him and give birth to him at 90. Now the son for whom she had waited so long, for whom she had given up hope and then was confronted with radically amazing and life-transforming news, is to be taken off on a 3-day journey into the wilderness, perhaps never to return. Unlike the contemporary poem many of us heard at the service last night, in the Bible we don't hear a single word from her mouth.

Did Abraham even confide in her? "Sarah I have good news and bad news. The good news is that God wants me to offer a very special sacrifice. The bad news is that it's Isaac." We are told that Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled and loaded his donkey and went off, apparently without even saying good-bye. Was it because he did not even want to face his wife and inform her of the nature of his mandate? One rabbinic midrash holds that when Abraham and Isaac returned to their home and told Sarah what had happened—how he bound his son on an altar and stretched out his hand with the knife to slay him—the thought was so har-

rowing that, even seeing him alive in front of her, she collapsed and fell over, dead. But nothing of this is in the text.

This represents the absence of the woman's voice, and often even the woman's presence, from so much of our history. Yes, there were women in the rabbinic era, women in the Middle Ages, who were known to be knowledgeable of Jewish law. But did they write anything? Are their teachings transmitted? The answer is no. Both the Islamic and Christian traditions include women whose mystical experience was recorded and transmitted. Nothing comparable has been preserved in the Jewish tradition.

We know absolutely nothing about the inner religious spirituality of Mrs. Moshe de Leon (author of the Zohar), or Mrs. Isaac Luria (the great Safed Kabbalist), or Mrs. Baal Shem Tov. In medieval Christendom, there were communities of nuns with abbesses who delivered sermons to them. In our tradition, there is no evidence of women preaching before the early 20th century, and the unique woman's voice from the Jewish pulpit begins to emerge only after 1970.

As many of you know, perhaps from a recent article in the *Jewish Chronicle* written by a United Synagogue Rabbi [Harvey Belovski], the issue of listening to *Kol isha*, a woman's voice, is an actual, ongoing problem in halakhah. One of the great legal authorities of the Babylonian Talmud, Samuel, said that the voice of a woman is *ervah*, which might be rendered "as sexually arousing as her nakedness." Because of the assumption that men listening to a woman sing, or perhaps even speak, would be provoked to licentiousness, the *Shulchan Arukh* prohibits a man to hear the voice of any woman forbidden to him; to put it differently,

women should not sing, or perhaps even speak, in the presence of a man who is not her husband or a member of her family.

In some ultra-Orthodox circles, this principle prohibits women singing around the Shabbat table when there were guests, and certainly their singing should not be heard in the synagogue. Many will not listen to a woman opera singer or rock star. All of this seems incredible to us, based on an absurd premise, and leading to an outrageous conclusion. But the suppression of the woman's voice in the public domain, adumbrated in our Torah reading by the absence of Sarah, is a part of our history with ongoing repercussions—actually defended by the United Synagogue Rabbi in the *Jewish Chronicle* two weeks ago.

A second person silent and missing from our narrative is Ishmael, Isaac's older brother. Now of course his absence is explained in the previous chapter (Genesis 21), which is actually the traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Following the birth of Isaac, at the instigation of Sarah (whose voice is indeed heard at *this* critical point), Abraham expels his concubine Hagar and his teen-age son Ishmael, sending them out in the wilderness with only some bread and a jug of water. From that point on, Ishmael lives out in the wilderness, banished from his father's presence and his father's story, returning only at the time of Abraham's death to help bury him.

As difficult as this experience must have been for Hagar, she knew that her status was of a servant woman, with no rights comparable to that of the wife. How much more difficult it must have been for Ishmael, sent away as a child by his elderly father with no good explanation. Can we imagine Ishmael's reaction if he had been privy to the divine command

that Abraham was to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice to God? "Here is my chance to be restored to my father's house. True, Father will never get over the pain of losing his son with Sarah. I'll never be able to fill the emptiness in his heart. But maybe he will again love me too, as he once did." And then the report that either God or Abraham had a change of heart at the last moment, and Isaac returned, more precious than ever. What emotions he would have felt: disappointment, anger, resentment, hatred. Yet this dimension too is missing from the narrative. Ishmael's voice is silent, his story does not get told.

In both Jewish and Muslim tradition, Ishmael is the progenitor of the Arab Muslim nation. Indeed, the dominant tradition of Quran exegesis makes Ishmael the son whom God commanded Abraham to sacrifice. For most of Jewish history, it would be incorrect to speak of the metaphorical absence or silence of Ishmael. Everyone literate in Jewish history should know that the centre of world-wide Talmudic study was for centuries in Muslim Baghdad, that the best-documented medieval Jewish community was that of Muslim Cairo with its vast Geniza literature, that the greatest flourishing of Jewish culture in the Middle Ages was in medieval Muslim Spain. But if Ishmael is present as the powerful and tolerant host for much of our history, he begins to fade into the background with the Zionist movement.

The great Zionist theoreticians—Pinsker, Herzl, Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha'am—developed their ideologies with hardly a thought given to the native Arab population of Palestine. The catch phrase was "A people without a land, for a land without a people." Those who actually went to live in Palestine knew that there was an Arab population, but with few excep-

tions, they went about fulfilling their own agenda as if the native population were invisible.

The master narrative of the Zionist movement is of returning to the soil, draining the swamps, clearing the rocks, making the desert bloom, bringing civilization and technology and culture to the Middle East. The Arabs appear only as the looming threat, the source of danger, the inscrutable Other who must be suspected and feared. Empathy with the voice of the Other, the experience, the pain of the Other, is the rare exception to the rule.

When we were in Israel this summer, there was a bitter controversy over a new text book called "Living Together in Israel," recounting the history of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel for children in the third grade. Since Arab citizens of Israel have their own school system in which the language of instruction is Arabic, text books are published in Hebrew and Arabic versions. In the Arabic version for 3rd graders, but not in the Hebrew version, there was a sentence about the events of 1947-48 that reads: "The Arabs call the war 'Nakba', that is, a war of disaster and loss, while the Jews call it *Milhemet ha-Shihrur*, 'The War of Independence.'

Fierce attacks were generated not by the omission of this sentence from the Hebrew version, so that Israeli Jewish children would not be exposed in even half a sentence to the perspective of their Arab neighbours. Rather, he attacks condemned the inclusion of what is an undeniable fact (the Arabic term for the 1948 war) in the version for Israeli Arab children. The Hebrew version also omits information that appears in the Arabic version about the military rule over Arab populations and the expro-

priation of land by the Israeli government. For those who condemned the new textbook, the voice of Ishmael, the perspective and experience of the Other, is to remain silent in the master narrative even today. That too is a silence we must deplore.

The final silence in our Akedah story is the silence of beings who are physically present yet mute. There are the servant youths who accompany Abraham and Isaac but never open their mouths. And there are the animals. The donkey—not a sentient, talking, articulate donkey as in the Balaam story, but one who characteristically carries his burden in silence, perhaps wondering why Abraham too seems to be so silent throughout the 3-day journey, not talking to his son. And most important, there is the ram.

The greatest Hebrew poet of the past generation, Yehuda Amichai, a genius at expressing simple profundities in such a direct and accessible manner, reminded us of this in a poem called, *Gibbur ha-Akedah*, The Hero of the Binding:

> The true hero of the binding was the ram
> Who did not know about the conspiracy between
> the others.
> It was as if he volunteered to die in place of Isaac.
> I would like to sing about him a song of remembrance,
> about the curly wool and about his human eyes
> about the horns which were so silent in his live head
> and after being slaughtered they made from them *shofarot* . . . .
>
> The angel went home

Isaac went home
and Abraham and God went long ago.

But the true hero of the binding
Is the ram.

I was reminded of this when recently I read an article by Orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Riskin called “The World Needs the Temple”. In it, Riskin defends the hope for the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of the sacrificial cult by asserting that the Temple in Jerusalem “is cardinal to Israel’s purpose as a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed. . . . The Temple is to be the beacon from which this message [of universal peace] goes forth. Only a Temple teaching absolute morality in the City of Peace can secure the future of freedom in our global village!” Therefore the need “to continue fighting for Jerusalem.” [*Ha’aretz*, English edition, July 20, 2007, p. 32]

In addition to the unbelievable political naivete in this position—will the Muslims really be attracted by a Temple that replaces their Dome of the Rock? Will Hindus want to come and offer bullocks for a burnt offering?—the underlying premise of this position is that the restoration of a system requiring the massive slaughtering and burning of animals is the highest form of worship of God, and will be an inspiration for the entire world.

Now I am not someone sympathetic to the notion of animal rights as radically understood. Ants or termites that are entering my home may just be doing their thing totally innocent of harmful intent, but I’m going

to call an exterminator. If a dog I loved and a child I had never seen before were drowning and I could save only one, there is no question that I would save the human being. Although I eat very little red meat, and only slightly more poultry, I am not a vegetarian out of moral principle.

I am outraged by public relations campaigns sponsored by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals called "Holocaust on your plate," juxtaposing pictures of cooped up, starving animals with Holocaust victims in the camps, stating that "What we are doing to animals . . . is [imposing] the same suffering that the Jews went through in the Holocaust,", or "In relation to [animals], all people are Nazis; for them it is an eternal Treblinka."

And yet: I winced when I saw a few weeks ago a BBC television programme reviewing a century of wildlife photography, with footage from the early part of the 20th century showing magnificent animals being shot for the camera. Thankfully we have moved beyond the point where seeing an animal hunted and shot is considered to be appropriate entertainment (although this morning's *Guardian* carried a harrowing picture of a bull suffering a "long, frightening and sadistic death" by lancing in a traditional festival at Tordesillas, Spain).

I wince when I read about a "culling of the herd" resulting in the slaughtering and burning of many thousand animals to protect against the potential spread of a disease; or about the destruction of 7000 – 9000 male calves in the UK each month because male calves do not grow up to make good beef; or the close confinement in individual pens of calves kept in the dark and fed no solids so that their flesh will remain as pale as possible for high-grade veal.

Certainly we have some responsibility to ensure that economic incentives will not consign animals to a life of hardship and deprivation for the culinary pleasures of self-indulgent human beings. More of us seem to be sensitive to such issues; this too is a voice that is increasingly beginning to be heard.

Our covenant with God includes also *asher einenu po imanu hayom*, those who are absent, those who are silent:

- Sarah representing the suppressed voice of women throughout so much of our history;
- Ishmael, representing the voice of the vanquished Other in the Holy Land;
- the ram—"the true hero of the Akedah"—representing the often brutally silenced voice of the animal world that shares this planet with us and that is crucial to our very survival.

In reading this stirring story each year, let us remain sensitive not only to the sounds of communication between God and Abraham, and between father and son, but also to the sounds of silence that we so readily ignore. For without them, this story remains incomplete.