

Congregation B'nai Brith
Rosh Hashanah 5778 – The Ram of the Akeida

וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאחז בסבך בקרניו.
וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל ויעלהו לעולה תחת בנו.

Abraham lifted up his gaze and saw איל אחר, a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. And he took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

The איל is the most enigmatic character in the story of the *akeida* (עקידה). Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai refers to him as the real hero of the story of the *akeida*: “a silent presence – as if volunteered to die in place of Isaac.”

There are two ways to understand Amichai’s line. The first is that the ram wanted to become this sacrifice, that he volunteered himself. This traditional reading relies on Mishna Avot (5:6), which tells us that the ram was created at twilight on the very first Friday, one of ten magical things created on the cusp of the very first Shabbat of creation. And Rashi tells us that this איל has been wandering the earth since, waiting for the designated moment. If Douglas Adams (in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*) sold us on a cow that wants to be eaten, the rabbis are selling us on a ram that is born to die, created by God to become burnt offering to God.

But there is another way to understand “as if volunteered”. This is the direction Amichai is pointing us at – the איל did not volunteer to die. Abraham volunteered him. Why volunteered? Because God does not request a sacrifice instead of Isaac. Goes doesn’t ask for a ram or any other animal. The sacrifice Abraham chooses to bring is a voluntary gratitude sacrifice. In his moment of joy, he sees the entangled ram and believes it to be serendipity – an opportunity to make a sacrifice to God. So he takes the opportunity. This is also how the rabbis understand it.

Tradition provides us with eleven reasons for sounding the shofar. One of these reasons is to remind God of the עקידה, to remind God of the binding of Isaac. Our Machzor reads:

“Remember the pledge you gave Abraham our ancestor on Mount Moriah. Remember how he bound his son Isaac on the altar, subduing his fatherly compassion so that he might do your will wholeheartedly. So may your compassion for us subdue your wrath”
(*Machzor Hadash*, 321)

On the surface this is about God’s role as a judge on Rosh Hashanah, before whom all souls pass like sheep. We know, or at least fear, that we will be found wanting at this moment of judgement. So we bring in our family history to act as character witness for us and we say “but look, we are the same children of Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his own beloved son to show his loyalty and dedication to you. Surely that counts for something?”

But it’s more than that. When we blow the shofar we say: we are not only the descendants of Abraham who was such a great servant to you, we are the descendants of Isaac the *intended sacrifice himself*. You spared Isaac. We hope you will spare us. Or in the words of the Talmud: “why do we blow a ram’s horn? God said: ‘blow before Me a ram’s horn so I will

remember the binding of Isaac and I will consider it as if you bound yourselves on the altar as sacrifice to Me'." (RH 16a)

Without getting into the depth of the question of whether the imagery of God as an actual judge – and of ourselves on trial -- even resonates with us (I assume for many the answer is a resounding no), there is the question of whether a ram's horn is the best tool by which to invoke Abraham and Isaac's commitment to God? Why don't we wave a bunch of firewood to remind God of the altar? Or symbolically bind ourselves as we do with tefillin? Why a ram's horn? After all, the story would have been (completely) complete without the ram. Once God says to Abraham – your willingness to sacrifice your son counts by me as if you did it, the story is complete.

Because the ram is tacked on to the plotline of the akeida, an unnecessary sacrifice, I feel we need to look for the horn as a representation of the ram himself, and not Isaac or Abraham. What does this animal, caught in the thicket, come to teach us? And what do we invoke by sounding its horn?

First, a word about taxonomy (Jewish taxonomy).

You probably noticed that I went from using the term אֵיל to ram. I will continue by speaking about a goat. I even throw in an antelope and an ox for good measure. There is quite a bit of discussion about the correct identification of biblical animals. For one, the word אֵיל – male sheep, and the word אֵייל – male deer are identical in writing and we can only differentiate them by vocalization – which does not exist in the Torah. All we have to go on is oral tradition how to pronounce particular words. So what did Abraham even see in the thicket?

The English translators almost uniformly translate אֵיל as ram. But the commentators are saying: how can we say it was a ram? Rams are not wild animals. If Abraham saw a ram in the thicket, he should have returned it to its owner. Certainly he wouldn't have sacrificed to God someone else's animal? That's theft!! Later scholars point out that unbeknownst to early commentators there actually was a proto-domesticated male sheep that existed in the wild during that time-- the *ovis orientalis* – but sadly they also agree that it never inhabited the region where our story takes place. We are not sure which animal it was. We know it was an animal with horns. But actually in English we have animals with horns and animals with antlers. In Hebrew we don't have that distinction. So all we know is that it was an animal either with horns or antlers. We can assume they were horns though, because Abraham's sacrifice is a *korban olah*, which can be an ox, a male sheep or a male goat (all horned creatures). So horns.

When the great endeavor to “revive the Hebrew language” gained momentum, Eliezer Ben-Yehudah attached the names of biblical animals to animals that existed in his time. In doing so, he often used the identification he found in the commentators' work. He took an educated guess. That's all.

Moreover, the word “ram” exists as a Hebrew word in the Torah. The ראם is often mentioned for its horns and strength, but it is not a male sheep but rather identified as an antelope, or oryx.

What I am trying to say is that the biblical taxonomy of the animal kingdom is not an accurate science. But we can assume that when we blow an animal horn on this holiday, we are saying that there is some significance to that horned animal, and I've been trying to think: what

is this significance? Are we really blowing the horn to say to God: look we are the sacrifice? We are victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (like the ram in the akeida?), or even worse, are we saying we live our lives for the purpose of becoming sacrifice (Rashi's commentary)?

A Chassidic story.

A Chassidic story tells of an old hassid who lost his snuff box made of animal horn. These were expensive items and so he was rather distraught and wailing "I've lost my snuff box", when he came upon the holy goat. The holy goat was pacing the earth and the tips of his beautiful horns were kissing the heavens. When the goat heard the hassid lamenting, he leaned down to him and said, 'Cut a piece from my horns - whatever you need to make a new snuff box.' The old man did this, made a new snuffbox and filled it with tobacco. When he returned to the House of Study, he offered everyone a pinch of tobacco. Everyone was awed by the scent: 'What a wonderful tobacco! It must be because of the box. Where did you get it?' And the old man told them about the sacred goat. Then one after the other, they went out onto the street and looked for the sacred goat. The sacred goat was pacing the earth and the tips of his beautiful horns were kissing the heavens. One after the other they went up to him and begged permission to cut off a bit of his horns. And time after time the sacred goat leaned down to grant the request. Box after box was made, and the fame of the boxes spread far and wide. Now the sacred goat still paces the earth - but he has no horns.

It's a sad story. The goat representing the majesty of being, at once grounded and at home pacing the earth, but also connected to the heavens, to spirituality and to God. It represents human life in the balance, or at least at the beginning of the story it does.

This has been a tough year for our country. We've seen a rise in antisemitism, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. We've seen the loss of important LGBTQ rights. We felt the wrath of nature as at the same time our government pulled out of the Paris treaty. Last year we sat in this very room already exhausted from a contentious and mean spirited presidential campaign, but possibly telling ourselves that we only need to endure a couple more months till November and then things will return to the way they were. Now it is a year later and we are tired. We are exhausted.

We are exhausted because bad news are exhausting and because worry is exhausting.

But we are also exhausted because for many of us this has been a year in which we lived out of our comfort zone, a year in which we were called to action more than before. I shared with you the story of the holy goat because I think this year many of you, indeed most of us, found ourselves in the position of this once glorious horned being. Our country was crying to us with loss and need, and we were called to respond and help. So we gave of ourselves perhaps more than we normally would. Perhaps you are uncomfortable making phone calls, but you called your representatives repeatedly. Perhaps you are an introvert, but you still marched with tens of

thousands of people. Perhaps you wanted a break from the news, but you felt it was your responsibility to stay informed. We've all bowed our heads and gave some of our very selves this year. And then again, and again. Because the assault on our way of life was unrelenting and the involvement requested of us unceasing.

And now we arrive at this season of return, at this season of high holidays and we are emotionally drained and spiritually depleted. We lost our horns - The symbol of that extra something that makes us more than mundane earthlings, the horns that symbolize our connection to spirituality and to God.

I confess, I was struggling for a message to share with you at this season of renewal when I too feel so low when I, too, feel a bit caught in the thicket of life, unable to free myself and wondering where the replenishing of our soul might come from.

וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא איל אחר

Abraham lifted up his gaze and saw another ayil, a different ayil – an after ayil.

The commentators write much about the weird ambiguity in this verse. What does it mean Abraham saw a different ayil? Were there more than one? Were there two? Was it not a real ram? Perhaps Abraham was having a mystical vision? The rabbis don't know.

But I think this verse comes to instruct us rather literally to look for another איל. Look for a different איל when we blow the shofar of the akeida. Not the victim, the sacrifice, not the hornless, sad, depleted, caught in the thicket of life, exhausted איל. Another איל.

Here are two such אילים from our tradition, both representing our soul.

The first, the איל of Friday night's yedid nefesh –

ידיד נפש אב הרחמן משוך עבדך אל רצונך ירוץ עבדך כמו איל ישתחוה אל מול הדרך

Beloved of my soul, merciful parent draw your servant to do your will, so your servant may run, like an איל and bow before your splendor.

Our soul is an איל that runs and pastures with God. Happy. Majestic.

The second איל comes from psalm 42:

כאיל תערוג על אפיקי מים כן נפשי תערוג אליך ה'

My soul sounds its yearning for you in the same way as the איל does when in need of water.

This verse requires a bit of an explanation.

In Hebrew the sound of the איל is called ערגה – it's a word not used for the sound of any other animal and it comes from the root ערג, yearning. In other words, a cow, moos. A cat meows, and the איל yearns.

Rashi explains that when the animals thirst for water, they all go to the איל and the איל digs a hole in the ground with his horns, places his head into it, and makes this sound of yearning.

And when God hears the yearning of the איל, God cannot remain detached and God immediately consents and produces rains of blessing for all the animals to quench their thirst.

This is the איל I want to think about as we sound the shofar this year. An איל that is all but cut off from the heavens. An איל that is close to God's heart, majestic and strong. An איל that takes the anguish of the world, the things we yearn for, and turns it into rains of blessing.

When we hear the sound of the shofar, may you all merit a sense of renewal, a sense of your strength and majesty. A sense of how close you are to God. A sense of God's love for you and the knowledge that even if the year ahead is as difficult as the year behind, we are not hornless, not powerless, we will make it through.

שנה טובה