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Rochel *bas* Avrohom *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Remembering Akeidas Yitzchak

PARSHAS VAYEIRA 5778

Few other events figure so prominently in the annals of our heritage as does Akeidas Yitzchak (the Binding of Yitzchak), featured in this week’s *parshah*. This episode, of course, involved the heroic devotion of Avraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son for Hashem’s sake, and of Yitzchak, who willingly submitted to the deed.

And so it is that the memory of this event is invoked at key moments. This is especially the case on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, when Klal Yisrael is in need of great merit. Not only is this section featured in the day’s Torah reading, but the event itself is incorporated into the special blessing of “*Zichronos*” (Remembrances) in the Mussaf service.

Sacrifices and Judgment

In what way, exactly, does the invocation of Akeidas Yitzchak aid the Jewish People at this critical time of Judgment? The simple understanding, it would seem, is that the mention of the event is an effort to arouse Divine mercy; that is, we ask Hashem to have compassion on us in the merit of the monumental deed of our forefathers. And while there certainly is truth to this notion, we shall see that there is yet a deeper dimension to the matter.

Such emerges from Chazal’s treatment of the topic of Divine Judgment. There are actually four adjudications that take place throughout the year, as the Mishnah relates (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:2):

בְּאַרְבָּעָה פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו... וּבְחַג נְדוּנִין עַל הַמַּיִם.

“During four periods the world is judged: On Pesach (the world is judged) for (the allotment of that year’s) produce; on Shavuos – for fruits of the tree; on Rosh Hashanah – all the world’s inhabitants pass before Him (in judgment)...and on the (Sukkos) festival, there is judgment for water.”

Elaborating on this theme, the Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*) perceives a connection between the unique *avodah* (Divine service) of these festivals and the judgment that pertains to them. On Pesach, the meal-offering known as the *Omer* is brought, consisting of barley-grain. This offering corresponds to the type of judgment conducted at this time, as it is on Pesach that Heaven determines that year’s allotment of grain and produce. By mandating the bringing of this offering, then, Hashem is in effect saying: “Bring to Me the *Omer* at this time, such that you will be blessed with abundant grain.” The pattern continues on Shavuos, at which time the mandated offering is the *Shetei Halechem*, two loaves of wheat. This corresponds to the judgment concerning the “fruit of the tree.” (Rashi explains that this teaching aligns with the opinion of R’ Yehudah [*Sanhedrin 70b*], who holds that the tree from which Adam ate its fruit in Gad Eden was actually a “wheat tree.”) The specialized *avodah* of Sukkos consists of the water libation, as it is exclusively wine that is offered on the altar during the remainder of the year. This corresponds to the timely judgment of rainwater.

Now, it is with regard to the remaining judgment – on the lives of man on Rosh Hashanah – that somewhat of a complication arises. Here, the Gemara identifies the unique *avodah* pertaining to the judgment as the recital of the special Mussaf blessings of *Malchiyos* (Kingship), *Zichronos* (Remembrances), and *Shofros*. Each of these consists of Scriptural verses reflecting these themes, and it is through them that we aim to achieve a favorable judgment. But this seems to be a bit of a departure from the preceding items. Until now, everything else – the service of Pesach, Shavuos, and Sukkos – involved the bringing of a sacrifice. Why the sudden shift when it comes to Rosh Hashanah? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate if, at this time as well, a special offering was brought to elicit a favorable judgment?

Self-Sacrifice

In his *sefer Yerach L'mo'adim* (*Rosh Hashanah*, § 44), R' Yeruchem Olshin explains that, in fact, this is indeed the case; the recital of these verses – specifically through the invoking of the episode of *Akeidas Yitzchak* – itself constitutes a sacrificial offering. And the object of this offering is our very selves, for by mentioning the *Akeidah*, it is credited to us, as Yitzchak's progeny, as if we have offered ourselves to Hashem on the altar. The Gemara (*ibid.*) proceeds to delineate this idea as embodied in the Shofar: “Why do we blow (on Rosh Hashanah) the horn of (specifically) a ram? Hashem says: Blow before Me the horn of a ram, so that I will remember for you *Akeidas Yitzchak* (in whose stead a ram was offered) ...**and I will account it to you as if you had offered yourselves before Me.**”

Now, the *Meshech Chachmah* (*parshas Va'yeira*, *parshas Emor*) takes the matter one step further. He understands that the invocation of the *Akeidah*, in a sense, serves to conjure up the actual merit of Klal Yisrael. Jewish history has witnessed the phenomenon of remarkable heroism on the part of the common folk of Yisrael, as large segments of the populace readily submitted to martyrdom rather than betray Hashem and His Torah. Thus it was that during such time periods as the Crusades, the Cossack massacres of *Tach v'Tat* (5408-09) and many others, whole communities displayed their heroic loyalty to Hashem by choosing death over conversion. Indeed, it is something of a wonder; what gave even unlearned men, women, and children the strength to make such a profound sacrifice, without hesitation? The answer is that such was bequeathed to them from their forefather, Yitzchak; his submission to the *Akeidah* implanted within the nation for all time the ability to display such *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice). And it is this notion that is brought to the fore with the blowing of the shofar, for it reawakens the memory of Klal Yisrael's *own merit*, as they follow in their forefather's footsteps, sanctifying the Name of Hashem with their very lives.

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