

## **Sermon—First day of Rosh Hashanah**

Our Torah portion dealt with the birth of Isaac as foretold by the three angels in the previous Torah portion. There are many fascinating aspects of Abraham's encounter with the three strangers whom he is privileged to host. The first is that Sarah is described as eavesdropping at Abraham's tent during the conversation. Her reaction to the news of her impending pregnancy is one of disbelief. How could she possibly conceive a child from a sexual union with a husband who was so old? The fact that she was ninety and had experienced menopause was not consequential. The problem was that her husband was ten years her senior. God is disturbed by Sarah's utterance of disbelief in the miraculous and complains to Abraham. Sarah is not only convinced of Abraham's inability to father a child but is also concerned about public opinion. What would people conclude other than the reality that the father of the child was a person other than her husband Abraham? God chides Sarah for believing that she is too old to conceive a child at her advanced age, which was not an accurate account of her statement. The commentators are concerned about the inaccuracy of the divine report

to Abraham. How could God tell such a white lie? The answer for them is simple and conclusive—God can fib in order to insure *shalom bayit*, family peace. Were Abraham to have learned that Sarah had placed the blame on him, this would certainly have led to a rather serious marital argument.

Abraham is praised in the narrative as the paragon of hospitality. He is seated in front of his tent in the heat of the day in order to be able to offer welcome to any stranger who passes along the way. Before realizing the angelic status of the three visitors or the purpose of their visit he instructs a young servant to fetch a calf in order to serve his guests a proper meal. The Torah portion informs us that the calf is secured and prepared and that Sarah is requested to bake cakes to accompany the meal. We learn nothing more about the episode. The Zohar and the Kabbalists have a field day with this text. Their imagination runs wild. They link life with death and ponder over the mystery surrounding Abraham's paying an exorbitant price for the purchase of a burial site for Sarah. The site is the cave and field of Machpelah that Abraham purchases from Efron the Hittite. The price is

extravagant and outrageous—in today’s market, at least \$300,000. The name of the cave is mysterious. It is derived from two Hebrew roots—that which is double and that which is miraculous—caphel and pelah. The Zohar presents us with an imaginative narrative that relates to the servant lad who secures the calf for the feast of welcome.

The lad is led to the cave of mystery by a calf that is roaming in an adjoining field. The young man enters the cave and is enchanted and astounded by what he experiences in its interior. He hastily returns to Abraham and bids his master to return with him to the cave. Abraham does so and is fascinated by the brilliant light that seems to emanate from the ceiling of the cave. He realizes, however, that this is light that is reflected from a source in the interior of the cave. The Kabbalists interpret this to be Abraham’s experience of the difference between Essence and Attributes, the foundation of mystical thought.

The Zohar account should sound quite familiar to those of you who remember reading *Plato’s Republic* in college. In the Prologue to the *Republic* the liberated slave in a cave confuses the idea of an entity that

is “essence” with the finished product that is “attributes,” which in today’s lingo would be the difference between “reality” and “virtual reality.” Abraham readily grasps the difference and is able to concentrate on the light that is emanating from the interior of the cave. It assumes the configuration of Adam and Eve who are sitting up in a rather rigid position. Abraham confronts his ancestors with a question, “Why are you not enjoying eternal repose?” Adam’s answer is immediate: “We are being punished by God for having introduced sin to the world!” Abraham’s response is also immediate, “You, Adam, are sadly mistaken. We sin as you did but not because you did.” With this comforting thought from Abraham, Adam, and Even recline in a state of eternal rest.

The mystery of the cave is thus explained. The miraculous is the light that emanates from its interior, the doubling in the difference between Essence and Attributes. Abraham’s response to Adam and Eve is in keeping with the theological perspective of Judaism in our denial of the concept of original sin. How, however, do we sin as Adam did? The answer for me personally is the lack of understanding of the

commandment in Leviticus to love your neighbor as yourself. Adam's sin was that of self-denigration. He ate from the wrong tree. He tasted the tree of cerebral knowledge before he ate from the tree of life—the tree of existential experience. He covered his body in shame because he became a disembodied intellect. He lived life vicariously but not existentially. He forgot that he was created in the image of God—a hybrid formed from dust but also spiritualized through the breath of the divine. He could not fathom the meaning of Psalm 8, “What is man that You consider him or the son of man that You honor him, yet You have created him little lower than the angels and have crowned him with glory and with honor.” We are indeed a paradox—a combination of that which is lowly dust but also that which is a little less than divine. It is not accidental that the Hebrew word “stirah” is a homonym, meaning both paradox and mystery. I have always been emotionally intrigued by the ballad, “You are dust in the wind.” It makes me sad and hopeful at the same time. My dustliness is my mortality and frailty but it is enhanced by my spirituality. During my fifty years in the rabbinate I have counseled countless individuals who have engaged in the sin of Adam—they are incapable of liking themselves because they do not

understand that life is reflection of the paradox of being created in the image of God—it has its ecstasies and its agonies. During a Sabbatical in 1999 to 2000, I dedicated the year to writing my memoirs. I shared this autobiography with a trusted friend who told me never to publish it because it revealed that I possessed a dark side. I enlightened him to the reality that what he perceived as darkness is the otherness that is my being and that the Hebrew word “kodesh” means both “holy” and “other.”

God asks Adam, “Where art thou?” An omniscient God certainly knows where Adam is physically. The question is really, “Where is your head?” This is the season for turning and returning with the expectation that the process can be transformative. Rosh Hashanah is considered by many to commemorate the birthday of the world. Others look upon it as celebrating the creation of humankind. Would it not behoove us to return to that beginning and contemplate what our response would be to the divine questions, “Where art thou?”