

## The Torah Readings for Rosh Hashanah

Everett Fox and Cherie Koller-Fox

### SESSION SUMMARY

On *Rosh HaShanah*, we hear two seminal readings from the Book of *Genesis*. The first is the story of Hagar's expulsion from Abraham's house with her son Ishmael. The second is the story of the sacrifice of Isaac also known as the *Akeda*. In this session, we will closely read these stories, examining them through the eyes of a scholar and translator. This close reading will help us to understand what is on the page — in Hebrew this is called *pshat* or the simple reading of the text. We will look at literary features that point us toward the deeper meanings of the text. The job of the scholar is to facilitate our understanding of what the text says, while the job of the rabbi is to help us explore what the text means, and equally important, what it means to us today.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**The Scholar (Professor Everett Fox)<sup>1</sup>**

Once Yitzhak has been born, separation must be made between heir and firstborn. Despite Avraham's obvious love for him, Yishmael must leave; her mother must repeat her ordeal of Chap.16 as well. Nonetheless, the text emphasizes that God is there "with the lad" (v.20) twice the Yishmael motive of "God hearkening" resounds (v.17) and God promises that the boy will eventually attain the same exalted status as his brother (vv.13,18).

Structurally, this brief tale foreshadows the next chapter, the ordeal of Yitzhak. It speaks of a journey into the unknown, a child at the point of death, the intervention of God's "messenger," the parent's sighting of the way out, and the promise of future blessing. Of course the differences between the two stories are equally important.

**The Rabbi (Cherie Koller-Fox)**

On the surface, we read this story because the themes of Rosh HaShanah: Malchyyot (Kingship of God), Zichronot (memories) and Shofarot (the communication between God and human beings are highlighted here.

Where do we see Kingship at play? God is steering the action in this story even when the characters believe that they are. Sara asks that Hagar be driven out but it is God who tells Avraham that he should do it and why. It is God that heard the voice of Ishmael and an angel who calls to Hagar and tells her that God has heard the voice of her son and will save him. It is easy to hear the parallels here to the story of the binding of Isaac. On Rosh HaShanah we imagine a day when God's justice and mercy will replace that of human law which is often oppressive to people.

Where do we see memory at play? The way the word memory is used in relation to Rosh HaShanah is as a proof text. We repeat the many times in our history someone in trouble was saved by God. For example, God remembered Noah and all the animals and sent something to save them from the flood. Hereto, God sees the plight of Hagar and Ishmael. He does not forget or abandon them and leads them to water and safety. Not only that, but God stays with the lad as he grows up and thus never forgets him. On Rosh HaShanah as we stand before God, we also want God to remember us and save us.

Where in this story is Shofarot at play? God hears the voice of the lad and presumably the voice of his mother. While the text doesn't tell us this, presumably, they cry as they await death. The shofar sound is also a series of sobs. Here a story of God responding with compassion to those cries. We are also hoping that God will respond to the cries of people in our time as God responded to Hagar and Ishmael.

For so many years, Jews have read these stories at Rosh HaShanah and have asked themselves the question I am about to ask you. Is there anything in this story that can help us understand/shed light on our lives or the events of our times?

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<sup>1</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books, New York, 1995, pages 87-93

For example, does this story have anything to say about our relationships with our Muslim brothers and sisters? Does it have a resonance with the plight of refugees—those thrown out of their homes and sent to wander? What does the phrase “God heard the voice of the lad where he is? Is that just a geographical place or could it be that God hears us from wherever we are emotionally, psychologically, or in our faith journey? If you are working with children rather than adults, they will likely be concerned with issues such as, did Abraham love Isaac more than he loved Ishmael? (no, he trusted in God to watch over him) Why did Hagar leave her son to die alone? (she loved him so much she couldn’t stand to see him suffer) What was Ishmael thinking/feeling during this whole story? (the text doesn’t tell us. What do you think?)

21:1 And YHWH<sup>2</sup> took account of Sara as he had said,

YHWH dealt with Sara as he had spoken.

2 Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old age,  
at the set-time of which God had spoken to him.

3 And Avraham called the name of his son, who was born to him, whom Sara bore to him:  
Yitzhak/He Laughs.

4 And Avraham circumcized Yitzhak his son at eight days old, as God had commanded him.

5 Now Avraham was a hundred years old when Yitzhak his son was born to him.

6 Sara said:

God has made laughter for me,  
all who hear of it will laugh for me!

7 And she said:

Who would have declared to Avraham:  
Sara will nurse sons?  
Well, I have borne him a son in his old age!

8 The child grew and was weaned,  
and Avraham made a great drinkfest on the day that Yitzhak was weaned.

9 [Once] Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, laughing....<sup>3</sup>

10 She said to Avraham:

Drive out this maidservant and her son,

<sup>2</sup> God’s unpronounceable name: yud hey vav hey in Hebrew When reading you can say, Adonai, the Lord, Ha-shem etc.

<sup>3</sup> Laughing: perhaps mockingly. The theme of Yitzhak’s life (the laughter) continues

for the son of this maidservant shall not share-inheritance with my son, with Yitzhak!

11 The matter was exceedingly bad in Avraham's eyes<sup>4</sup> because of his son.

12 But God said to Avraham:

Do not let it be bad in your eyes concerning the lad and concerning your maidservant;  
in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice,

for it is through Yitzhak that seed<sup>5</sup> will be called by your [name].

13 But also the son of the slave—a nation will I make of him, for he is your seed.

14 Avraham started-early in the morning,

he took some bread and a skin of water

and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder,

together with the child, and sent her away.

She went off and roamed in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva.

15 And the water in the skin came to an end, so she cast the child under one of the bushes,

16 and went and sat by herself, at a distance, as far away as a bowshot,

for she said [to herself]:

Let me not see the child die!

So she sat at a distance, and lifted up her voice and wept.

17 But God's messenger heard the voice of the lad;

God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to her:

What [ails] you, Hagar? Do not be afraid,

for God has heard the voice of the lad there where he is.

18 Arise, life up the lad and grasp him with your hand,

for a great nation will I make of him!

19 God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water;

she went, filled the skin with water, and gave the lad to drink.

20 And God was with the lad as he grew up;

he settled in the wilderness and became an archer, a bowman.

21 He settled in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Bad in Avraham's eyes: Displeasing or upsetting to him

<sup>5</sup> Seed will be called: your line will be continued

22 It was at about that time that Avimelekh, together with Pikhoh the commander of his armed-forces, said to Avraham, saying:

God is with you in all that you do.

23 So-now, swear to me here by God:

If you should ever deal falsely with me, with my progeny and my posterity...!

Rather, in loyalty, as I have dealt with you, deal with me,  
and with the land in which you have sojourned.

24 Avraham said:

I so swear.

25 But Avraham rebuked Avimelekh

because of a well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized.

26 Avimelekh said:

I do not know who did this thing,

nor have you ever told me, nor have I heard it apart from today!

27 So Avraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Avimelekh, and the two of them cut a covenant.

28 Then Avraham set aside seven ewe-lambs of the flock.

29 Avimelekh said to Avraham:

What [mean] these seven ewe-lambs of the flock which you have set aside?

30 He said:

Indeed, these seven ewe-lambs you should take<sup>6</sup> from my hand,  
so that they may serve as a witness for me that I dug this well!

31 Therefore that place was called Be'er Sheva/Well of the Seven-Swearing,  
for there the two of them swore [an oath].

32 Thus they cut a covenant in Be'er Sheva.

Then Avimelekh and Pikhoh the commander of his army arose and returned to the land of the Philistines.

33 And he planted a tamarisk<sup>7</sup> in Be'er Sheva

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<sup>6</sup> Take: Accept

and there he called out the name: YHWH God of the Ages<sup>8</sup>.

34 And Avraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines<sup>9</sup> for many days.

Reading for second day of Rosh HaShanah

### **The Scholar and the Rabbi**

#### **The Scholar (Professor Everett Fox<sup>10</sup>)**

The Great Test

This story is certainly one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. In a famous article by Erich Auerback it is remarked how biblical style as exemplified here, in contradistinction to that of Homere and other epic bards, eschews physical and psychological details in favor of one central preoccupation: a man's decision in relation to God. The result of this style is a terrible intensity, a story which is so start as to be almost unbearable.

Chapter 22 is a tale of God's seeming retraction of his promise (that Abraham would have many "seed" (Genesis 12:2). The fact that other issues may be involved here (i.e. Israel's rejection of local and widely practiced ideas of child sacrifice) may be quite beside the point. Coming just one chapter after the birth of the long-awaited son, the story completely turns around the tension of the whole cycle and creates a new, frightening tension of its own. The real horror of the story lies in this threatened contradiction to what has gone on before.

Most noticeable in the narrative is Avraham's silence, his mute acceptance of, and acting on, God's command. We are told of no sleepless night, nor does he ever say a word to God. Instead he is described with a series of verbs starting early, saddling, taking, splitting, arising, going (v.3; similarly in vv.6 and 9-10). Avraham the bargainer, so willing to enter into negotiations with relations (Ch. 13) Allies (Ch14), local princes (Ch20) and even God himself (Ch18), here falls completely silent.

The chapter serves an important structural function in the Avraham cycle, framing it in conjunction with Chapter 12. The triplet in v.2(Pray take your son,/your only-one,/ whom you love") recalls" from your land,/from your kindred,/from your father's house" in 12:1"go you forth" and "the land that I will tell you of: (vs the latter, three times in the story) similarly point back to Avraham's call of ("Go-you-forth...to the land that I will let you see"). There he had been asked to give up the past ((his father); and here, the future( his son). Between the two

<sup>7</sup> Tamarisk: A tree rarely mentioned in the Bible, it may indicate a holy place, similar to the oaks where Avraham dwells earlier.

<sup>8</sup> God of the Ages: A name unique to this passage

<sup>9</sup> Philistines: Another anachronism. The Philistines appear first in the days of the Conquest (Joshua and Judges) not here.

<sup>10</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books, New York, 1995, pgs.93-97;804

events lies Avraham's active life as a man of God, ancestor, and intercessor. After this, God will never speak with Avraham again.

In many ways this story is the midpoint of Genesis. It brings the central theme of continuity and discontinuity to a head in the strongest possible way. After Moriyya, we can breathe easier, knowing that God will come to the rescue of his chosen ones in the direst of circumstances. At the same time, we are left to ponder the difficulties of being a chosen one, subject to such an incredible test.

The story is also the paradigmatic narrative of the entire book. The Patriarch passes the test, and we know that the fulfillment of the divine promise is assured. Yet there is an ominous note: love, which occurs here by name for the first time, leads almost to heartbreak. So it will be for the rest of Genesis.

### **The Rabbi (Cherie Koller-Fox)**

The story of the Akeda, or the binding of Isaac, is one of the most troubling in the Torah. It forces us to confront the question of why any father would agree to slaughter his son and why any son would seemingly acquiesce as Isaac does. It is said that the Torah has seventy faces and if you keep looking at a story you will find many interpretations and lessons in it. This idea is never more true than in this story. I would challenge you not to give up on this story. The story as written in the Bible is sparse with details. It leaves huge gaps that are calling to us to fill in through our own understanding and experience.

Let's deal with the question here of why Avraham takes his child to "one of the mountains that I will tell you of". We see his getting up early in the morning as a sign that he intends to follow God's request to sacrifice him. But look closely at the text and you will see that Avraham does not answer God directly. He doesn't argue with God, it is true, but he doesn't agree with God either. Why not?

One answer I would like to suggest to you is that, as they say, this is not Avraham's first rodeo with God. We are told that he had eleven previous tests. Would he agree to leave his home and family and go to a place that God would show him? Would he trust God that he would have a land and descendants? Would he allow himself and the men in his midst to be circumcised? These are tests of obedience to God. Would he welcome strangers into his tent? Contrast this behavior with that of his cousin Lot who was willing to hand over those guests to the mob outside his house. Would he deal fairly in his business dealings with Avimelech? These were tests of his mettle as an ethical human being. Finally, would he stand up to God when he learned that God was going to destroy Sodom. He argued vociferously with God that it was wrong to kill the innocent along with the guilty. In a way, this was a test for them both. Did Avraham know what was right? Would he be willing to stand up to power? Would God do what was just? Avraham got his answers to these questions in the positive. Avraham trusted in God—but not just because he was the King. He trusted because his experiences showed him that God's ways are beneficial to him and because he believed in his absolute justice.

That is the Avraham that we meet at the beginning of Chapter 21. Perhaps he no longer has to argue the ultimate argument with God. He believes God will not kill the innocent Itzhak. This is

different from the Moslem interpretation that he submits to God's will no matter what the outcome. The Avraham that we know is not submissive. He is a man of faith and his faith has been born out. God gave him the son that he had been promised and that son would give him the descendants that were as many as the sands of the sea. He could not die. Avraham does not see the land belong to him in his lifetime and yet; he believes that it will belong to his descendants. He has already sent off his beloved son Ishmael with the belief that God will not harm him and so he has faith that whatever the reason, God will not take Yitzhak from him and with him all that he has been promised.

In verse 5, Avraham tells his serving lads "we wish to go yonder, we wish to bow down and we wish to then return to you" (I am emphasizing here the repetitive nature of the Hebrew use of the "nun" (meaning "we") before each verb. Avraham does not know the mind of God, but he trusts that God will not harm Yitzhak. Otherwise, I believe that Avraham would have at least argued with God before setting off on this terrible journey.

Throughout our history, Jews have read these stories at Rosh HaShanah and have asked themselves the question I am about to ask you. Is there anything in this story that can help us understand/shed light on our lives or the events of our times?

For example how does our life experience teach us who and what we can trust? Do traumatic early experiences somehow lead us off the right understanding so that we need to revisit our conclusions as adults? How does who we trust inform our decisions about who to marry, who to be friends with, who to partner with in business, who to get advice from? As we go through life, do we need to reassess our understandings of who to trust? Avraham is well on in years as he faces this most terrifying test of his judgement. Does our judgement get better as we age? Can we learn from our mistakes? Maybe this is one of the questions that makes this Torah reading so appropriate for the Rosh HaShanah holiday as we prepare to ask forgiveness for the mistakes we have made in the past year.

22:1 Now after these events it was

that God tested Avraham

and said to him:

Avraham!

He said:

Here I am.<sup>11</sup>

2 He said:

Pray take your son,

your only one,

whom you love,

Yitzhak<sup>12</sup>,

and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing<sup>13</sup>,

and offer him up there as an offering-up

on one of the mountains

that I will tell you.

3 Avraham started-early in the morning;

he saddled his donkey,

he took his two serving-lads with him and Yitzhak his son,

he split wood for the offering-up

and arose and went to the place which God had told him.

4 On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am: A term used to convey readiness, usually in relation to God's command or address

<sup>12</sup> Yitzhak: The name is left until the end of the phrase, to heighten tension. Similarly see: 27:32 (Genesis)

<sup>13</sup> Moriyya: Trad. English "Moriah". The mountain here is later identified with the site of Solomon's temple.

and saw the place from afar.

5 Avraham said to his lads:

You stay here with the donkey;

I and the lad wish to go yonder,

we wish to bow down<sup>14</sup> and then return to you.

6 Avraham took the wood for the offering-up

and placed them upon Yitzhak his son,

while in his hand he took the fire and the knife.

Thus the two of them went together<sup>15</sup>.

7 Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, he said:

Father!

He said:

Here I am, my son.

He said:

Here are the fire<sup>16</sup> and the wood,

but where is the lamb for the offering-up?

8 Avraham said:

God will see for himself<sup>17</sup> to the lamb for the offering-up,  
my son.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the two of them went together.

9 They came to the place which God had told him;

there Avraham built the altar

and arranged the wood

and bound Yitzhak his son

and placed him on the altar atop the wood.

10 And Avraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slaughter<sup>19</sup> his son.

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<sup>14</sup> Worship

<sup>15</sup> Between the phrase here and in v. 8 is Avraham's successful deflection of Yitzhak's question, and perhaps the hint of a happy ending.

<sup>16</sup> Fire: i.e. a torch or brand

<sup>17</sup> See -for-himself: Or "select". See the name of the mountain in v. 14 "YHWH Sees."

<sup>18</sup> Offering-up,/my son: One might read it with a dash instead of a comma, to preserve what may be an ironic answer.

<sup>19</sup> Slaughter: A verb used to describe animal sacrifice: the throat is slit

11 But YHWH's messenger called to him from heaven

and said:

Avraham! Avraham!

He said:

Here I am.

12 He said:

Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,

do not do anything to him!

For now I know

that you are in awe of God—

you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.

13 Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw:

here, a ram caught behind<sup>20</sup> in the thicket by its horns!

Avraham went,

he took the ram

and offered it up as an offering-up in place of his son.

14 Avraham called the name of that place: YHWH Sees,

as the saying is today: On YHWH's mountain [it] is seen.

15 And YHWH's messenger called to Avraham a second time from the heavens

16 and said:

By myself I swear

—YHWH's utterance—<sup>21</sup>

indeed, because you have done this thing, have not withheld your son, your only one,

17 indeed, I will bless<sup>22</sup>, yes, bless you,

I will make your seed many, yes, many,

like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the shore of the sea;

your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies<sup>23</sup>,

<sup>20</sup> A ram caught behind: Some read: “one ram caught”.

<sup>21</sup> YHWH's utterance: A phrase often found in the prophetic books. Avraham is thus portrayed as their spiritual ancestor (Buber, 1982)

<sup>22</sup> Avra-ham has received such blessings before, but never before “because you have hearkened to my voice” (v.18)

<sup>23</sup> Possess the gate: i.e. possess or take the city

18 and all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your seed,  
in consequence of your hearkening to my voice!

19 Avraham returned to his lads;  
they arose and went together to Be'er Sheva.  
And Avraham stayed in Be'er Sheva.

20 Now after these events it was, that it was told to Avraham, saying:  
Here, Milca too has borne, sons to Nahor your brother:

21 Utz his firstborn and Buz his brother, Kemuel father of Aram,  
22 and Cesed, Hazo, Pildash, Yidlaf, and Betuel.

23 Now Betuel begot Rivka.—  
These eight Milca bore to Nahor, Avraham's brother.

24 And his concubine—her name was Re'uma—bore too: Tevah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maakha.

29:1 And in the seventh New-Moon, on [day] one of the New-Moon,  
a Proclamation of Holiness there is to be for you;  
any-kind of servile work you are not to do.  
A day of [horn-]blasts it is to be for you.

2 You are to make an offering-up, as a soothing savor for YHWH:  
one bull, a young of the herd, one ram,  
lambs a year in age, seven, wholly-sound,

3 and their cereal-gift, flour mixed with oil:  
three tenth-measures per bull,  
two tenth-measures per ram,

4 one tenth-measure per [each] one lamb,  
for the seven lambs,

5 and one hairy goat for a *hattat*-offering, to effect-purgation for you,

6 aside from the New-Moon offering-up and its cereal-gift,  
and the regular offering-up and its cereal-gift  
and their poured-offerings, according to their regulation,  
as a soothing savor, a fire-offering for YHWH.