

Rosh Hashanah 1st day 5763

Today is a day when we invoke particularly the יצחק of זכות. The shofar is designed to evoke the memory of יצחק; and, likewise, we say in davening today: ועקידת יצחק היום לזרעו תזכור. And, in that vein, I'm reminded of a Gemara in Shabbos (89b):

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן.... לעתיד לבא יאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם: בניך חטאו לי. אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם - ימחו על קדושת שמך. אמר: אימר ליה ליעקב דהוה ליה צער גידול בנים, אפשר דבעי רחמי עליהו. אמר ליה: בניך חטאו. - אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, ימחו על קדושת שמך. - אמר: לא בסבי טעמא, ולא בדרדקי עצה. אמר לו ליצחק: בניך חטאו לי. - אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, בני ולא בניך? בשעה שהקדימו לפניך נעשה לנשמע, קראת להם + שמות ד+ בני בכורי, עכשיו בני ולא בניך? ועוד, כמה חטאו? כמה שנותיו של אדם - שבעים שנה. דל עשרין דלא ענשת עליהו - פשו להו חמשיין. דל עשרין וחמשה דלילותא - פשו להו עשרין וחמשה. דל תרתי סרי ופלגא, דצלווי ומיכל ודבית הכסא - פשו להו תרתי סרי ופלגא. אם אתה סובל את כולם - מוטב, ואם לאו - פלגא עלי ופלגא עליך. ואם תמצא לומר כולם עלי - הא קריבית נפשי קמך... מיד נשאו עיניהם למרום ואומרים (ישעיהו סג) אתה ה' אבינו גואלנו מעולם שמך.

What does this mean?

The Gemara says in Shabbos (55a) תמה זכות אבות. The merit of the אבות extends only so far and at a certain point it is used up. It is of such a time the Gemara speaks, when אברהם - who showed the path of faith - can no longer defend them. A time when they have strayed so far from Torah that יעקב - he exemplified Torah - can no longer defend them. And at that time, it will fall to יצחק, to offer on their behalf four defences:

הא קריבית נפשי קמך; פלגא עלי ופלגא עליך; ועוד כמה חטאו; בני ולא בניך.

And today, when we seek ways to defend ourselves in the face of the דין we face on ראש השנה, and in the face of the dangers that threaten us, I would like to take a few minutes and try and understand the nature of these defences:

Let us take these arguments of יצחק אבינו one by one:

בני ולא בניך? בשעה שהקדימו לפניך נעשה לנשמע, קראת להם בני בכורי, עכשיו בני ולא בניך?

Q: was said at ה' סני, while בני בכורי ישראל, הר סני, נעשה ונשמע: בשעה שהקדימו כו'

A: That is precisely the point. His children called כלל ישראל הקבי"ה. Why? A father sees his child differently than everyone else. Everyone else sees what the child is; a father sees what he can be. (Joke: How old are your children? The doctor is 6 and the lawyer is 4.) A father sees his children's potential. Not only what they are, but what they can be.

When עיזי were still steeped in מצרים they were still prepared to take כלל ישראל out of before - סני - the whole pageant of the מכות and the trek to

they would stand on the pinnacle of faith and say נעשה ונשמע. And yet הקב"ה saw their potential: They will one day say נעשה ונשמע.

And that is what יצחק now says to רבשי"ע in their defence. Perhaps the Jews are not all they should be. בניך חטאו. Perhaps many have assimilated, many have abandoned אידישקייט, and even among the faithful materialism and other ailments of modern society are infiltrating more than they should. But, the potential is still there. They are no worse than they were in Egypt when you saw something special in them, that no one else could see. בני ולא בניך? You also see them with the eyes of a father; don't look at what they are, but at what they can be.

The next defence:

כמה שנותיו של אדם - שבעים שנה. דל עשרין דלא ענשת עלייהו - פשו להו חמשין. דל עשרין וחמשה דלילותא - פשו להו עשרין וחמשה. דל תרתני סרי ופלגא, דצלווי ומיכל ודבית הכסא - פשו להו תרתני סרי ופלגא.

This seems absurd. OK - so we're not culpable for childhood, and we behave ourselves while davening, and we don't get into too much trouble while we're sleeping, or eating, or in the bathroom. But when we can sin - we do. So what exactly is the defence?

Answer: Imagine a Jew who works hard for a living, but each evening he comes to a shiur. And he makes that the focal point of his day. He eats in order to have strength for the shiur, he sleeps in order to pay attention to the shiur, he works in order to put body and soul together to be able to come to the shiur. And in the shiur - he falls asleep.

Actually, it's not very hard for me to imagine.

Ok, so for the shiur itself he won't get so much שכר. But that doesn't mean he should lose the שכר for setting aside time for the shiur, for working in order to come to the shiur, and the sleeping etc.

That is what יצחק is saying. We spent long years of childhood in school, preparing to be good Jews, learning about Torah and mitzvos. And when a Jew eats and sleeps - he does it in order to have strength to be איד ערליכער איד. True, when the moment of truth comes we don't always pass with flying colors. But all those times of preparation, should still count.

And the next defence:

רב: ברכות י"ז - R' Hutner explained: The Gemara says in אלכסנדרי בתר דמצלי אמר הכי: רבון העולמים, גלוי וידוע לפני שרצוננו לעשות רצונך, ומי מעבב? שאר שבעיסה ושעבוד מלכויות.

על חרבך: עשיו to יצחק of ברכות from the שעבוד מלכות. הקב"ה comes from שיעור שבעיסה על חרבך. תחיה כו. פלגא עלי ופלגא עליך. So.

And finally:

עקידת יצחק of מסירת נפש - the הא קרבת נפשי קמך throughout the generations even simple Jews - who are even, perhaps, lax in their שמירת המצוות throughout their lives, yet at the moment of truth were able to be מוסר נפש. And that power comes from עקידת יצחק.

So we have four defences: Maybe we're not all we can be. But we still have the potential, which הקב"ה can see in us, as a father sees the potential in his son, even if he is delinquent now. And we prepare ourselves sincerely, we study we daven - and we come to shul and listen to the rabbi - because we want to be good Jews. At bedrock, we want to do רצון השם, even if we're sometimes swept up by the יצר הרע and the temptations and blandishments of society. And deep within us there still burns the fire of עקידת יצחק and the ability to be מוסר נפש for הקב"ה.

And all these defences really amount to one thing:

We're asking הקב"ה to have faith in us, in the potential and the desire for קדושה that is within us. We're asking Him not to give up on us.

But in order to do that, we have to not give up on ourselves. If we want הקב"ה to have faith in us, we have to have faith in ourselves. Too often we make peace with our own shortcomings. We make peace with the idea that "I'm not the kind of person who comes to a shiur", "I'm no the kind of person who can be quiet during davening", "I'm not the kind of person who can control his temper", and so on. We lose faith in our own ability to grow and to change. But if we don't believe in ourselves, then how can we ask הקב"ה to believe in us?

It doesn't matter how old we are. R' Isser Zalman, on his 80th birthday, was very excited by a resolution he had made צו שטייגען אין לערנען. 80 years old and a גדול הדור, and what gets him excited? The prospect of making a new beginning, of growing in his אידישקייט.

In our davening today we describe הקב"ה as קל אמונה - קל אמונה. He is a G-d of faith. What does that mean? Faith in what? Where does הקב"ה require אמונה? Answer: He has אמונה in us.

And we too have to share that אמונה. If we have faith in our own ability to grow and improve, then הקב"ה, who is קל אמונה, will share that faith with us. And together we will experience a year of growth, of שטייגען, in every aspect of our lives, and we will be זוכה together to a שנה טובה ומתוקה.