

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

By Dennis Lazof

While a challenging and even disturbing story for many Jews, I have discovered that the sacrifice of Isaac can be a powerful and positive story in one's life. I believe it fits perfectly into the mood and meaning of Rosh Hashanah – Yom Kippur. Perhaps it might be helpful to some others, if I share these ideas, offering them as points for further discussion, individual consideration and criticism.

For me the concept of being “asked by Adonai” to sacrifice a loved one seems NOT very foreign or at all remote. It seems in fact that the story describes closely what I was asked by Adonai just over one year ago with the passing away of my young wife. Like Abraham, refusal was not really an option, although many husbands or family members do not accept the sacrifices they are called on to make, and many delay in acceptance for many years.

My wife fought courageously for her life for more than eight years against a terrible disease. Even up through the last several days of her life, she clung tenaciously to life and actively enjoyed every possible moment and experience she could gather. In all this she had my unlimited support. If the comments of her surgeon and our friends and family are to be credited at all, then I succeeded in demonstrating my love for her and my support, too, for extending and fulfilling every possible moment of our life together. That's not the issue. No one needs to question whether Abraham really loved Isaac or would have preferred that he live a long life.

Yet, during the last six weeks of her life, I was asked to sacrifice my wife. True, I did not raise a large sharp knife over her. After all, I take the story as an allegory. But I was challenged to let her go and to let her know and even encourage her that she should ready herself and find a way to leave the life we shared and loved. In the year since her passing, even more clearly, I could see that I was still being challenged to accept more deeply and let go of my wife. Certainly, this acceptance involves also some integration and incorporation of my wife's finest aspects into my continuing life. It is indeed real to me that it is “our life” which is continuing. I love that this can be my sense of the world, that my life has such continuity. I believe she has attained that eternal life which is possible for Jews.

Sacrifice of our loved ones is something that many, if not nearly all of us, will be called on to perform at some point. Like Abraham, although we will consider it terrible, we will not understand it to be a request that can be refused. As in the case of Abraham, it may “kill us” to comply more than losing our own lives might. We may view the sacrifice as totally inappropriate initially. We may consider that the one selected is the most innocent and the one who seems to us most deserving of a long and joyous life. But that won't matter; it remains Adonai's request, whether we understand it or not. And if we refuse it, if we deny it and fail to accept that these terrible sacrifices are integral to life, or if we fail to struggle with the concept of acceptance, then we fail the test given to Abraham. We

fail to appreciate the gift of life also. We begin to see the miracle of life as something we are somehow entitled to, and so not a miracle at all.

As for the last instant rescue or substitution of the Ram for the loved one, well, perhaps that is analogous to the gift we receive in knowing that our loved ones live on within us. Going through these experiences with my beloved wife currently myself, I sense this knowledge deeply. I feel often that she is living on with me, her voice guiding, encouraging, and appreciating life with me. I don't assume that this sense is common to all surviving spouses, siblings, or parents. I don't believe it is given automatically, not in its fullness. I doubt it is very similar to the feeling surviving Christian family members who accept that their passed loved ones are "now in heaven with Jesus."

Appreciation of the gift of life in its fullness is what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (and being Jewish) are fundamentally about. How can we appreciate the enormous and miraculous gift of life, if we fail to recognize how tenuous our stay here on this earth is? How can we be said to ever see each precious moment as a miracle and each person whose path we cross as an opportunity to recognize a divine light and encourage its burning brighter, if we fail to admit that any of these lights (even the strongest and purest) might be at any moment extinguished? To go through each "normal" (non holy-day) as though "of course we're here for another day" and as if "we will be here for many to come and so will our loved ones" because we're entitled to such, or are deserving of such— perhaps those attitudes are what we need to rise above through the days of awe.