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THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Rosh HaShanah (October 4 this year) and the *akeida* (binding of Isaac) (Gen 22) have long been associated with each other. This is not because of the date, but rather because of the association of both with the ram's horn. The only ceremony associated with Rosh HaShanah in Leviticus 23 is the blowing of the *shofar*, which is traditionally made of ram's horn. When Abraham was prevented from actually taking the life of Isaac, he instead sacrificed a ram that had been caught by its horns in a thicket. Because of this coincidence of mentions of ram's horn, the account of the *akeida* is customarily read on Rosh HaShanah.

Abraham was told to take his son and sacrifice him on a mountain specified by God. Regardless of what he may have thought of such a command, he took the wood and Isaac, traveled three days, and prepared an altar. Then he bound Isaac and laid him on the altar. As he reached for the sacrificial knife, an angel told him that he had passed the test God had set him. It was then he saw the ram, extricated it, and sacrificed it.

Many artists' renditions of this event show Abraham with his hand raised above his head, ready to plunge it into his preteen son. Many artists are wrong. First of all, Abraham would probably have sacrificed Isaac as he would any animal. That means he would have done it in the most humane and quickest way. This is a slice across the neck, severing both jugulars and allowing the animal (or in this case son) to bleed out quickly and practically painlessly. Abraham certainly would not have raised his hand above his head or plunged the knife into Isaac's heart. Second, Isaac was probably anywhere from his late teens to about twenty-five years old when this happened. Third, the scripture says the angel called to him as soon as Abraham "stretched forth his hand, and took the knife." (Gen 22:10-11) He probably did not even have time to raise it from the stone on which he had previously placed it. But all of this is digression.

As the start of the Days of Awe that culminate in Yom Kippur, Rosh HaShanah is a time of repentance. The head of a year is a time for reflection on those things that could have been done better the previous year. The mournful sound of the *shofar* is a call to repentance. The sacrifice of a ram was most often a trespass offering, an

offering for unwitting sin. Thus a further association of a ram with the High Holy Days.

Abraham, of course, had no reason to repent of almost sacrificing Isaac. However, he obviously felt the need to sacrifice to God. The fact that God provided a ram rather than a lamb or ewe may have made him feel the need for repentance. Perhaps he had harbored some doubts, or thought a fleeting rebellious thought on the way to Moriah. Alternatively, he may have felt that his, and Isaac's, lives had begun anew at the voice of the angel. Although Rosh HaShanah had yet to be designated as the head of the year, he may have been feeling that the *akeida* was the beginning of a new phase of his life, as indeed it was. After this event, God made several promises to Abraham.

On his way home someone came to Abraham and told him that his brother had children. The timing of this may, itself, have been a message to Abraham. It is as if God was saying to Abraham, "See, if you had not obeyed me I could have taken Isaac anyway and made the promise instead to your brother. But you obeyed, so now you begin a new life as a man with a promise." Even this is in keeping with the blowing of the *shofar*. The trumpet call is not just a wail of sorrow. It is also a warning of the Day of Atonement to come. Faith and repentance are necessary precursors to God's forgiveness.

Whether you are Jewish or not, Rosh HaShanah and a remembrance of the *akeida* should serve as a reminder of new beginnings. It is a time to get rid of the old baggage of sin and start anew. It is a time to go to those you have offended or who have anything against you and seek their forgiveness in anticipation of forgiveness by God.

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A NEW DAY

Let me tell you about a Day of Atonement. At the time it was one of the saddest days of my life. As is common with the Day of Atonement, a few days later we were rejoicing. At the time I didn't even realize it was a day of atonement. It was Passover, and the real Day of Atonement should have been six months away. We were later to learn it was a day of atonement nonetheless.

Now that I've piqued your interest, let me proceed. Perhaps I should start a week or more earlier. We had been traveling with the Teacher from Galilee through Samaria toward Jerusalem. At first the teacher had sent some of us out as advance men to the villages he would pass through. As he reached those villages he took the time to teach and to heal. He angered a few people when he healed on Shabbos, but for the most part it was a good trip. As the holiday approached, though, we traveled faster. We arrived at Jerusalem on the same day they were bringing in the sheep to be chosen for the Passover sacrifice. We should have known something was going to be different this year when we entered Jerusalem. The

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people greeted the Teacher with palm branches and recitations of the psalm used on Hoshana Rabbah. (See "A Celebration Out of Time" in the October, 2000 issue.) If it looked like *Sukkos* then, we should have asked what Passover held in store.

For most of the week leading up to the holiday, we stayed in Bethany. The Teacher had been telling us about the leaders of the Pharisees wanting to kill him, so I think he wanted to stay out of their way, especially after that greeting in Jerusalem. We expected him to share the *seder* with Lazarus and his sisters. It was a surprise, then, when he sent Cephas and John to find a place to hold the feast. How were they going to find a room in all of Jerusalem at the last minute? We would be better off staying in Bethany, where we knew we had a place to celebrate. The Teacher had a plan, though. He told them to enter the city and follow a man carrying a jug of water. (That drew a few snickers.)

When that person went into a house they were to ask the owner for a place to hold the feast. Amazingly, this plan worked.

I won't go into detail about the feast that night. Maybe another time. Suffice it to say it was an unusual evening. Between the Teacher washing our feet and Judas leaving unexpectedly, we were all a little apprehensive. The discussion that evening went places we had never expected. We were all a little glad to leave and head home toward Bethany.

When the Teacher made a stop in Gethsemane we thought little of it. He enjoyed the paradise, and spent time there whenever he could. When he asked most of us to stop, and took Cephas, James, and John a little further we just considered this normal routine. I did notice that he eventually left them alone for a while. It had been a long week, traveling almost daily between Bethany and Jerusalem, so most of us were tired.

When we woke to the unexpected arrival of soldiers and others (I couldn't tell who all was there in the torchlight) we were a little confused. Cephas, who had just rejoined us, started flailing away with his sword. We knew what he could be like when awakened suddenly, so we stayed out of his way, but he did manage to remove an ear from one unfortunate fellow. (Fortunately, the Teacher put the ear back on.) I did see Judas go up to the teacher, and wondered what he was doing with this crowd. When they asked for the Teacher by name he agreed to go with the soldiers. Most of us decided this was a good time to disappear. At least the Teacher would be safe with the soldiers, we hoped. We couldn't guarantee the same for us at the hands of the mob.

The next time I saw the Teacher I almost didn't recognize him. I had gone to the Roman palace to see if I could hear any news about what had happened to him. It had been several hours since he had been taken from Gethsemane. I learned later that John and Cephas had been able to see him briefly from a distance earlier. He had clearly gone through a lot since. When I saw him standing before the Roman governor he was covered in blood. He had clearly been beaten. Although he was dressed in a purple robe the blood stains were obvious. Blood was dripping down his face from a circlet of thorns on his head. He still looked strong, but not like he had before. A lacerated back can take a lot out of you. Yet he stood tall before the governor, plainly answering his questions with his usual confidence.

We in the crowd could hear little of what was going on. At one point, though, the governor addressed the crowd. He was offering a choice between pardoning the

Teacher and another man. The same people, possibly, who had welcomed the Teacher a week earlier now demanded his execution at the hands of the Romans.

The place of execution is outside the city. If it had been up to the Romans it would probably have been in the city center. But they let us keep our culture and our religion, and at least gave us this much. Of course, that meant that the candidates for execution had to carry a beam of wood from the Temple precincts, down through town, and then out to a nearby hill. Hardly anybody could negotiate that trek alone. In a sense, the Roman respect turned to their advantage in respect to Roman cruelty. After the beating he had taken, the Teacher was no more able to carry a heavy beam that distance than anyone else. I would willingly have helped him, but when he stumbled I was too far away. They forced someone else to help him.

It took a while to get to the place of execution, Golgotha. After he had stumbled, I made my way around the crowd to that hill. Thus I was there when the soldiers and the condemned men arrived. There were three to be crucified that day. I suspect that the majority of the crowd was there because of the Teacher, however. I was able to read the charge above the head of one of the others. He was there for robbery. When they raised the Teacher up I heard a gasp from the crowd around his cross. Then came a murmur spreading outward as people read the charge. The Romans were executing him for being the King of the Jews. The mob had demanded that one accused of sedition be released, and now the Romans were killing an innocent man on the charge of sedition. I am sure that some of the leaders would rather the people had seen a charge of blasphemy. The people were more likely to honor a revolutionary than a heretic. Nevertheless, the charge was there for all to see. Some of us even think that it should have read King of Kings.

There is something about an execution that draws a crowd. We say we are gentle people, but we rush to view a man die. Many in the crowd could be seen to stop in at food shops along the way. After all, a crucifixion takes a long time. I hope some of us can be pardoned for following the crowd because we knew one of the condemned men. As hard as it must have been, I know Miriam, the Teacher's mother, had to be there. No mother should ever have to see her child die; but no mother could stay away when her child needed her by his side. Miriam was proud of her son. Sometimes around the campfire she would tell the story of his birth, or about the visit of the men from the east a couple of years later. But pride and high hopes were what forced her to his side as he appeared to be about to die.

Not everyone in the mob was like the Teacher's mother, or John, or even me. As the Roman soldiers raised him up on the cross many mocked him. I knew this would happen. It always does at an execution. Even if they didn't know the man, some people have to get in a last, cruel

word. In some ways it was worse in the case of the Teacher. Instead of general mockery, many flung his own words in his face. "Tear down the temple and build it in three days, will you? Let's see you do it now." "Son of man. Son of God. Let me see you come down. Then I will believe you." "He saved others. Why doesn't he save himself?" Good men can be exceptionally cruel in a mob.

I was hoping he would respond by coming down off the cross. That was not to be. Instead he conversed with the men being executed with him. He said something to John, who was standing with Miriam close to the cross. Amazingly the one thing I could hear was when he shouted a line from one of the psalms. That was the Teacher, though; quoting scripture to the very end.

And then it was the end. And what an end! Darkness at noon. Earthquakes. It was like we were inside the writings of the Twelve Prophets. Looking back, I see we were.

The day of sorrow was turned to rejoicing the following week, when we learned that the Teacher had come out of his tomb, alive again. We had seen him raise

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others back to life, but had not expected him to raise himself.

Thank you for bearing with me through this account. By now you are probably asking yourself what all this has to do with the Day of Atonement. After all, I said this happened one Passover. The thing is, it wasn't long before we realized the significance of the Teacher's execution and resurrection. This was a Day of Atonement half way through the year, but one that made all others unnecessary. You see, God required a sin offering. We came to realize that the Teacher was *the* sin offering. Because he was the perfect Son of God, the offering doesn't need to be repeated. Our sins are covered by his blood. The Teacher, acting as High Priest, took his own blood into the ultimate Holy of Holies in heaven. That is how a Passover can become the Day of Atonement.

Taken from accounts in Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-16, Luke 14-24, and John 12-20, as well as ideas presented in Hebrews 9-10.

(The Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur falls on October 13, 2005)

A HOLE IN YOUR ROOF

A number of things characterize the Jewish holiday of Sukkos, the Feast of Booths, which falls on October 18-23 this year. Perhaps the most visible is the *sukka*. This is a temporary structure, the construction of which usually begins as soon as Yom Kippur is over.

There are rules for building a *sukka*. No more than one wall of the structure may be a permanent wall. That is, one wall may be part of the regular family home, but the other walls must be temporary. Since this is a harvest festival, it is usually decorated inside with fruit and vegetables, but the décor may also include family items. Some people make the *sukka* very elaborate; others make it simple. Since the family must “live” in it for seven days, it should include some everyday furniture. (At least one meal a day must be taken in the *sukka*.) To many people, though, the most striking feature of the *sukka* is the roof.

In keeping with the temporary nature of the structure, the roof may not be solid. In fact, the space between the materials making up the roof must be at least a handbreadth apart. You must be able to see the stars in the sky through the holes in the roof. That assumes, of course, that the stars are visible. In October in Albuquerque we hold an annual hot air balloon fiesta. (It is the most photographed event in the world, I am told.) The problem is that every year some of the Balloon Fiesta events have to be cancelled because of rain or high winds. Living in a *sukka* in Albuquerque, and many parts of the world, would subject you to getting wet. But this just emphasizes one of the lessons of the holiday.

This life is not always easy. Some days it is going to rain. Problems fall at the seemingly most inopportune times. Just after buying a house you lose

your job. Health problems don't wait for convenient days. The phone rings when I am watching *Jeopardy!* (a major disturbance which will probably be ignored). You can't count on sunny days during *Sukkos*. And yet God asks you to leave a hole in your roof.

It is a matter of trust. The holiday reminds of the Exodus, “that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 23:43) God protected the people in the desert. He gave them a night-light. I don't know if the cloud that gave them shade in the desert protected them from wind and rain, but it probably provided some air conditioning. God provided food. He did not let their clothes wear out (Deut 8:4). Remembering all this, why worry about getting a little wet?

This idea of trusting God is an essential part of the holiday of *Sukkos*. On the last day of the eight-day holiday, the day known as Hoshana Rabbah, it is traditional to quote Psalm 118:26, “Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD.” Essential to Jewish thought is the idea that to quote a passage is to quote its context. In keeping with that idea, to recite “Blessed be he” is also to refer to Psalm 118:8-9. “It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes.”

Most homeowners, if they detect a hole in the roof, call in a roofing specialist to repair it. They rely on a man to fix their holes. The roof of the *sukka*, on the other hand, is intended to have holes in it. It tells us not to call on a man to fix the holes, but to trust in God that the holes don't make a difference. In fact, the holes in the roof enable us to see God, in whom is our trust.

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