

Saturday 12th November 2011

SHABBAT VAYERA 5772 – REMEMBRANCE DAY WEEKEND

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Michael Hilton, Kol Chai Hatch End Jewish Community

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This morning we shall be reading the well known story of the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22. God tests Abraham by asking him to offer his son Isaac as a whole offering. Abraham and Isaac travel for three days to reach Mount Moriah, thought of by our Rabbis as being *Har HaBayit*, the place where the Temple would be built one day. Isaac says to his father: here is the fire and here is the wood but where is the lamb for the offering? Abraham avoids the question by answering "God will provide". He stretches out his knife to slay his son but at the last moment a voice calls him to stop and a ram is offered instead. Abraham is promised that his descendants will be as many as the stars in the heaven and the grains of the sand on the shore of the sea. This is to be the reward for his obedience.

We don't often read this particular story at our Remembrance Service, but it's especially poignant when we do. Shortly before, the Torah gives us the story of a war, the war of the four kings against the five. The first murder in the bible is carefully documented, as was the taste of that forbidden fruit. But war does not have such a grand entry onto human history. There is no suggestion that this particular war recorded in the Torah was the first one. The existence of war is somehow taken for granted, as if it were a fact of life. And our story this week, of the binding of Isaac, makes me think of all those parents who willingly through history have allowed and still allow their sons and daughters to go off to war, not knowing whether they will return. Many have come back, many have not. The faith and courage of their parents is every bit as great as that of Abraham, tested by God in our story. God tests every soldier, every soldier's parents children and loved ones. In this last year, we have witnessed the tributes paid by the people of Wootton Bassett to those who have fought for this country and lost their lives, and the renaming of the town as Royal Wootton Bassett.

But though the Torah assumes the existence of war, and places peace, as we still do, far into the future, it does not glorify war. War is not for the faint hearted. In Deuteronomy 20 we find this:

The officials shall address the troops, saying, 'Has anyone built a new house but not dedicated it? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another dedicate it. Has anyone planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another be first to enjoy its fruit. Has anyone become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another marry her.' The officials shall continue to address the troops, saying, 'Is anyone afraid or disheartened? He should go back to his house, or he might cause the heart of his comrades to fail like his own.' When the

officials have finished addressing the troops, then the commanders shall take charge of them.

Would there have been anyone left willing to fight after such a speech?

We do not know how ancient societies looked after those who were traumatised and returned. I suspect it was not good. After Abraham and Isaac returned, the next thing we hear about Sarah is that she died. No reaction to her husband's attempt to do away with their precious son is recorded, but between the lines we can perhaps read grief and anger. Abraham's relationship with Isaac appears to be over too. They never speak again.

For so many the experience of returning from the front has not been a good one:

DOES it matter?—losing your legs?...
 For people will always be kind,
 And you need not show that you mind
 When the others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?—losing your sight?...
 There's such splendid work for the blind;
 And people will always be kind,
 As you sit on the terrace remembering
 And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?...
 You can drink and forget and be glad,
 And people won't say that you're mad;
 For they'll know you've fought for your country
 And no one will worry a bit.

That was written by Siegfried Sassoon (1886 – 1967), the first world war poet who came from a prominent Indian Jewish family. He wrote it, they say, to try and make people realise that being injured could be just as bad as being killed.¹ But it has a bitterness in it about those people, perhaps people in authority, who didn't seem to care. But we can care. That's why we come here for this service each year, and why this shabbat is for me one of the most important services of our year.

Writing in this week's Limmud mailing,² Alma Smith points out that the medieval mystery plays had a different take on the Abraham and Isaac story. They saw it as actually improving the relationship between father and son. "In one version, Abraham shows a much greater interest in Isaac's thoughts and feelings after almost killing him, asking questions and expressing his love. Their relationship is deepened by the

¹ www.britishlegion.org.uk/media/1127117/ks1-2_a2_wwi_d3.pdf, accessed 11/11/11

² <http://www.limmud.org/publications/tasteoflimmud/>

experience, inculcating in Abraham a love for Isaac that is more full and less selfish. There is no question for the medieval dramatists that Abraham passed his test. His willingness to follow God's commands is seen as commendable and his love for Isaac improved." But in the real world, sacrifice is not like that. The Jewish version in which they don't speak at all to each other afterwards seems sadly more realistic. Just as in our prayers we ask God to remember Abraham and his good deeds, so we ask that God will remember all those who go off to war. They too have left family and friends behind: many have had to give the lives of their sons and daughters. God's promise to Abraham was to bless his descendants in spite of what might happen to him. So they who fought and died did so in the hope of a freer and better world for us. May we build our world to be worthy of their memory.