

Good Yontif... The Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, is the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashana. It's also perhaps the greatest mystery in the entire Torah. Greater than the mystery of the chok of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer. Greater than the mystery of the dazzling special effects of the splitting of the Red Sea. Greater -- and also more troubling -- even than the mystery of the injustice of Moses being denied entry into the Promised Land. In reading again the text of the Akeidah for this drash, I was immediately struck by the sheer power of the story's language -- clean, spare, exacting -- Ernest Hemingway honed even further to a razor's edge. Perfectly matching the story's language, the narrative itself is stark and compelling. The unfolding of the story is absolutely unwavering. There is no attempt to embellish or poeticize. As storytelling, the Akeidah succeeds magnificently. But the standard understanding of the Akeidah as the ultimate trial of faith in God seems to me to fall short, to be very unsatisfying. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of Abraham's faith in God is to me, as I'm sure to others, ultimately incomprehensible. Something else is going on here. Something else *must* be going on here. To me, the story of the Akeidah really only makes sense when it is seen *not* as a trial by God of man. Rather, it makes sense to me only when it is seen as a trial by man of something within himself that he first must find and subdue -- something within himself that persists in trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. Only after he has subdued that drive, completed *that* trial, will his faith be able to survive, let alone flourish. Abraham raising the knife before plunging it down makes sense to me only if the target is not Isaac's outstretched neck, but Abraham's own exposed soul. And there is plenty in Abraham's exposed soul that needs airing out. The Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana is of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. This is an event, like the Akeidah, that also occurs only on God's direct command. Yesterday's Torah reading of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion becomes in effect the perfect prelude to

today's Torah reading of the Akeidah. The guilt and shame Abraham must have felt for his role in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from his own home must have been great. It must have weighed heavily on Abraham as he trudged silently alongside Isaac up the mountain. Demonstrating fidelity to God by the expulsion of his first-born child was already a huge price he had been commanded to pay. Now this direct assault on his second child?

The Akeidah *is* a mystery. Indeed, I believe it is intended to be -- and to remain -- a mystery. As part of this mystery, I believe it's also intended to be the centerpiece story in the Torah of the struggle to believe in and accept a higher power and design. Literature seems to contain numerous attempts to deal with this problem of trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. Over the course of their writing careers, two American authors, in particular, seem to me to have tried most directly and forcefully to address this issue – Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway. Perhaps not coincidentally, both Melville and Hemingway each capped their great writing careers by writing a great long short story. Melville wrote Billy Budd, which was still unpublished at the time of his death in 1891. Hemingway wrote The Old Man and the Sea, which was published in 1952, nine years before his death in 1961. I'd suggest that these two great long short stories written at the close of Melville's and Hemingway's careers can in effect be viewed as their parting statements on this enduring issue of faith, their parting attempts to try to comprehend the incomprehensible. But I'd suggest even something more. Each in their own way, these two short stories may actually have been conscious or unconscious attempts by Melville and Hemingway to come to terms specifically with the story, the mystery, of the Akeidah. Both of these extended short stories speak powerfully to an ultimate mystery, both moral and physical. In the process, both Melville and Hemingway end up offering powerful commentaries on the mystery of the Akeidah. For Melville, the central character of his capstone short story is the young sailor,

Billy Budd. Billy Budd can be viewed as the biblical Isaac, the essence of innocence, who is destined to be sacrificed on master-at-arms John Claggart's altar of evil. Billy Budd's death is an outrageous, incomprehensible act, one that cries out for an explanation, *any* explanation. But Melville has no explanation. More subtly, for Hemingway in The Old Man and the Sea, the central character of *his* capstone short story is Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman. He, too, can be viewed as Isaac. Only now, Santiago is presumably no innocent as was Billy Budd. Santiago is probably half a century older than Billy Budd. He is full of the rugged experience of Havana's streets, bars, and fishing boats, full also of serene faith in the great Joe DiMaggio. But like Billy Budd, Santiago, too, is destined to be sacrificed without apparent purpose. This time, though, Santiago will be sacrificed not by a single mysterious evil act or individual as was Billy Budd. Rather, Santiago will succumb simply to the sheer mysterious totality of natural forces and human struggle. At the end of the story, his heartbreaking loss of the great fish again cries out for an explanation. But again, like Melville, Hemingway has none.

Today, we observe -- no rather, celebrate -- Rosh Hashana 5776, a new year. Today -- "hayom" -- we have a new opportunity to try to gain some glimpse, some inkling, into God's plan and purpose for us. Here today in shul, and going forward, we shouldn't neglect that opportunity. We should take that voyage, pursue that gorgeous fearsome fish leaping, glistening in the early morning sun. But there should be no mistake about the essential, everlasting mystery. At the conclusion of Moby Dick, Ishmael, Melville's narrator and lone survivor, gazes out on the spot where the "Pequod" has just vanished beneath the deep.

"Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."

Good Yontif.