

## Second Day Rosh Hashanah Sermon

- Basil Herring. Me' Ayin Yavo Ezri: Whence Cometh my Help

Rabbi Basil Herring  
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The Nevele

Me' Ayin Yavo Ezri: Whence Cometh my Help

Some of us may have forgotten, but today is precisely the second *yahrzeit* or anniversary of the launching of the Rosh Hashanah War, otherwise known as Intifada II. And of course last Shabbas was the first *yahrzeit*, on the Jewish calendar, of September 11, whose secular anniversary will be marked 3 days from now. By any measure these dates mark the beginning of two years of excruciating pain for Klal Yisrael, and one year of grief for the American people. A period of darkness and bitter loss, both personal and national. But on these twin *yahrzeits*, as we stare at the pictures, and read the stories, of the holy martyrs – men, women, and children– in our homeland Israel, as well as the men and women who died in the infernos of the twin towers and the Pentagon and the fields of Pennsylvania, there is another feeling that comes over us: not just sadness and grief, but a determination to overcome, to defeat, and destroy, the forces of evil that beset our people, both Jewish and American.

But the question that we must answer, is that of David ha-Melech, as he confronted the harim, or mountains, that challenged his mettle: *me' ayin yavo ezri* – whence cometh my help? As we contemplate the challenges before us, whether dealing with the emotional trauma, or the imminent military battles in the Middle East or here as we prepare for our homeland security, we too need to clarify the sources of inner strength, emotional fortitude, and spiritual stamina that will enable us to defeat the despicable enemies who have risen up against us, as Jews and as Americans. Today, on this *yahrzeit*, I would suggest that we need look no further than what we read a few moments ago, in the *keriyas ha-Torah* for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, this *Yom ha-Zikaron* par excellence.

My text, which has been the subtext all year long for many Israeli's and Jews in the face of their and our anguished adversity, is *Akeidas Yitzchak*, or the binding of Isaac. *Vayehi achar ha-devarim ha-eileh, ve'ha-Elokim nissah et Avraham.* “And it was after these things that God tested Abraham, saying... take Isaac your beloved only son, and proceed to Mount Moriah where you are to offer him up as a sacrifice on one of the mountains which I will show you.” And so it was that God subjected Avraham Avinu to the most excruciating 3 days that any man or woman can imagine; a fate worse than death; beyond any physical pain; in violation of everything that he believed in and stood for; sustained mental anguish that boggles the mind and begs for an explanation. “*Ve'ha-Elokim nissah et Avraham, and God tested Avraham.*” What kind of a supposedly all-knowing and all-merciful God Almighty is this? What could He possibly want to prove or learn thereby, to subject his beloved Avraham to such gratuitous suffering, as the horrendous death of an innocent young person with such promise and potential?

These questions needless to say preoccupy every commentator, ancient and modern. And of course, as we stare into the abyss of the craters where a Sbarro pizza store or twin towers once stood, those questions are our own, as they were of King Lear and Hamlet and Dostoevsky. The answer that I would like to share with you today is not my own but that of the 19th century commentator Netziv, in his understanding of the Midrash Rabbah on this verse. For indeed I would not be so presumptuous as to dare to speak my own mind on this most perplexing of matters. And if I share it with you, it is because I am convinced that what has happened these months past in Israel, and these days past in New York and Washington, should teach us all that it is indeed the right answer and proper response.

The key is to understand the meaning of the Hebrew verb “nissah”, which we have translated as “tested.” But in truth that is not what it means at all. For God does not need to test Avraham. Instead, following Psalms 60, (natata li-yereicha nes le’hitnoset), the term here means that God sought to raise Avraham through adversity to become all that he could be, that in the crucible of his pain Avraham would discover within himself a greatness and heroism that would otherwise remain forever hidden and unrealized. Thus, “Said Reb Elazar: it is like a farmer with 2 cows, one strong and one weak. Upon which one does he place the heaviest load? Surely it is on the stronger, for he knows that it can bear the heavy burden, and indeed it is made the stronger for carrying such a weight on its back, and its reward in turn the greater. So too, does God test only the strong and the righteous, thereby making them stronger and better, and more deserving of the ultimate reward.” Thus, says the Netziv, God pushed Avraham to his absolute limit with this command to sacrifice his beloved son, so that Avraham and his descendants, starting with Isaac, would be incomparably strengthened, in ways which they would never otherwise have achieved, to devote themselves with unsurpassed love to sanctify God’s name in the world, and thereby reach the pinnacle of human achievement. Thus, at the end of the story, the consequence of Avraham’s ordeal is made clear: “Because you have done this thing, I will surely bless and multiply your seed like the stars of the heaven and the sand of the seashore, so that your descendants will overcome and inherit the cities of their enemies.” As the Netziv explains: just as the sand ultimately withstands the pounding of the surf even though many of the sand grains might be lost, so too even though it will sometimes happen that some or many Jews will die at the hands of their enemies, the inner steel and strength of the Jewish people will never be vanquished, never destroyed, always in evidence, thanks to the extraordinary strength demonstrated by Avraham as a result of the binding of Isaac.

Here then is the answer to our question: suffering and adversity bring out and crystallize in us a strength and a fortitude, a goodness and a sublime and selfless virtue that were simply not there up till that agonizing moment. The potential was there, the inner resources lay dormant and unrealized. But to become fully human and all that we can be, we cannot avoid the crucible of suffering, and we cannot in the end come to receive the ultimate reward from Almighty God. Avraham’s great bequest to his children, to us, to the children of Israel in every generation, and through us to all of mankind in turn, is the legacy of this knowledge accompanied by the inner strength that we can bring forth, so as to confront the crises and the suffering, the pain and the adversity, which fate and destiny inexplicably bring upon us in the course of our time on God’s earth.

Thus the real question is not why did God allow it to happen, but rather what must I do to the best of my ability to summon and call upon my deepest fiber of strength at this moment of pain? How can I turn this catastrophe which is mine or ours, into my or our defining moment of redemption? How do I summon the spiritual strength and moral fiber to walk in the footsteps of father Avraham, for the sake of God? This, I fervently believe, is the proper response to events of these past 2 years, for us as individuals and for us as a nation. To step up, to come together, to overcome despair, to refuse to give in to human evil incarnate, to demonstrate unstoppable courage and determination, to rebuild and renew in the face of terror and destruction.

And it is this, I would submit that has enabled our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel to respond with such almost superhuman strength and courage in the face of terror and lynchings, car bombs and suicide attacks, day after day having to bury children and spouses, body parts and blood-soaked clothing. They have shown the world and we their fellow Jews for 2 long years what it means to persevere in the name of our common humanity. Through thick and thin they have faced down the mass murdering minions of Yasser Arafat's brigades of Fatah and Tanzim and Chamas and Islamic Jihad and PFLP; they have withstood ongoing defamation by the world's media who have shamelessly portrayed Israel's noble self-defense efforts as the same as, or worse than, the relentless Palestinian and Moslem terror campaigns. All this time, ordinary Israelis and Jews, throughout Israel but especially in Yehudah, Shomron and Gaza, have stood with their bodies on the ramparts of Western civilization, protecting an ungrateful humanity from the onslaught of Hitler's successors. And what they have gotten for the most part in return was not gratitude or understanding, but rather resentment, and often hatred, for having the chutzpah to be strong and courageous Jews who refuse to lie down and die in the face of terror.

Whence the strength and the courage? I would submit that, whether they know it or not, it is in the bones, a timeless legacy of Akeidat Yitzchak, of Avraham Avinu, and his willingness, even though he could neither fathom nor understand God's ways, to sacrifice everything he loved al kiddush Hashem, to sanctify God's name. Hence, I have no doubt, Israel and its allies, first and foremost the United States, will triumph over adversity, and be victorious in war, just as God promised Avraham in the words I have quoted. That they, and we, Israeli and American, Jew and Gentile, will indeed summon the necessary strength and courage, even if no other nation will stand at our side and we have to go into battle in splendid isolation, in order to beat back the waves of hatred that today wash over our shores, to defeat the forces of evil that stand against us across the world, so that soon we will all of us witness the great day of redemption, when the righteous Mashiach ben David will raise his scepter over all the world, to defeat the enemies of God from one end of the universe to the other, bringing not just peace and justice, but (as the prophet Isaiah put it) a world filled and overcome with knowledge of the Lord, as today water covers the oceans.

May God grant us His people strength, and may God bless us, His people, with peace.