

INITIATION BY THE TREE OF LIFE

Beyond the Land of Moriah

It was so big, what I wanted to grasp with today's sermon, the first sermon of my life, that I ended up with none of it. It kept slipping out of my hands over and over again, and it just kept growing even larger. So I finally let it all go and the text became a free-flowing stream of thought – a fabric of words, a 'text-ure'. Join me the next few minutes for a journey on the threads of this web.

A few weeks ago, I didn't know the meaning of the word 'drasha'. Kata as rabbi and Kati Balogh in her Hebrew lessons were like torches guiding me on this path through the complete unknown. From them I also learned that drasha, from the root 'darash', means to dig, to search, to explain. We dig deep in search for meaning and the beads we find – we string on a chain. On a chain of associations, on my grandmother's golden chain, the texture of which lives on in me so vividly as if I would be touching it right now.

As I am writing these lines, we are in the period of 'yamin noraim'. It is the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah – the New Year, and Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, which is translated in English as the Days of Awe.

There is a magical story. Not even just one – the Torah is a vast, vibrant, rich tapestry of stories, traditionally known as the Tree of Life, 'etz chayim'. It is the greatest honor - to be called up to this tree at the Bat Mitzvah ceremony, the rite of passage into adulthood, and to meet its ancient sacred mystery for the first time, normally, at the age of 13.

At the time when this should have happened – something very different happened to me. Another kind of initiation: I lost my beloved grandmother. Today, 24 years later, it is an honor to be standing by the tree of life and inheriting her Hebrew name: Shulamit. It is the feminine form of the word 'shalom', from the root 'shalem', meaning the kind of peace that comes from completeness.

We didn't know about that name, just like about most other things. Everyone knew her as Fini, and we, her grandchildren, called her Hugomama, as we still do. We only learned about her Hebrew name after her death, from a document. She is the only one of our ancestors whose Hebrew name we ever knew at some point. Even though everyone else must have had one.

A secret was revealed, a single thread of a hidden web came to light: the secret name of the one we loved dearly – she meant the light and warmth of *home* in a dark and cold night. Just like most other things, we didn't understand, either, the

meaning of the gold pendant she always wore on a necklace. Somehow, over the years, this mystery also revealed itself: *chet* and *yod*. Two Hebrew letters, meaning *life*. Since then, I have been wearing such a gold pendant day and night, I don't take it off.

A few days ago I did take it off because at the evening of Rosh Hashana, Detti, one of the community leaders, looked at me and said I was wearing it the wrong way around. Nobody had noticed it until then, even though it has been like that for a long time. Most people, if they notice it at all, they think it's an elephant or a rhino. They don't know it. It is a secret sign. It is part of that intricate world that has been hidden from our eyes all our lives, and we could only detect it from incomprehensible signs, reading between lines. That evening, at the turn of the year, I turned the pendant around. *Life* was set right on me. Something took a full 180 degree turn that was a part of me, and that had been turned backwards all along, without meaning.

There is a story. Perhaps the most terrifying story in all of Jewish mythology. Yet, we traditionally read it every New Year. By coincidence (or fate) this story is part of today's weekly Torah portion. In choosing the date for the Bat Mitzvah, there was no other option available, for purely practical reasons. This is the story that now bridges time and brings us here today, the Days of Awe – the Akedah, the binding of Isaac.

When I told Kata that I wanted to read out loud these lines from the Torah in Hebrew, her response was that this was not a typical Bat Mitzvah theme. I couldn't understand why, yet I couldn't choose otherwise. I was magnetically drawn to these lines. It was as if the teaching came true, that the Torah is a breathing, living fabric, to which one can connect. It spoke to me. I then told Kata my suspicion that this was a story of initiation. This is how I know the Eternal One – so ruthless but not unloving.

In addition to the two Hebrew letters of life, Fini, Hugomama, Shulamit, also wore another mark day and night: a scar on her arm. It was also part of that secret world. I was too young at the time to be able to really ask her questions, I was before the age of initiation. My brothers could ask more, and she answered. She didn't keep secrets, but she just didn't see the point in talking about it. She wanted to spare us the burden, she wanted to carry it on her own. The burden that was palpable by the scar on her arm and by the smell of the herbal balm on her bedside table that soothed her constant headaches on sleepless nights. She called it '*lager*'. A camp. And the typhus. This mysterious camp was also part of that hidden world. Somehow, in some intangible way as only children can *know* – so we knew that this meant *death*.

Life at her neck, death on her arm. This was what we learned about Judaism. And nothing else. Maybe that's why it has always been so hard for me to step closer to this world. Every time I tried, I faced a force greater than myself. I was knocking on closed doors, at best. And I couldn't step away from it either, because this also meant life. Not with, nor without.

This irreconcilable dichotomy that prevents the soul from finding home in its own house, cannot be expressed more precisely than by the poet. A deep split cracks in the living fabric of life, and the two worlds are irreparably torn apart. "Deadly grass is growing on my beautiful heart."

In the story of Akedah, the Eternal One puts Abraham to the test asking him to offer up what is dearest to him in his life, his beloved son of mystical birth – at the place that he designates for it.

"Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

For 2,000 years we have read this story over and over again, horrified, trying to find an explanation, some way out – with fear and trembling, with that certain feeling of 'norah' in our hearts. A just God cannot ask such a thing, cannot be so cruel, a murderer.

The Hebrew word norah, translated as awe - touches into that intangible experience of rare moments of grace when we feel on our own skin that we are part of something incomprehensibly greater than ourselves. When facing that force we can only fall on our knees and bow with trembling and awe in our hearts.

It is not a kind force, nor benevolent, but it is also not evil, and above all – not a killer. On the contrary - it is a force that serves Life: above all, and at any cost. Life, but not us – not the individual, but something far more powerful. It does not aim to save us from suffering, which is why it may seem ruthless. In fact, experience shows that most of the time, it is through suffering and pain that the path is leading.

It is ruthless in the sense that it does not take into consideration the small self and will of the individual little men. But it is by no means cruel. It serves the greater whole that we cannot comprehend from the perspective of the human realm. The force is called Eternal One, that which remains eternally real, regardless of the human world. Man, through free will, has only one decision to make: to serve or not to serve. Abraham chooses to serve: whatever it takes, transcending himself over and over again, dying and being reborn, broken as small individual and being rebuilt again, he says: '*hinneni*'. Here I am.

In the archaic language of initiation rites, it is said – the initiating demon masters dismember the soul so that it can be reassembled as a new whole. This is an intrinsic law of the initiation dynamics, and this is why wherever we look in the world, it is a common pattern in native societies that initiation rituals involve immense pain and suffering. It is by saturation with the experience of pain that the initiates find their ways into that other reality where the secret is revealed in front of their eyes, and they get to understand to the depths of their souls the truth that can only be glimpsed – that the two worlds are in fact One. *Adonai Echad.*

Abraham stands between the two worlds, heaven and earth, on top of the mountain that the Eternal One has appointed to offer up his sacrifice. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is ‘corban’, coming from the root meaning ‘to come closer together, to approach’. For 3 days he wanders into the land of Moriah.

‘On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.’

He instantly recognizes the mountain: it is the place (hamakom) where the earthly and heavenly realms *come closer together*. It requires sacrifice on our part for this rapprochement to take place. Not a small sacrifice but the greatest that can be asked of man.

At this place between earth and sky, on the threshold of life and death, in that liminal space – trembling, shaken, in awe, filled with the experience of ‘norah’ – here we stand with Abraham. He goes to the very edge of life, to that place where different laws reign from everyday life. He looks death in the eye, but he does not cross that line. Suspended between the worlds in this endless dramatic moment, with the knife against the neck of his beloved son, Isaac.

And then, at that sacred moment – the miracle happens, the release, of which we are reminded ever since, by the ram’s horn and the wake-up call of the shofar for generations.

Abraham receives the most rich and abundant blessings and rewards after this. He comes down from the mountain, returns from the liminal space between the worlds and arrives back to the mundane, but he will never be the same again. There is no further mention of Isaac in this passage after the dramatic moment. They go up the mountain together, but Abraham comes down alone. According to a midrash, this is because in fact Isaac died there and spent years in Paradise. Perhaps, psychologically, something really died there on the mountain that Isaac symbolizes in this ancient myth. Something we hold most dear has to die within us during initiation to give way to the birth of something new and to true inner growth. And this can hurt a lot.

I may have worn the golden ‘chai’ pendant backwards for maybe 2 years. The last time I put it back on was after the birth of my son Noah. His birth on a Saturday, shortly after Hannukah – was the greatest celebration. I wore the

pendant the whole time while we made the journey to life together. It was only taken off of me when I reached that threshold – beyond all, on the borderline between life and death, stripping and surpassing everything, sacrificing what I held dear and believed to be mine. He stayed home all this time, kept warm and safe, held by my family, nourished with breast milk for 3 days while I walked through the land of Moriah. Mano, his 9 months old cousin shared with newborn Noah, his most precious treasure, the sweet mother's milk.

In the hospital I had already lost consciousness from blood loss when the gold necklace meaning life, was cut off me. Half an hour later it may have been too late. The necklace was given back to me in a sealed plastic bag after I returned, after I came back down the mountain to reunite with my newborn son and to be able to say to him: *hinneni* – here I am.

Now I am here. Because now I can be here. I returned into my newborn life with the knowledge of the secret, that the two worlds, which had been irreconcilably split all along, with everything torn apart around them – that these two worlds are in fact *One*. No need to look elsewhere. All that is sacred has been here all along and is here right now in this moment – as we gather at the Tree of Life.

I could only open the sealed hospital bag a few months later, with my name and a number on it: Julia Karadi 6/b. I put the necklace back on myself. The two letters that meant *life*, were now back on my neck. As it turns out now, reversed.

While preparing for today, I sometimes practiced the Hebrew text, reading it out loud at home, while Noah, who is not yet two and speaks only a few words, played beside me. One day, unexpectedly we found him sitting on the sofa, leafing through a book and cheerfully saying aloud: *hinneni, hinneni*.

He is really *here*. Because he can be here. Today also means that he no longer has to read secret signs between the lines or wander rootlessly between disjointed worlds. I made the sacrifice and maybe he no longer has to. I have come down from the mountain, and today we receive new names. The long-broken threads with the roots of the tree of life are mending. The blessing of our ancestors may now accompany his path.

Thank you for travelling along with me.

And we say together with Abraham and Noah – *hinneni*.