



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

Optimism Pays

It may not have been the first day I reported to my new job, but it was not many days later that I first met Richard Hood. I had joined a team of new PhDs, some trained as psychologists and some as educators, whose assignment it was to breathe new life into a very old-fashioned, one might even say backward, school system in suburban Washington, D.C.

It was a rapidly changing community that had been semi-rural up until the late 1960s. At the time I joined the school system advisory staff as senior school psychologist, the area was becoming much more diverse. On the one hand, high-level government employees were beginning to move there, finding the real estate prices more attractive than the neighboring counties. But at the same time, there were a number of areas that were depressed socio-economically and were spillovers from the teeming African-American ghettos of our nation's capital. It was not long before that Washington had experienced the riots of 1968.

I have many stories to tell about the years I served in that environment. But I want to focus this week's discussion upon the personality of this one colleague, Richard Hood, a tall, burly man in his early thirties with a Southern drawl that originated in

small-town Mississippi. His politics were liberal; he was open-minded, tolerant, and most empathic. But he was a cynic. His favorite word was "irredeemable." "This school system is 'irredeemable,'" he would say. "The government is irredeemable." "Mankind is irredeemable." "The world is irredeemable." His attitude to life was best expressed in the sign that hung above his desk: "Pessimism Pays."

He felt that people were essentially evil, that a life of pain and frustration awaited us all, that man was fated to suffer. His spiritual mentor was the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings have been described as the "Bible of pessimism."

Richard had a bone to pick with Western culture, child-rearing, and public education.

**May the learning in this issue
of Torah Tidbits be לעילוי נשמת**

**CANTOR MARTIN
HOROWITZ ז"ל**

**on his 29th Yahrtzeit
טז חשוון**

**Greatly loved and missed
by his family and a
world of people whose lives he touched**

*Mina and Howard Millendorf
Sharon, Shlomo, Elior, Amiad,
Yagel Rabinowitz*

He felt that we deceive our children into believing that the world is basically a benign and safe environment, that success could be achieved by hard work, and good health guaranteed by clean living. He maintained that “we indoctrinate our youth into the belief that the world is a rose-garden, whereas in reality it is a snake pit.”

I had long one-on-one discussions with him, because he was fascinated by Jews and Judaism. In those discussions, he came to believe that “you Jews are the worst of all. You just emerged from the hell of the Holocaust, and you still tell your children that all we will be well if they just cling to your tradition.”

I think of Richard often, and was sad to learn that he passed away several years ago after having returned to his Mississippi origins upon his retirement from a university teaching post. I especially remember him whenever this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Vayera* (*Genesis 18:1-22:24*), rolls around.

Why *Vayera*? Because it is this week that we read the story of the *akeda*, of Abraham’s obedience to God’s command that he bind his son, Isaac, upon a mountain-top altar and offer him as a human sacrifice to the Lord. This is surely one of the most troubling passages in the entire Bible, and traditional Jewish commentaries



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ביחד ננצח



as well as great secular philosophers have struggled to understand it. How could Abraham, who so valued human life that he stood up to God Himself pleading the case of wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, unhesitatingly obey God’s command that he slay his own son?

That is not a question I will even attempt to address within the limits of this column. But another aspect of the story has always troubled me. At the beginning of the story, Abraham was unaware of its happy ending. He did not know that at the last moment, an angel would order him to desist from sacrificing his son. As far as he knew, a terrible, unspeakable tragedy was about to unfold. But in his words to the servants who accompanied him, he was completely reassuring and gave them no inkling of the catastrophe that was about to



The OU Israel Family
sends heartfelt condolences
to Sharon Katz and family
on the passing of her mother

BRACHA RIVA BAT FALIK
BELLA ROSS DOBULER a”h

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים

occur: “You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”

And he gave Isaac no hint about the fate that awaited him. Did he not owe the lad a glimpse of his imminent death, a chance to prepare himself to meet his Maker? Was it not the height of duplicity for Abraham to reassure his son that all would be well? I could just hear Richard ask these piercing questions. Although, to my recollection, he and I never discussed the Bible, he was raised as a Southern Baptist and surely knew the story of the binding of Isaac.

To me, the answer to these questions lies in this phrase, repeated twice in the narrative, for emphasis: “And the two of them walked on together”. Abraham conveyed to Isaac this message: “I am with you. I will hold your hand. I will be there for you despite the horror that awaits us both.” This is the attitude that Jewish parents have conveyed to the children throughout all of the tragedies of Jewish history. Yes, there are persecutions and pogroms and torture and worse. But I will be there with you. I will be close to you.

This is one of the themes of so many of the Psalms. Rarely is the Psalmist assured that “everything will be alright.” More often, he is told, “I, God, am with you.” I am

with you in your exile, in your wanderings, in your suffering. I am with you in the hell of Auschwitz and Treblinka. The Psalmist asserts, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

The Talmud teaches us that the *Shechinah*, the Holy Presence, is in exile alone with us. Most eloquently, Asaf in Psalm 73 expresses the consoling power of the awareness of God’s closeness in the most dire of circumstances: “I have been constantly afflicted, each morning brings new punishments...Yet I was always with You, You held my right hand...As for me, nearness to God is good...”

Abraham felt that his duty to obey God took priority over the love for his beloved son. That is one central lesson of the story, although it remains a disconcerting lesson for us. But this much we can comprehend: his behavior reflected reassurance and trust, optimism and hope. At the end of the story, that hope proved justified.

Richard could never fathom Abraham’s lesson. To remain hopeful in the face of threatening doom, to be able to see beyond the dark clouds of fate, to continue to pray even when “the sharp sword dangles over one’s neck:” that is Abraham’s lesson and that is the Jewish way.

More than just the “Jewish way,” this capability is the secret of Jewish survival. It is a secret that we all must learn, especially in our times, when many challenges sadly still beset us. We can be confident that the *Shechinah* is there for us, but we must be sure that we are there for each other. ■

May the Torah learned
from this TT be לַעֲנֵךְ
and in loving memory of
our dear brother

RABBI ZVI (HOWARD)

ROSNER ז"ל
לְבָבָא כ"ב מרחשון תשפ"א

Nechama and Elliot Rosner