

Day 2 of Rosh haShannah, 5780

No one said these holidays were easy. We Jews do something funny with our New Year celebration. It's not surprising that we should tell stories of births on the New Year, but it is certainly jarring to hear them paired with tales of near-death, the near-death of children, at the hands of their father. And that father, the father of our people.

Particularly in the original Hebrew, this story is told with exquisite and excruciating artistic skill. It's an emotionally impactful story, but almost every year, I hear a flurry of questions about it: Why would God instruct Abraham to sacrifice his son? Did Abraham do the right thing by obeying? Is blind obedience really what we're looking for in our religious character? What are we supposed to take away from this on the High Holy Days?

And some come away feeling that this is exactly what's wrong with religion - its power to override our sense of morality our intuitive understanding of right and wrong in the name of some mysterious call or doctrine.

So I want to look at what Jewish tradition actually does with this story.

Our tradition is strikingly multi-vocal, embracing many different perspectives on almost every important issue. This is no exception.

This morning, I'll offer just three takes on the binding of Isaac. The first take was found in our prayers yesterday. We'll recite the same words again this morning as part of the *Musaf* service for Rosh haShannah.

We say the following: "Our God and God of our ancestors, remember us favorably, take note of us for salvation and compassion from the highest ancient heavens. Hashem our God, for our sake remember the covenant and the kindness and the oath that You swore to Abraham our father on Mount Moriah. Let the image of that binding, when our father Abraham bound Isaac his son upon the altar, be present before You, when he held back his compassion to do Your will wholeheartedly. So, too, let Your compassion overcome Your anger with us, and in Your great goodness let Your rage be turned away from Your people, Your city, Your land, and Your inheritance..."

I would guess that this is the understanding of the binding of Isaac that is most familiar, because we read it year after year. And, frankly, it sounds terrible. We don't really want Abraham, or any of us, using obedience to override our compassion. That's as good a description as any for religious extremism of every flavor and variety.

But it isn't totally clear what "compassion" here means. It could be, as I instinctively read it, love for Isaac. Abraham overcomes his love for his son in order to make it possible to give him up. But it could also be his own attachment to a promise. After all, God's repeated promise to Abraham is that, as long as he follows God's way, he will become a great nation.

Well, he was old and childless, and still followed. He was given a child through Hagar who was then expelled from his household and he still followed. Isaac now seems to be his last chance, and was the child of his old age, the miraculous fulfillment of God's promise. If Abraham is willing to let go of Isaac now in order to fulfill God's instructions, it means that he's prepared to follow the covenant even without reward and against all personal gain.

And there is a powerful lesson for us here about surrender. While we don't want to be submissive in a way that undermines our ethical judgment and intuition, we would do well to adopt a posture of surrender, to be willing to let go of our plans, our self-interest, and our comfort in order to devote ourselves to something greater. If we aren't willing to do that, we're not really on the court, and we can never achieve the life of purpose and devotion that will fill our days with meaning.

That's one lesson from the *'aqedah*, from the binding of Isaac. But that isn't the only perspective. The second take has nothing to do with Abraham and everything to do with Isaac and his attitude to what is happening.

There are a number of texts, going back to ancient *midrash*, that understand Isaac as a fully aware participant in what happened on that hilltop. I'll share just one. It's a poem (*Im Afes*) that's part of *Selihot* services leading up to Rosh haShannah. It was written by Rabbi Efrayim of Regensburg in 12th c. Germany, which, it should be noted, is right after the large-scale destruction of Central European Jewish communities by the Crusaders and a period during which many Jews were understood as martyrs, sacrificing their lives rather than submitting to their murderous oppressors.

This is a long poem, and I'll read just two verses from it:

“The singular one (Isaac) saw that he was the sheep
He declared to his parent who was being tested,
'My father, treat me (offer me) like the sheep.
Do not have mercy and do not hold back.'”

““He (God) desires me
And my heart longs to reveal itself to Him.
If you prevent me (from being sacrificed), in the end
He will gather my spirit and soul to Himself (anyway).””

The Isaac of this poem is awake and aware. And while Abraham actually hesitates to offer him up, Isaac insists upon it. He longs for spiritual union and death is his way back to God. In his words, this moment isn't so different from the inevitable time when his soul will be gathered up by God. When set against his desire to be one with God, life itself is of marginal value.

Beyond the romanticization of the many martyrs throughout Central European Jewry, this poem and the other texts like it summon us to do something at the turn of the year that we are called to do each time we confront death, which is to reevaluate how we are living our lives. What is of such deep value to us that death itself seems insignificant by comparison? That value or

commitment, whatever it is, should be at the center of how we live our lives, throughout the year and throughout this lifetime.

We cannot wait until near-death experiences to remember that, for example, our relationships, or acts of kindness, or social justice, or creative expression, or spiritual devotion are most important to us but have been drowned out by the noise of life. Rosh haShannah is a moment to rededicate ourselves to what actually counts, to what we might be willing to die for but don't always remember to live for.

The last take on the *'aqedah* is quite different from the others. It is found in a *midrash* (Bereshit Rabba 56:8) that reads as follows: "Rabbi Aha said: Abraham started to wonder, 'These words are simply bewildering! Yesterday, [God] You told me (Genesis 21:12), 'Because through Isaac will your seed be called.' [Isaac will be your successor.] And [then] you went back and said (22:2), 'Please take your son...' [to offer as a sacrifice.] And now You say to me (22:12), 'Do not send your hand to the youth.' [Don't sacrifice Isaac after all.] It is a puzzle!"

God, you keep giving me different instructions! How is it possible that God would be so inconsistent?!

"The Holy Blessed One said, 'Abraham, 'I will not profane My covenant and the utterances of My lips I will not change.'" (Psalms 89:35) [Meaning, I don't keep going back on my word!] When I said, "Please take your son," I did not say, "slaughter him," (וּשְׁחַטֵּהוּ) but rather, "and bring him up" (וְהֵעֲלֵהוּ)."

The way God's instruction reads in Torah, Abraham could be commanded to sacrifice Isaac, but the words can also be translated as a simple instruction to go with him up the mountain. The *midrash* chooses the latter.

God continues:

"For the sake of love did I say to you, "Bring him up." You have fulfilled My words. So now, bring him down."

Abraham, all I asked of you was to take a pilgrimage to Mt. Moriah with your son. You've done so. You're all set. Go back home.

According to this *midrash*, God always meant for the ram to be the sacrifice, not Isaac. Which is an interesting twist on the first two lessons from this story. There is a common worry that if we really give ourselves over to God, or a cause greater than ourselves, that we or something dear to us will be sacrificed, that we'll never be able to set boundaries and protect ourselves.

The posture of surrender that Abraham embodies in the first reading of the story feels dangerous. But what if God never means for us to be swallowed up. What if that call to devotion always comes from a Force that is holding, supporting, and sustaining us rather than seeking our demise?

And perhaps Isaac, too, is a little confused. He believes that he will have to die in order to experience God's closeness. What if that weren't true either? What if he, and we, could incorporate those passions and values that we would be willing to die for and to live for them instead?

There are many connections between yesterday's reading from Torah and this morning's. One of them is this: Until the appearance of an angel, Hagar is blind to the life-saving well of water right beside her, and Abraham is blind to the ram which was God's intended sacrifice all along. We, too, may be blind, blind to the ways that our next steps from where we are and who we are to becoming the people we're inspired to be - that those steps are right in front of us.

If we are willing to release fear and despair, cynicism and rigidity, if we are willing to surrender to something greater than ourselves while still listening to our inner voices and maintaining sensitivity to the world around us, our life's path may just present us the resources and opportunities and inspiration to continue to live out our callings.

So, at the outset of a New Year, I invite us all to consider:

Where are we stuck?

Where do we feel trapped?

Where can't we see a way forward?

Are fear, panic, stubbornness, and habit clouding our vision?

Between now and Yom Kippur, may we have the courage and dedication to get ourselves unstuck by trusting, by surrendering control, and by being willing to live out our deepest commitments

And may we be blessed to discover that God will provide a well, or a ram or the words to say we're sorry, or the resolve to take the right next action.