

L'shana tova. To prepare to speak to you today on the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, I started not only by reading and rereading the story, but also reading the chapters and verses before and after it. That led me to three observations I would like to talk about today:

- First, that the Torah gives very little depth to or insight into the character of Isaac, our second forefather—and it seems to me this is a reflection of the physical and emotional abuse that is implicit in Isaac's having nearly been sacrificed. He is a sad, tragic figure.
- The second observation flows from the first: that the singularity of the Akedah story, which is never mentioned again in the Torah, is also a reflection and an acknowledgement of this abuse. On its own, this whole tale is too terrible to revisit—not to mention what it might make us think or feel about the behavior and motivations of either God or Abraham.
- And third, it is because of this very singularity, the exceptional nature of the Akedah story, that we read it today, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

Let's start with a quick bit of Torah context. Yesterday we read Genesis, chapter 21, right before the Akedah story, in which we learn of:

- the birth and circumcision of Isaac to aged parents: Abraham is 100, Sarah is 95
- the subsequent expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's house
- and in just a few short lines, the future of Ishmael, including God's promise to Hagar to make Ishmael the father of a mighty nation

Later, in chapters 23 and 24, after we have read the story of the Akedah, we learn of:

- Sarah's death at age 127, and her burial
- Abraham's assignment to his servant to go find a wife for Isaac
- the servant's introduction to Rebekah, who seems to be a woman of some presence and personal strength
- and the rather unceremonious consummation of Rebekah's marriage to Isaac

And reading all this, what struck me was an absence: there isn't much about Isaac himself. Even in the subsequent chapters and verses of the Torah—ostensibly focused on Isaac's family life, and the birth of his sons Esau and Jacob—Isaac is an oddly minor and rather pathetic figure. He functions more as a kind of Biblical cipher, a loose link for continuity of the story with a limited role to play for himself. Indeed, much of the story feels like an odd mirroring of the actions of Isaac's father, Abraham: they both tried to protect their wives by calling them their sisters, they both fought with their neighbors over ownership rights to a well.

I guess this makes sense: in thinking about the early days of Judaism, who wants to plumb the depths of a character whose greatest and most tragic experience comes not from some outside force but from his own father? But that is precisely the point: to understand the story of the Akedah, and the tragedy and trauma of Isaac, and why we re-read this section of Torah today, we must ask and attempt to address the psychological and moral questions it poses.

### **Isaac as an abused, tragic figure**

Now for Isaac, the act of being bound and ready to be sacrificed must have been terrifying. Did Isaac resist? It is unimaginable the he didn't. Yet in chapter 22, verse 7 of this story, he merely asks a question—the obvious question: um, Dad: where is the animal for the sacrifice? Answers

Abraham: “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” The Torah tells us that Abraham bound his son, but there is no mention of resistance at a moment when it must have become startlingly clear to Isaac what was about to happen.

In his book “The Last Trial,” on the legends of the sacrifice of Isaac, Shalom Spiegel presents a different perspective on Isaac’s state of mind, through the retelling of a 12<sup>th</sup> century poem by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn. Rabbi Ephraim wrote, in Isaac’s voice: “Bind for me my hands and my feet / Lest I be found wanting and profane the sacrifice / I am afraid of panic, I am concerned to honor you.” The poem continues with a description of Abraham’s embrace, before he binds Isaac firmly. I can’t help but think that this all gives new meaning to the concept of honoring thy father! However, the recognition in Rabbi Ephraim’s poem that Isaac *might* resist—might, at the instant of sacrifice scream or otherwise screw things up—is not the same as actual resistance.

There is also some debate about Isaac’s age, which is relevant to our understanding of Isaac’s decision-making capabilities and state of mind. While the Torah text refers to him as a boy, some commentators argue that he must have been 37, given how old Sarah was when he was born, and how old Isaac would have been when she died. But making Isaac older seems like an attempt at achieving comfort via commentary. Let’s put it this way: if he was 37 and went along with this, he was either clueless, crazy, or extremely devoted to God in ways that might also make us uncomfortable.

And so I have to ask: What does this story say about Isaac, either as he was or as the person he became? If he wasn’t a cipher before, he certainly becomes one now, at the conclusion of this episode. It colors his whole life, which is surely why the entire story of Isaac in the Torah is

actually rather short and mostly sad. The Akedah concludes—and Isaac isn't mentioned as coming down from Mt. Moriah. Nor is he mentioned as being present at the burial of his mother. He never speaks to his father again, and who can blame him. [You think you've got issues with your father, well...!] Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic rabbi, taught that Abraham's having to unbind Isaac was even more painful than his binding, because it came with the realization that this whole experience would forever mark their relationship.

Isaac, at this point, is a schmoe, a sad sack. Things have to be done for him, since he cannot quite manage them himself. He would have had every right to be angry with his father—and furious with God. That God follows through on his long-term plans for Abraham—and Isaac—by ensuring Isaac a bride, in the person of Rebekah, is notable. But Abraham's servant has to find her. And Abraham, as one of his last acts, disperses his other children away from the lands near Isaac, to protect this son, the one who cannot quite seem to protect himself. Later still we have Jacob conniving with Rebekah to fool the old, blind Isaac and take the blessing intended for Esau—from a father who either did or did not quite know what was going on, realized it too late, and was oddly powerless to do anything about it.

Perhaps Isaac would have been an uninspiring character even if his father hadn't tried to kill him, and even if he hadn't seemed to be abandoned by his God, however temporarily. But that's the Torah story we have—and it is difficult not to blame the Akedah—the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father—for Isaac's subsequent sad sack state. He is an unusual Torah hero, a character with very few positive qualities to offset the negative ones.

### **Reconciliation / Singularity**

This brings me to another point about the Akedah story: In a tradition defined by an insistence on recollection within the Torah's own narrative, it is noteworthy that the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac is never mentioned again.

What are we reminded of in the Torah? Really, what aren't we reminded of?! Elsewhere in the Torah we are reminded that we were both strangers and slaves in Egypt, we are reminded to wipe out the descendants of Amalek, we are reminded of our kinship to the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. We are even reminded of the importance of primogeniture, the rights of the first born, and explicitly instructed not to overturn it by playing favorites with one's children or spouses—a reference that seems apt when talking about Abraham's casting out of Ishmael in favor of Isaac, or Jacob's subsequent stealing of the birthright blessings from Esau.

But for the Akedah story, there's no call to remember it, there's no compulsion to repeat it except liturgically, by tradition, once a year, on Rosh Hashanah. One of the most terrifying and disturbing stories in the entire Torah is never mentioned again. This might be because it's truly offensive—not just singular in its occurrence, but singular within the Torah in being morally reprehensible.

You don't have to be Immanuel Kant to react as Kant did: “Even if the voices were to resound from a visible heaven, Abraham should have answered the alleged, divine voices by saying, ‘that I should not kill my good son is clear to me; but that you, who appear to me, be God, that is not at all clear and can also never become clear.’” A century or so after Kant, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber also rejected Abraham's actions, writing that one should follow the orders of divine voices only when those orders are to do acts of justice and mercy, not cruelty.

Indeed, re-reading this story myself it was hard not to be angry, no matter how much Biblical or historical context I put around it. And angry at whom? God, or Abraham, or Isaac—or all three? It's a tough call. This story raises the most uncomfortable and unfathomable issues, and forces us to question just what it is we believe in, and why, and to what good end. That's an awkward place to be, sitting here in shul on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

Which I think is precisely why we read this story again today, as we enter a period of atonement. Among Rashi's comments on the Akedah, he references the Midrash Tanchuma as the source for the idea that we read this story every year to remind ourselves and God of the obligation that binds us together, as Isaac was bound: "May God see this Binding of Isaac every year to forgive Israel and to save them from punishment..."

But the psychological explanation seems deeper than the textual one: like nothing else in the Torah, reading the Akedah story makes us confront the most difficult and disturbing things we have done—or not done, or nearly done—over the last year. The very idea that Abraham would even consider, for just one second, sacrificing his son must raise questions for us, about the decisions we have made, the decisions we will make, how we prioritize what matters in our life and how we justify it. It is a clarion call, at this moment, to remember issues—both global and personal—that we don't want to think about.

To flash forward from the Biblical to the present day, let's review a few things about our current world. There are an estimated 12 million people currently on the brink of starvation in the horn of Africa right now, and millions more facing starvation and violence elsewhere. Our Abrahamic

brethren across the Middle East have, in the last nine months, accomplished incredible feats of liberation—which too many of us watched with trepidation instead of joy, out of fear of chaos or fear for Israel. But even as many Arab nations struggle to secure permanently their hard-won freedoms, too many more people, in the Middle East and around the world, remain oppressed.

Closer to home, our nation faces challenges greater than those we have seen in two generations, with millions of people out of work and economically disadvantaged—and suffering in all the ways that implies. Our synagogue runs a shelter for 10 men, 365 days a year, an amazing feat for our community. But that shelter relies on volunteers from this community to staff it, which has not always been easy, while the funding source for the meals the shelter provides has dried up. That's not a fundraising pitch, it's an acknowledgment that there is always more to do.

And at home, our actual homes? I cannot speak for anyone else—but I can stand here today and acknowledge my imperfections as a husband, a father, and a son. It is too easy to take for granted our place in the world and our relationships to people who love and trust us. It is too easy to stop working hard to be better—more loving, more reassuring, more nurturing, and more protecting—especially when the going gets tough. Indeed, it's all too easy to cast one's self inadvertently into Abraham's shoes: to believe in the rightness of our position, and begin to care too little about who we sacrifice in order to follow through on the things we think we know about the world.

I am in no position to criticize or question Abraham's faith—but his belief in God must surely have been bound up with his unerring belief in himself. So, we read this short story of the Akedah in order to be reminded of one man's devotion—and to force ourselves to ask questions about our own devotion. But we also read this passage to be reminded of the consequences of our

actions on others—something that the Torah itself does not address here. Instead it is our obligation to assess these, to read and interpret, to learn about and learn from the Akedah story.

This short piece of Torah reminds us that, like Isaac, none of us are immune to psychic harm or abuse, even from those closest to us. And it makes plain, as we enter a period of atonement, that like Abraham on Mt. Moriah, knife in hand, none of us are without moments in which we must, absolutely must, stop or be stopped, and forced to reconsider what we are about to do, or what we have done.

Happy new year and G'mar chatima tova—may you be inscribed in the book of life.

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