

Early in the morning, the sun walked in the forest, together with me and my father, my hand in his. Father? Hurry and save Isaac, and no one will be missing from the noontime meal. It is I who is being slaughtered, my son, my blood is already on the leaves. And I wanted to cry out, writhing not to believe, tearing open my eyes. And I woke up, the blood had left my right hand. (from Amir Gilboa – Isaac).

Abraham rises early in the morning, perhaps not to wake his sleeping wife, Isaac's mother, Sarah. Maybe he knows that she would dissuade him, convince him that God would never, could never ask this unthinkable thing of their family, not after all they had been through. Having a child at all was a miracle for them, and God had promised their descendants would be numerous. How could Abraham throw all of that away? Sarah surely would have talked some sense into him. And the story would have been very, very different.

Along the way, Abraham lies to their servants. You wait here, he tells them, my son and I will pray on the mountain, and return to you. We are given no further insight into Abraham's thoughts, nor do we pretend to understand what motivates him, let alone God in this moment. And Abraham and Isaac walk up the mountain, and Isaac is bound on top of the wood. Abraham lifts up his hand, ready to sacrifice his son...

Every Rosh Hashanah we encounter the disturbing and challenging narrative of the Binding of Isaac. We are at once drawn to the tale, and repulsed by it. It is the ultimate story of faith for some – Abraham undergoes trial after trial, tested by a God who asks of humanity nothing short of the impossible. Others are confused that this same Abraham, not three chapters ago argued with God over the destruction of two cities full of strangers, cannot be compelled to question the command to give up his son. We are dismayed at Abraham's compliance, and Sarah's absence. We are distraught that father and son part ways after this chapter, never to speak to one another again.

Some years we wonder why we were given this story to read at all on Rosh Hashanah. Why do we not read some uplifting story about forgiveness and love, or of creation and starting anew? Why not ask us to consider God's promise to Noah never to destroy the earth again, as we commemorate the birthday of the world? Or we could read the story of the Creation itself? The shofar should call to mind the dawn of Humanity, and revelation at Sinai, rather than the bleating of the ram caught in the thicket.

Every character in the Akedah is tested, even the ram, even God. Does God demand from us the sacrifice of our children? Will Abraham follow through on his responsibility to God or to his son? Do we imagine that Isaac is a willing participant? What is his role in the

unfolding drama? Ultimately the angel's voice calls to Abraham by name. The angel calls twice, with a strange mark in the Torah itself denoting a pause in between calls, "Abraham | Abraham!" as if our father does not heed the cry when first he hears it.

There are as many different ways to think about the Akedah as there are generations of Jews who have attempted it. Some identify with Abraham, feeling tested by God, and worrying whether or not we are doing right by our children. Others see themselves as Isaac, overlooked by God, punished for the sins of our parents. Perhaps we have searched for our reflection in the lost voices of the Akedah: Sarah's, God's, or even the Ram's. Or perhaps the hero of the story in our time is God, who passes a sort of test too by saving Isaac. As we have moved through the stages of life, and witnessed different stages of Jewish history, our perspectives have shifted like a Rorschach test of family dynamics and of what it means to be a person of faith.

Today as I encounter this text, what strikes me most is the feeling that Abraham failed the test he was given. A radical thought, perhaps, but not an original one. On Rosh Hashanah especially, we see the character of Abraham as representing all of humanity. Like each of us, Abraham attempts to understand God's purpose for him and sometimes he misunderstands. Like each of us, Abraham ends up hurting those he loves most. Like each of us, Abraham has to live with the consequences of his failure to protect Isaac for the rest of his life.

God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. *V'ha'alehu sham le'olah* – raise him up there to me." (Gen 22:1) A midrash imagines a conversation between God and Abraham after the events of the Akedah. "Abraham became surprised and said, 'These words are confusing. Yesterday You said 'For it is through Isaac that children shall come to you.' Then You went back and said, 'Take your son, your only son...' And now You say to me, 'Do not lay your hand upon the child' – I am bewildered.' The Holy One, blessed be God responded, 'Abraham, I will never violate My covenant or change what I have said' (Ps. 89:35). When I told you to take your son, I never said to slaughter him. I wanted you to raise him up. I wanted you to show your love for me [through your love for him], and you did as I asked – [you lifted him up] - but now please Abraham, take him back down again." (Genesis Rabbah 56:8)

Many commentaries note that Abraham and Isaac represent the two great generations of the beginning of great tradition of passing Judaism from parent to child. Perhaps rather than honoring that covenant, and lovingly caring for the future generation, Abraham is too willing to give up his son, in blind obedience to God. Perhaps, having heard God's voice once, Abraham is confused, and instead of honoring his son, lifting him up spiritually, he tries to destroy him. He does not see that without Isaac, Abraham devastates his own future.

We hear God talking to us today. God draws our attention, reminds us of forgotten promises, and truths we once knew. We still often fail the test, every one of us, every year, every day. We fail to live our values; we fail to care for each other in ways that matter. That is what brings us together here today. The facts of our failings. The ways we use words to cut each other down, the litany of shortcomings we contemplate at this moment each Rosh Hashanah. Too often we forget how to honor our spouse, lift up a friend, or set the next generation on a pedestal, rather than on an altar upon which we sacrifice them in the name of our mistakes.

Too often we have not shown our children what it means to honor one another. We have not taught them to love by example. We have not given them shining examples of a marriage to strive for and to believe themselves worthy of. The planet is in peril - our generation is leaving the environment in worse shape than we found it. We have failed to care for immigrants who remind us every day of our own families entering this country fifty or a hundred years ago. If only we imagine them speaking Yiddish instead of Spanish.

We are Abraham: blinded by religious fervor that our views are right. We have abandoned our ethical teachings, leaving room for hateful voices of intolerance to lead us. Like Abraham, we can no longer see what is right in front of us. We cannot see that our own children will be the sacrifice we make, future generations asked to clean up the mess, to figure out on their own how to balance family life; to lead our communities with integrity and moral courage; to solve the problems we created; to shoulder the burdens we ask them to carry like firewood up the mountain.

Today is the day we stand like Abraham stood, having bound our own futures to the altar, with our knives raised, prepared to follow through on our misguided efforts to heed God's voice. We are about to be told by angels and we were wrong from the beginning.

The poet Amir Gilboa writes: "Early in the morning, the sun walked in the forest, together with me and my father, my hand in his. Father? Hurry and save Isaac, and no one will be missing from the noontime meal." One generation leads the next through the woods and up the mountain. Even God's command should come second to protecting our children.

Not Isaac but Abraham cries out, "It is I who is being slaughtered, my son. My blood is already on the leaves." We are devastated by the Akedah, recognizing within it the suffering placed on Isaac and Abraham together. And in this modern Israeli poem, the ultimate question asked of Abraham is not about his obligations to God but to his family. "Hurry, father, save your son, and no one will be missing from the table come lunchtime."

But this father does not save his son, not really. We do not need modern psychology to tell us that Abraham loses Isaac on that mountaintop. The text tells us Abraham leaves alone.

The text tells us that Abraham and Isaac do not speak to each other again. The next time we hear from Isaac he is old, and weak, and blind. Maybe his father left him that way.

Emmanuel Levinas, the great theologian, argues that Abraham fails in this moment not only as a father, but also as any kind of religious example. He writes that, “Loving Torah even more than God means having a personal God against whom one may rebel, that is to say, for whom one may die. (Difficult Freedom, 145) He argues that the high point in the drama is not when Abraham almost sacrifices his own son, but when he finally, finally resists, having heard the voice of the angel.” (Existence and Ethics, 34)

This angel who appears at the end of the Akedah delivers a complicated message. “Because you have done this thing for God, I will bless you, and will make your children as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the sands of the seashore. And through your children all the peoples of the world will be blessed, because you have listened to my voice.”

But Abraham failed the test, and hasn’t protected Isaac. God’s angel says, “because you have listened to my voice” this second time I have called you. And even though you, Abraham, misunderstood what God wanted from you until now, you finally listened, and therefore God’s covenant with you is secure.”

“Listen Abraham,” says the angel, “put down that knife. I think you misunderstood what I asked you to do. There you go, thank you for putting down that knife, Abraham. It must have taken you a great amount of resolve to prepare to do what you were prepared to do. And now that you have finally listened to and understood My voice, I will bring you the greatest blessing I can bring. I will help you understand that this child is your future, that it is because of him future generations will remember you, and they will bring even more blessings to the world because of you.”

My friend and mentor Rabbi Paul Kipnes puts it this way: “The angel’s words remind me of a parent who walks into his freshly painted house. Dad is greeted at the door by his young son who, with a big smile on his face, says, ‘Daddy, come see how much I love you.’ The boy brings his father into the next room and proceeds to proudly show him a picture drawn in magic marker on the living room wall. It is a red heart, inside of which are the words, ‘Daddy, I love you.’ How does a parent respond to such a display of love, especially after spending thousands of dollars to paint the house just right? Most of us would yell. But if we stopped first to think about it, we might say, with tears in our eyes, ‘I love you too, my son. Try to use paper next time. And you can’t write on the walls. But, I love you too!’ Similarly, through the words of the angel, God, the patient One, who cherishes Abraham, teaches love and forgiveness as an example for future generations.”

The story only lacks compassion for Isaac - the true victim of the Akedah. We are not devastated enough for Isaac. His destiny is left in limbo, his family's servant forced later to go out and find a suitable wife for him, as if Isaac is incapable of caring for himself after the Akedah. Isaac could have been saved, if Abraham had only been brave enough, or strong enough, or smart enough to listen to God the first time.

During our Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance which begin tonight, I hope that Isaac's pain stays with us, as a constant reminder of the ways in which our sins, our devastating mistakes can affect those around us whom we claim to love. I hope we also connect with the pain of Abraham. We fail, and the Gates of Repentance are always open to us. Let us embrace the pain of Sarah, because there is always a human cost we pay, for every person we claim to love, and whom we have hurt, and will hurt again.

Maybe Isaac carries pain with him but survives. And maybe Sarah and the Ram become collateral damage. And just maybe Abraham failed his test. But God loves them anyways. God loves them all through their human failings, and the ways they hurt each other. Isn't that the best reason for us to read this story on Rosh Hashanah? We fall down, we get back up, we transgress and God forgives us. We hurt, we suffer; we are cruel to one another. But at any moment, at every moment, God's angels are calling to us and hoping that we will hear them, hoping we might learn better how to hear God's truest commands, and not allow our children, our friends, our family to suffer the consequences of our imperfect and human ways. Blessings are waiting for us, only when we are open to hearing God's voice in our lives.

Today is our day to recognize the ways we have misunderstood the angels calling out to us. Today may we take stock of the past year, and make new promises for the future. The shofar blasts pierce our veil of distraction and show us the hurt we have caused. And we finally hear and understand God's voice.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel recalls the time he learned the Akedah for the first time in religious school. He writes, "Yitzchak - Isaac lay on the altar, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Yitzchak. Behold, Avraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard. Avraham lay not your hand upon the lad, for now I know that you fear God. And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. 'Why are you crying,' asked the rabbi, 'you know that Yitzchak was not killed.' And I said to him, still weeping, 'But rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?' The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that angels cannot come late. An angel cannot be late, but human beings, of flesh and blood, may be.

May we not miss the call of the angels of God sent here for us today.