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ABRAHAM'S FAITHFUL BINDING OF ISAAC

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Coming to High Holy Day services while struggling with difficult questions and decisions about one's life is hardly uncommon. And it's equally true that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services often leave us with more questions than answers. The Torah reading (Genesis 22) for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Akedah, however, offers some insights for our thinking about unanswered questions.

The Akedah is about Abraham's faithful binding of Isaac, so that he might sacrifice him—or at least that's how it's usually understood.

God had given Isaac to Sarah and Abraham in their old age (Genesis 21:1-3), and when Isaac was weaned Abraham made a great feast (21:8). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) describes the events that followed:

After the feast, Satan spoke evil of Abraham to God. Satan said that God had given a child to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, but Abraham had failed to sacrifice to God even one turtledove or pigeon at the feast. Satan accused Abraham of honoring his son but not God who gave him the son.

God answers Satan, saying that Abraham would sacrifice his son, Isaac, for God's sake, if God asked him to do so. Then, according to the tradition, God "tempted" Abraham, telling him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice.

Simeon ben Abba, a destitute Babylonian-born Amora who moved to Eretz Yisrael, teaches that God entreated Abraham to make the sacrifice of Isaac as a king would entreat a great warrior to uphold his name and crown in battle. In effect,

Abraham was tempted in a way that would allow him to think he was doing great good if he would sacrifice his son. And God made the request indirectly, using circumlocution, to avoid overwhelming Abraham with the shocking nature of what he was being asked to do.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) teaches on Genesis 22:2 that when God says Abraham would sacrifice Isaac if God asked him to, we should read this as, Abraham would *offer* to sacrifice Isaac. God *asks* rather than commands Abraham to offer up Isaac: God makes the request using the expression *na*, "I pray thee," and God asks that the sacrifice be made in the future. The request was to offer up Isaac after Abraham reached the mountain; it was not a demand to sacrifice him at that moment.

While Abraham is on his way to Mount Moriah, following God's instructions, Satan—his "adversary" and "accuser"—approaches him. Satan has no independent existence or power but derives entirely from God. In effect, he encounters his own *yetzer hara* or evil inclination (Baba Batra 16a). This part of the story gets somewhat convoluted, so keep in mind that *Satan is nothing more than Abraham's own evil inclination*.

Satan asks Abraham if he will be "grieved" by talking with him. He reminds Abraham that while Abraham has taught and strengthened many other people, he himself is now feeling faint from the trial of sacrificing Isaac.

Abraham responds, I am ready to be tested—heart and mind (Psalm 26:2)—in my trust of God.

Satan retorts, Shouldn't your awe of God give you confidence [in what you believe, that human sacrifice is evil]?—but you're preparing to sacrifice your son.

Abraham answers: When did God ever take an innocent life? And he adds, he has secret knowledge from God that Isaac is not to be sacrificed.

Satan replies: Because I am a liar, even when I tell the truth I am not listened to.

What's happening here?

Abraham's evil inclination is clamoring for attention. In effect, he is taunting himself with the question of whether he can face his own fear about the ultimate outcome of the journey he has embarked upon, that is, whether God will eventually require him to sacrifice Isaac.

He answers himself bravely that he is ready to be tested. He is ready to do everything God asks of him—short of actually sacrificing Isaac, presumably, because it could only be a false god that would ask for such a sacrifice, not Abraham's One God.

When his evil inclination says that he should be confident, and he is not, Abraham affirms his faith by stating that his God does not demand the sacrifice of innocents. Having quieted his evil inclination, he reminds himself further that his intimate knowledge of God assures him that Isaac is not to be a "burnt offering."

This reaction isn't surprising because, as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches, the idea of the Akedah as human sacrifice is "blasphemous nonsense"—which presumably it would have seemed to Abraham. Similarly, Rashi comments (Numbers 22:2): "(God) did not say to him [Abraham], 'Slaughter him' [שחטוהו]; because the Holy One Blessed be He did not desire to slaughter him, but only to bring him up to the mountain in order to prepare him as an elevating offering [עולה]. But after (Abraham) had brought him up, He said to him, 'Take him down [הורידוהו]'."

Abraham was almost certainly doing what we all do—carrying on an internal debate between his *yetzer ha tov* and his *yetzer ha ra*, between his good and bad inclinations.

Despite momentary doubts, he refused steadfastly to believe that God would ever require the actual sacrifice of Isaac. Rashi says that Abraham prophesied to the youths with him that both he and Isaac would return from the mountain, using the Hebrew word *nashuvah*, "we will come back" to you (Genesis 22:5). Because of Abraham's faith in God, his implicit trust that the seal of God is truth, Abraham would not listen to the voice he believed to be God when that voice told him a lie, even for a good purpose.

But Abraham was confronted with a very difficult question: Was the voice of this god the same as his One God—and how could he be sure, one way or the other?

The simple answer, of course, would be "no"—this could not be the voice of the One God, since his God abhorred human sacrifice.

But suppose Abraham decided to consider the question *as if* the voice he was hearing was that of his One God: What would he—or anyone—be likely to imagine it would mean that this God, who abhorred sacrifice, would ask that he sacrifice his son?—not command, but *ask*.

One conclusion would be that it was a test—God was tempting Abraham to do what was forbidden, to test his faith.

Now what might Abraham imagine that God would require of him to pass or fail the test?

If, on the one hand, he was in fear and reluctant to offer up his son, that would seemingly demonstrate a failure of his faith in the One God, because it would indicate a fear that his son was *actually* going to be taken. If, on the other hand, he had absolute faith in his God, and a conviction that no other god or gods had any power over him, might he not go to the very moment of taking his son's life, confident that his God would not require the ultimate act? And wouldn't he also be confident that if such an abomination were asked of him, it would not be *his* God who would be making the request—so he could not only refuse the request but he could also reject the god who was making it?

How can we understand *why* and *how* God is "tempting" Abraham?

It would seem that, in telling Abraham a "lie," that is, implying that He will yet ask for the sacrifice of Isaac, God is testing Abraham for a good purpose, to see whether he can discriminate between offering Isaac and actually sacrificing him—the first, dedicating Isaac to a lifetime service of God, is pleasing to God; the second, actually taking his life in a rite comparable to pagan sacrifice, is abhorrent. Seemingly, Abraham was being tempted to believe the evil thought that his God would desire *actual* human sacrifice.

It may have been a lesson to Abraham about his own evil inclination, which no longer had to be listened to, even if occasionally it told the "truth" for an evil purpose. As it says in Genesis Rabbah (22:6), "When Abraham arose and saw how really feeble he [i.e., the evil inclination] was, he began to crush him, as it is written: And I will beat to pieces his adversaries before him (Psalm 89:24)."

We may learn from all this that God tests us through various aspects of the creation—some of

which we ourselves co-produce—to believe that our worst inclination is God’s own truth.

We can imagine that God was testing Abraham to see if he would believe that his worst evil inclination, the idea that God wanted him to sacrifice his son, was in fact the Divine Will. We may also learn from this reading that we have been endowed with the capacity to choose to stifle the voice of our conscience, our good inclination, so that we can carry on a conversation with our evil inclination, which is what Abraham was doing.

Of course, there’s still the inevitable question: How far would Abraham have gone if the angel of God had not intervened?

Some say he would have slain his son. But that hardly seems plausible, considering the confidence he had that *his* God would *never* demand human sacrifice.

Did Abraham have questions about God and His mitzvot, His commandments?

Absolutely! Who wouldn’t under such circumstances? Can there be any more serious questions than about the life and death of our children?

There’s a story about a man who abandoned his Judaism because of his questions.

The man was asked by an old friend, who was still a practicing Jew, “Why did you give it up?”

The man replied, “I had a lot of questions.”

The friend then asked, “Were they questions or were they answers?”

“What do you mean?” the man replied.

“Well,” said the friend, “maybe they were really the excuses you used to explain away why you abandoned your heritage. If so, such questions are really answers already—and so, of course, they can’t be answered.”

One cannot live a Jewish life—or a life based on any moral vision and law—without questions. Human life is full of contradictions, which prompt endless questions. But the more we study the Torah—all of the sacred Jewish literature—the more answers we find. Inevitably, with each new set of answers comes new understanding, intellectual and spiritual growth, and new questions. And so, if we’re living a *Jewish* life, “We live from question to question.”

Abraham certainly had questions, compelling questions, but he didn’t use them as excuses to abandon his God. He had faith that the answers to his questions would emerge in time.

In this context, “faith” means that he was committed to God’s goodness, regardless of his immediate experience and reason. He was willing to act on the assumption that goodness would emerge and increase in the world, even if at any particular moment that possibility seemed contradicted by his reason and experience.

Imagine where we would be if Abraham had not struggled faithfully with his questions. In all likelihood, *we* wouldn’t *be*.

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