

“The Binding of Isaac”

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As explained in one commentary to the *Genesis* story of the binding of Isaac, this story has one central preoccupation “man’s decision in relation to God. The result of this style is a terrible intensity, a story which is so stark as to be almost unbearable.”¹ A truer word has never been written about Genesis 22: 1- 18. Who is God in this story? Can we bear his demands and accept his tests? Who is Abraham in this story? Can we respect him after he brings his son for sacrifice? Who is Isaac in this story? Can we bear this abuse upon him? Who is Sara in this story? She is Isaac’s mother, a mother who desperately yearned for children but struggled with infertility. Finally, we are told that Yahweh opened her womb and one child is born to her, Isaac, which means “laughter.” Sara does not appear in this story because Abraham never consults her when he goes to sacrifice Isaac. This story is so stark as to be unbearable.

The rabbis also assigned this story to be read at the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, the Head of the Jewish New Year, which began this past Friday evening at sundown. Rosh Hashanah ushers in a ten-day period of reflection, prayer, fasting, and repentance. A time when Jews around the world share communal meals, attend synagogue and consider their individual and communal behavior in the past year. We are told that within this ten-day period, God will, if they have behaved well, sign their name in the Book of Life. On the final day, Yom Kippur, or the “Day of Atonement” God will decide whether or not to seal their name in the Book of Life for one more year. During these ten days Jews seek forgiveness of God for wrongs committed as a community, but for wrongs against individual people, Jews are commanded to directly approach that person, to apologize, and to change their behavior.

Unlike Christian concepts of forgiveness, atonement requires *teshuvah*, actively turning away from bad behavior and choosing better behavior in the future. It is not enough to apologize or ask for forgiveness, or to believe that faith will wash away all sins. Within Judaism there is a higher standard that requires a permanent change in behavior.

Through the ages there have been numerous commentaries and different interpretations of the Binding of Isaac. Jews refer to it as the *Akedah* (a-kay-da), which means “Binding.” I was even told by a rabbi that there are *Midrash* stories written with another ending, stories where Isaac is killed by his father. These stories were often written during times of persecution when Jews were dying for their faith, or dying for God, as would Isaac if he had been killed. Clearly this is a powerful story.

I began my research on this story and its inclusion at Rosh Hashanah with one central question, why this story now? As long as Judaism has existed it has encompassed

¹ Everett Fox, editor, *The Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses*, “The Great Test,” 92.

a wide variety of commentary and interpretation. The essence of Judaism is to consider stories, questions, and meanings from every angle, often not coming up with one answer, but multiple options. Why not begin Rosh Hashanah with another story, say Jacob wrestling with the angel, coming away transformed and with the new name of Israel. There are few greater or more transformative and defining stories than this one. Why the Binding of Isaac and not Jacob wrestling with the angel?

Rabbi Robert Barr of Congregation Beth Adam had a definitive answer. He said to me, “It is a story about blind following. It was popular with the rabbis because it is about God’s absolute authority. They are saying that the best way to be a Jew is to start the year by doing what God wants.” Rabbi Barr also told me that since September 11, 2001 he would no longer read this story during Rosh Hashanah. He told me that in a time of terrorism it is no longer constructive or appropriate.

He went on to add that a few years back he preached a sermon on this text explaining why he would no longer use it. He expressed his frustration with the over-accommodating Abraham and told members of his congregation that the story of Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah would be a much better story at this time of the year. In that story Abraham bargains with God several times to preserve the lives of the inhospitable, ungrateful residents of the city. Every time God expresses his desire to destroy the city, Abraham returns with craft and conviction to change God’s mind. I once heard the great humanitarian Elie Wiesel speak and he referred to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and like Rabbi Barr, Wiesel noted that a good Jew models the patriarch Abraham in this story, challenging God, bargaining with God, never accommodating a destructive God. Rabbi Barr told me that when he preached the sermon explaining why he would no longer read the Binding of Isaac, the members of his congregation applauded.

Over the year different rabbis have pointed out that in the Binding of Isaac, Abraham does not verbally challenge God, but he asks many questions and slowly goes about following his orders, perhaps stalling for time. But as my commentary notes

Most noticeable in the narrative is Abraham’s silence, his mute acceptance of, and acting on, God’s command. We are told of no sleepless night, nor does he ever say a word to God. Instead he is described with a series of verbs: starting early, saddling, taking, splitting, arising, going . . . Abraham the bargainer, so willing to enter into negotiations with relations (Chapter 13), allies (Chapter 14), local princes (Chapter 20), and even God himself (Chapter 18), here falls completely silent.²

As Unitarian Universalists, many of you are probably sitting here thinking, “Who cares? I don’t believe in God and I am not Jewish.” This reasoning is flawed because it assumes that faith God makes us that different from one another. Go ahead and substitute God for, “your commanding officer out in the field,” or “your mother or father,” or “your boss.” How much do we accommodate or follow those with greater age, authority, money, and power, and should we? I hope I have now peaked our treasured heritage or reasoning and individualism. The eternal and troubling greatness of the story of the

² Fox, 92.

Binding of Isaac is that it takes us to the eternal challenge of faith in ourselves and faith in others (whether divine or human), as well as the interplay between faith and reasoning.

Many times in our life we will accommodate a situation, go along to get along, buying time, hoping for a different ending or a diversion. How far will you go? The Binding of Isaac directly asks, how far will you go? Most of us will surprise ourselves and go farther than we would have thought. Have you ever lied at work or forged paperwork for a colleague or superior? Have you ever excused a partner's drinking or abuse past the point of reason? What about when children are involved? Have you ever missed multiple events in your children's lives because of work or some other boss? As a society, how do we bind our children to poverty and homelessness?

The Binding of Isaac is dramatic, but what would you do if you were Abraham? I always get to the part of the text where the messenger arrives, and for me, it is too late.

Abraham built the slaughter site
 And arranged the wood
 And bound Isaac his son
 And placed him on the slaughter site atop the wood
 And Abraham stretched out his hand,
 He took the knife to slay his son.
 But Yhwh's messenger called to him from heaven
 And said: Abraham, Abraham!
 He said:
 Here I am.
 He said:
 Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,
 Do not do anything to him!
 For now I know
 That you are in awe of God-
 You have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.

The text concludes with the promise that because Abraham has hearkened to God's voice, he will be blessed and his seed will people the earth like the stars of the heavens. Abraham was in "awe" of God, just as the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are known as the Days of Awe.

The place where I lose respect for Abraham is when we are told, "he arranged the wood and bound Isaac his son." I can bear his setting out on a journey with Isaac to see what happens, buying time. I flinch when Isaac asks, "Where is the lamb for the offering-up?" But the part I can no longer bear begins when Abraham binds his child, a child, his son.

Another reason this text is still relevant is that it powerfully asks the question "When do we bind our children, and why? Do we bind them to our egos, our expectations, our needs, or do we encourage them with loving guidance to become their own persons? The text also asks us to consider "When were we bound as children and was that acceptable?" Most of us defer to our parents to some extent, no matter how they treated us. Parental respect is important, but does it somehow forbid us from assessing whether or not our own parents did a good job? Were they present or absent, fair or

unfair, appropriate or inappropriate? These are highly relevant questions. Often our own parental challenges relate to how we ourselves were parented.

If we are indeed forbidden to question our parents, then Abraham is forbidden to question God, and this I do not believe. I believe that Abraham and all of us have a moral responsibility to question anything that puts others, especially the vulnerable, at risk. I would have trouble following an authority figure that made such a request of me, regardless of the necessity of faith. Our first Unitarian Universalist source is direct experience, including reason, and in the end, I am not willing to sacrifice my reason for the faulty reason of others (with due regard to the fact that anyone's reason can be faulty).

Another one of my colleagues, Rabbi Rick Steinberg pointed out to me that Isaac never speaks to Abraham again. Now, *Genesis* doesn't say that Isaac dislikes or distrusts his father after his binding, and Isaac does accept the wife that Abraham later selects for him, but we never hear Isaac and Abraham speak again. Isaac survives the binding, but does his relationship with his father survive this test? We don't know and it is possible to infer that it does not. So what do we owe others in relationship, regardless of what an authority figure suggests? And what may be the consequences if we defer to authority rather than our loved ones?

Even more, some rabbis suggest that although the Bible tells us that Abraham is blessed because he passed this test, he in fact fails this test. For these rabbis, the proof is that God never again speaks to Abraham. Was God testing Abraham to discover if he was a victim of blind faith, and did Abraham really pass the test? We don't know.

The great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote an entire book on the Binding of Isaac entitled *Fear and Trembling*. In this book he proposes that Abraham is a "knight of faith" because he gives away what he loves best with faith in the absurd that it will come back somehow. In this way Abraham's faith is positive and proactive. Kierkegaard argues that this is the essential test of any faith. Faith, whether in love, God, hope, or humans requires faith in the absurd, something that can't be known. Kierkegaard notes that Abraham is not a "knight of infinite resignation," someone who is always passive, gives up everything, and focuses on his losses. This type of faith is negative and reactive. In the analysis of one Biblical story Kierkegaard offers a fascinating look at types of faith, proactive and reactive, positive and negative. This is a fascinating topic for conversation, but it still leaves me with the question of faulty faith and reason. How do we ever know when we are deluded by reason or faith?

One of my friends suggested to me that faith, in anything, results in an existential question of death, in a belief to the boundaries of life and knowledge, which is like a death but becomes a rebirth, and in this way the "Binding of Isaac" is an appropriate story for the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Obviously the "Binding of Isaac" is many things to many people. This morning our third – eighth graders discussed this story in their classes. If you are a parent of a child in this age range, I hope you talk about this story and what it means to you, together.

For people who are interested in further discussion, and there is a lot more to say, such as why Christians refer to this story as the "Sacrifice of Isaac" instead of the "Binding of Isaac" I invite you to our first Torah discussion with myself, Rabbi Barr, and members of Congregation Beth Adam. It is Monday, October 9, from 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 noon here at First Church. Read the story for yourself and decide what it means to you.

What questions does it make you ask, where does the story spark your interest? Then come and share what you have learned with all of us so that we can grow together. *Shanah Tovah*. I wish you a good New Year.