

Akeidat Yitzchak

Ivy Eisenberg

5772/2011

L'Shanah Tovah.

In 1997, I took a Franklin-Covey Time Management Course, which was offered through work. My children were 5 and 2 years old at the time, and I had assumed that the class would teach me how to use the smart-looking leather-bound planner to get my maniacal life under control.

It didn't quite work that way. The philosophy of the program is that you identify your major life goals, huge things like physical health, a good marriage, happy children, prosperity You then break these goals down into the things you have to do to reach them, and you continue to chunk the activities into smaller and smaller bits until you wind up with the tasks that you write in your daily planner –things like: Pick up diapers at CVS, make a haircut appointment, go to the gym, finish the monthly report, cancel gym membership, and so on. You discover that all of these seemingly mundane tasks in some way help you reach your life goals. If they don't, you're supposed to strike them from your to-do list.

The time management course began with a discussion of “WHAT MATTERS MOST” The instructor first asked us: “If I asked you right now to walk a tight rope between the World Trade Center Towers, would you do it?” The question scared the crap out of me. I'm afraid of heights, I hate circuses, I have terrible balance. I envisioned myself taking a step and falling

miles toward the ground. I just knew I wouldn't be able to do this – and it made me physically ill to think about it. Everyone in the class answered “no way.”

The instructor then asked, “Now, what if I told you that your child was at the other end of that tight rope, and that you needed to walk that tight rope to rescue him from disaster? Would you walk that tight rope?” Of course we all said yes without hesitation. We would do whatever we could in order to save our children, including putting our own lives—literally—on the line.

I often relive that nightmare in my mind. I imagine trying to scoot across the wire on my butt. I think about how I could zipline it. I scream across to my kids “what are you doing over there? How did you get us into this mess?” And though I've long since stopped buying those expensive Franklin-Covey planners, and my time management course materials are lost in some hopelessly messy pile of papers somewhere in my office – that tightrope story sticks with me.

And I tend to think about it when I think of today's portion, the Akedah – the binding of Isaac – another story that I turn over and over, looking to make some sense of. It's another haunting story of a parent seeing their child at the height of danger, although in this case, by the parent's own hand. Most parents would willingly give up their own lives to save that of their child, yet Abraham is asked to do the opposite—or so we think. The story is so chilling because it runs counter to our parental instincts toward unconditional love and protection.

In yesterday's torah portion, we read that Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac, when Sarah was 90 years old. Today's portion – the Akedah -- begins by telling us “sometime afterward, God

put Abraham to the test.” God asks Abraham to “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” Abraham makes the preparation, takes a three day journey with Isaac, and goes through the whole procedure of binding Isaac, placing him on the wood, and lifting the knife. Then at the last minute, an angel of God stops him and Isaac goes free.

The first time I attended the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah in this tent, I was over there [stage left, in the back] with my baby son sleeping peacefully and cozily in a navy blue stroller, under that delicious baby-smelling pastel-checkered blanket. The tent flap was up, the ground was uneven and the earth damp, and there was a cool September breeze. I have to say this – he was the perfect baby boy – my very own miracle baby, healthy, even-tempered, brilliant—even at 3 months old. I could not fathom a situation where I would be able to act as Abraham had done.

For many years, I understood the Akedah to mean that God is testing Abraham’s devotion – and in doing so, God is saying that you have to love me more than you love your cherished son. And Abraham passed the test – but at what cost? To the trust of his son, and some say to the life of his own wife. And what a lonely message this is: That you should not love your child too much.

A few weeks ago, our own Simon Aronin shared with me a thought that he never got to share when he gave the dvar torah several years ago. He said “you know, the Akedah is a central story for all Jews, and people can be placed in categories by how they relate to the Akedah – by

whether they think that Abraham 'failed' the test, or 'passed' the test, or *God* was being tested, or some other interpretation.” “Maybe I’ll add that” I said to him.

Whether or not one can place people in categories, I believe is that you learn a lot about yourself by how you interpret this story. And that your interpretation reflects who you are today, when you say “Hineni” I am here, as Abraham answered to God.

The noted sage, Penn Jillette – the large, loudmouthed comic of the magic duo Penn & Teller -- has a new book out called “God, No! Signs you may already be an atheist and other magical tales”

Jillette begins his book with these lines: “If G-d (however you perceive him/her/it) told you to kill your child—would you do it? If your answer is no, in my booklet you’re an atheist. There is doubt in your mind. Love and morality are more important to you than your faith. If your answer is yes, please reconsider.” In Jillette’s world, you are not supposed to bring your child to Mount Moriah. And according to Jillette, this makes you an atheist.

Okay, it’s a humor book – but his basic premise is that theists are always sure – they claim to “know”—and that atheists have doubts. My point of view is that having a “belief” or “faith” is not the same as having certainty. There is always a measure of doubt and struggle in life. Faith is action – you do the things that need to be done.

I believe that Abraham *believed in the possibility* that he would *not* sacrifice Isaac. That’s why, when Isaac asked him where the sheep was, Abraham said to him “G-d will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” God had promised to make of Abraham and Sarah a great nation.

Abraham understood that Isaac was the lifeline to the next generation. Yet, he was obligated to follow God's command.

Other commentators support this view. In his 2005 book *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders & Kabbalah*, Lippman Bodoff argues that Abraham never intended to actually sacrifice his son, and that he had faith that God had no intention that he do so. More evidence that Abraham thought that he wouldn't actually sacrifice Isaac comes from Genesis 22:5, where Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you." By saying that we (as opposed to I), Abraham meant that both he and Isaac would return. Thus, he didn't believe that Isaac would be sacrificed in the end.

This is echoed by Berel Dov Lerner, writing in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* in 1999.

Lerner says, "if Abraham had put a permanent end to Isaac's life, God's word would have been broken. One might say that while God's command tested Abraham's obedience, Abraham's obedience tested God's faithfulness to the covenant. On Mount Moriah, both God and Abraham proved their devotion to the fulfillment of the divine word.Since the fulfillment of the covenant required that no evil befall Isaac, Abraham had no need to fear that in obeying God his son would be injured."

So why go through the charade?

At each point of the succinct but powerful story, Abraham has to take an action to demonstrate his obligation. It is his task list, if you will.

He acts slowly and deliberately. He saddles the ass, he rounds up the servants and Isaac. He splits the wood for the burnt offering. He makes the three day journey with the company. He

takes Isaac up to Mount Moriah, takes the wood for the burnt offering and puts it on Isaac, takes the firestone and knife, builds the altar, binds Isaac, lays Isaac on the altar, and lifts the knife.

Each action is – a choice. An action taken. At each step, he has a chance to re-commit. At each step, he believes that “God will see to the sheep for the Burnt Offering.” He has to continue to believe – and God has brought him to the very brink before the angel of God orders Abraham to stop. Why is he brought to the brink? Abraham needs to demonstrate his faith.

Why do we read this on Rosh Hashanah?

In my view –each time, we gather here, we come together to reaffirm the birth, cycle of life, and the continuation of the Jewish people. Like the Passover Haggadah, where we are commanded to tell the story of the deliverance from Egypt, so too are we commanded here to retell. The Akedah is the same – but it is different for each of us each year, based on who or where we are. When my children were little, my world was like – as someone had characterized it - a pinball machine was constantly going off in my head. I was in a daze of to-do lists, and had no brain to comprehend it. I was in survival mode. Then, in a split second, or so it seemed, my first born was ready to enter Jewish adulthood as a Bat Mitzvah.

It was 2005, one week before my daughter’s Bat Mitzvah, 3 weeks before Rosh Hashanah, that God put **me** to the test.

My daughter announced to me “Mom, I am not Jewish. I can’t have my Bat Mitzvah because I am not Jewish.” What was I to say? Whenever my kids would say something ridiculous like “oh, how do you know I’m really your kid?” I’d always say “Hey, I know you’re my child. I watched you come out.” So proud was I about my natural childbirth, and they would be so grossed out,

the game would be over. I could have said to my daughter: “Hey, you’re my child, I watched you come out. And I’m Jewish, so you’re Jewish. Now go practice the blessings.”

I realized though, that I had no control over her. She was a separate individual, on the cusp of being an adult.

I don’t know where it came from, but I said, “That’s okay. You don’t have to feel like you’re Jewish. You can be a Bat Mitzvah anyway. Do you think that everyone sitting there is feeling it? Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don’t. People are out there thinking a million different things. You are standing up there on the bimah for them. For us, for Grandma and Grandpa. By standing there at the Bimah, you are giving them hope for the next generation.”

And then I did a most remarkable thing – I deferred to Daddy. I actually gave up control and I said to my husband, “You go talk to her.” And he did, and she agreed to go through the motions for the sake of the family.

By the time the Thursday rehearsal rolled around, a corner had been turned. And those of you lucky enough to have gone through a bar or bat mitzvah in this congregation know how special that Thursday is – from the intimate talk with the Rabbi to the time we spend getting to know the actual physical Torah. The rehearsal was great, she led the Kiddush at the Friday night service, and the Saturday morning service was beautiful. Everyone had told me “it’s amazing. You will see your child grow up on the bimah.” I didn’t know if that would be the case with my child, but it was. And she not only loved her Bat Mitzvah, she stayed in Dor Hahemshekh, the Bet Am Shalom High School program, all the way to the very end of 12th grade. She loves this place.

All I know is that at that Bat Mitzvah year, I felt that God was between my child and myself, not as a barrier, but as a connecting thread. I did not feel that God was saying to Abraham “love your God more than your child,” but rather “love your God in order to love your child.”

The Akedah is a story about family and about the entire Jewish people. And it is a story about life – and about renewal – and that is why we read it on Rosh Hashanah.

And each year, we read it anew – because our lives have changed – people have died, our kids have gone off to college, our struggles, our joys have tested our connection to God. We may have had an easy year. We may have been brought to the brink. Maybe we have gone through the motions without really feeling our connection to the Jewish people. Maybe we are walking a tightrope with fear – or with faith. But we return, year after year, and by coming here to relive the ancient story we can be remembered in the book of Life.

I want to close with a Poem by Yehuda Amichai, from his collection *Open, Closed, Open*.

Amichai writes:

Every year our father Abraham would take his sons to Mount Moriah
the way I take my children to the Negev hills where I once had a war.
Abraham hiked around with his sons. "This is where I left
the servants behind, that's where I tied the donkey to a tree
at the foot of the mountain, and here, right here, Isaac my son, you asked:
Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?
Then, up a little further, you asked for the second time."
When they reached the mountaintop, they rested a bit, ate and drank,

and he showed them the thicket where the ram was caught by its horns.

After Abraham died, Isaac started taking his sons to the same place.

"Here I lifted the wood, this is where I got out of breath,

here I asked, and my father answered: God will see to the lamb

for the offering. Over there, I already knew it was me."

And when Isaac's eyes were dim with age, his children

led him to that same spot on Mount Moriah, and recounted for him

all that had come to pass, all that he might have forgotten.

L'Shana Tovah.