

## **Akeidah D'rash Rosh Hashanah October 1, 2019**

### **John Cromwell**

My favorite section of the paper is the obituary page. I especially love learning about the process by which famous people came to find their life's calling. Recently, I saw a documentary film called "Obit" in which writers from the NYT discussed their techniques and approach to writing the obituaries of public figures. I learned that sometimes, circumstances permitting, reporters even contact the subjects of their research in advance! Most of us don't get the opportunity to contribute to our own obituary. To actually read our own obituary is even rarer.

Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, made his fortune as the owner of a company that was a major manufacturer of cannons and other armaments. He never married and had no children. When his brother, Ludwig, died, a newspaper erroneously published the more famous brother's obituary. The obituary summarized his life achievement with the following headline: "the merchant of death is dead - Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday." After reading this, Nobel vowed that he didn't want to be remembered this way, and shortly thereafter, he revised his will, bequeathing over 94% of his fortune to bettering this world and bringing people closer to peace.

I like to think of this time of year as the time when we get to think of how we would want our own obituary to read. Rosh Hashanah is the last big wake up call. "Just 9 days left until Yom Kippur!" the shofar announces.

Akeidat Yitzchak (the binding of Isaac), the Torah portion that we read today, relates how Abraham, acting on a divine vision to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering, at the last minute swaps out his son for a nearby ram caught in a thicket. Why does our tradition choose this Torah reading to recite today? To drive home two central themes of this period in our ritual calendar: *faith in God*, even in the depths of despair; and *teshuvah*. Teshuvah is often translated as "repentance for sin" – but it literally means "*return*." It's a time for us to come home - sometimes literally, to be with family, but more significantly for all of us - to *TURN INWARDS TOWARDS ourselves – to refocus on what really matters*.

I saw a sign on the bus the other day "Your choices behind the wheel matter," it read. Rabbi Akiva taught: "everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted (Avot 3:15, R. Akiva)". Whether or not you believe we're all just travelers beholden to a divine bus driver, we each are nevertheless responsible for our own steering wheel. It's so easy sometimes to just sit on the bus and get driven around, not realizing, or not wanting to face the uncomfortable truth that maybe it's time to get off. An essential message of the Akeidah is that we do have choices.

So often, we end up repeating similar patterns of behavior. Year after year, we get caught up in the same old arguments - with our siblings, with our parents, with our children. We act in hurtful ways to those we love. We know this, we recognize the patterns, but somehow, we just can't seem to stop. We apologize, and then fall right back into the same traps, letting our emotions get the better of rational selves. Rosh Hashanah challenge us, in the words of the late Rabbi Alan Lew, "to strip away the masks that we put on, to confront our innermost selves; to break the historical patterns of behavior – the ruts we have fallen into in our relationships with our spouses, children, co-workers, and friends; to remember what is truly important."

During the course of his adult life, Abraham evolves from passively waiting for messages from God – from being a passenger on the bus - to taking an active role in fulfilling God's promise to make him the father of a multitude of nations. The akeidah is the turning point in this evolution. Commanded to sacrifice his son, Abraham, at the last minute, declines to do so. The Torah describes how an angel stopped him as he was about to bring the blade down on his son's neck, and at that moment, Abraham hears a voice, "lifts up his eyes," and sees a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. Abraham heeds the voice, offering the ram as a sacrifice in place of his son (G22:13-14). Up on the mountain, knife poised above his head, his trusting son staring up at him, clarity comes to Abraham. He breaks free from the ghosts of his past.

The Torah tells us about Abraham's adventurous life prior to the akeidah, beginning with his departure from his ancestral homeland. However, the Torah is largely silent about Abraham's early life. The midrashic tradition, however, tells of a terrible ordeal Abraham suffered as a child. According to legend, Abraham's father, Terach, was a maker of idols. One day, Terach leaves his young son to tend the idol store alone. A customer comes in with a grain offering to give to the idols. She asks Abraham, "which idol should I give the offering to?" The youngster points her towards the largest one. After she leaves, Abraham smashes all the other idols to bits, placing a hammer in the hand of the biggest idol. Upon Terach's return, Abraham explains to his incredulous father that the idols fought over the offering, with the largest prevailing, destroying all the smaller ones. Terach, furious, takes his son before the local king, Nimrod, who casts Abraham into a fiery furnace, challenging his God to save him. Though Abraham emerges from the furnace physically unscathed, his father's willingness to sacrifice him surely must have left a lifelong emotional scar.

Perhaps even more traumatic, the midrash relates that no sooner had Abraham survived his fiery ordeal, than he witnesses the death of his brother. According to midrash, Abraham's brother, Haran, was present at Abraham's test. Seeing his brother emerge from the flames unscathed, he chooses that moment to join Abraham, declaring his fealty to the one God. Nimrod then throws *Haran* in the fire, but, unlike Abraham, the ordeal kills Haran. The midrash explains that Abraham emerged unscathed because his declaration of faith to the one God was unconditional; Haran, on the other hand, waited to

see what would happen to Abraham before making his decision. (Genesis Rabbah 38:13 R. Hiyyah 2nd-3rd c. CE). Abraham must have felt indirectly responsible for his brother's death. Possibly, for this reason, he and his wife, Sarah, take Haran's son, Lot, with them when, heeding God's call, they separate from Terach and travel to Canaan.

The beauty of the Torah is that our mythical progenitors aren't perfect. The bible depicts both their heroic attributes as well as their flaws. For the Torah, what's important is not how you start out, but where you end up. Up until the akeidah, Abraham has been less than heroic. His default mode is to separate himself when faced with familial conflict. He separates himself from his father. He separates himself from Lot, after their herdsmen quarrel over grazing issues. Right before the akeidah, he succumbs to pressure from Sarah, and separates himself from his older son, Ishmael, and Ishmael's mother, Hagar, expelling them from his house, banishing them into the wilderness. Moreover, in the face of danger, he's compromised his wife's honor to save his own skin, not once, but twice, the first time being when he travels to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan, instructing Sarah to tell Pharaoh she's his sister. He repeats the maneuver again with a local Philistine chieftain, Abimelech. Indeed, by the time of the akeidah, Abraham has even separated himself from his wife - he and Sarah are seemingly living apart. The Torah records that Abraham "sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days," while Sarah appears to have remained in Hebron. But that pattern of running away from conflict with those close to him stops at the akeidah.

One of the most perplexing aspects of the akeidah is Abraham's wordless response in the face of the divine command to slaughter his son. Think about it: Abraham has staked his legacy on an unseen voice telling him to uproot himself and his immediate family from his ancestral homeland and travel with them to an unknown land, in exchange for a promise to make him the father of many nations. But already in his mid-80's, Abraham still has no heir. Sarah offers Abraham her handmaid, Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael. Abraham at last has what he thinks is his successor to fulfill God's covenantal promise. But after 13 years, Abraham receives another divine message that Sarah, too, will conceive, giving Abraham a second son, Isaac. No sooner is Isaac born than God instructs Abraham to banish Ishmael, telling him the covenant is to run through his younger son. And now, out of nowhere, comes the order to kill Isaac.

As the modern scholar Everett Fox notes, during the incident of the akeidah, "Abraham never says a word to God, he has "no sleepless nights." How odd that Abraham - the man of action, who has heretofore been so willing to enter into negotiations with relatives and allies, here does not even raise the slightest protest.

Our great forefather's mute silence is all the more surprising given Abraham's past willingness to challenge God for what he thinks is right. When God announces to Abraham His intention to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham challenges God to spare the cities if he finds even 10 righteous men. Likewise, when

God announces to Abraham that Sarah will give him a son, too, Abraham is not afraid to laugh out loud before God over the preposterous idea of a 90 year old woman giving birth, and asks God directly, “what about Ishmael? What’s wrong with him?” (G17:17-18). Several chapters later, after God tells Abraham to actually banish Hagar and Ishmael, the Torah specifically tells us:

“The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.” (G21:11). (The midrashic sources go into much greater detail about the deep bond Abraham had with Ishmael, and the profound disappointment he felt about being forced to cast out his first-born son.)

There is no comparable narrative about Abraham’s feelings concerning the commandment to kill Isaac. In fact, it is God who tells Abraham “take your son, your only son, whom you love [first time the word “love” is used in Torah] (22:1-2) – why is it *God* who has to tell Abraham that he loves his son?).

How can we explain the lack of any attempt by Abraham to challenge or question God during the incident of the akeidah? Traditional commentators explain Abraham’s apparent acceptance as a measure of Abraham’s total unquestioning faith in God, his acceptance of God’s will, his ability to withstand even the most challenging of “tests” God throws at him. But does God really need additional proof of Abraham’s loyalty? If it is a test, what exactly is God testing? Is Abraham’s silence really just a matter of pure faith? Exactly who is testing whom here?

I believe that as much as God was testing Abraham’s faith, it was really Abraham who was testing God. To me, Abraham’s seemingly confounding behavior during the episode of the Akeidah only makes sense as a reaction to God’s prior seemingly erratic actions, the banishment of Ishmael being only the most recent.

Although Abraham makes no verbal response. His actions speak volumes concerning his emotions. The Torah describes his response using a series of active verbs: hurrying, splitting wood, saddling his donkey, arising early, and going forth. I see Abraham’s silence, his plunging with a vengeance to the task of getting ready for the trip into the wilderness, as his way of expressing his bitterness, disappointment, confusion, and frustration at God.

Up until the Akeidah, Abraham has only followed orders. But on Mount Moriah, as Abraham stands on the precipice, the knife held aloft, about to come down on Isaac’s neck, his face contorted in pain and confusion, at that moment, Abraham has what Prof. Naomi Graetz refers to as a “click moment.” God does not tell him to sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac. It is Abraham who SEES the ram, and suddenly, things become clear to him. At the decisive moment when he SEES the ram he, of his own volition, *chooses* to sacrifice *it* rather than his son. God did not tell him to do that. He *chooses* to follow the second command, the angel’s (Prof. Naomi Graetz)

And the Torah states: “Abraham names the place Adonai-yireh, from which today it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord there is vision.”

The name “Moriah” is an elision of “Mor” (Hebrew for bitterness), “Ra” (seeing/vision) and “Yah” (God) – so, we can understand the name as the place where out of the depths of Abraham’s misery, he attained insight.

“Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it”, the saying goes. Indeed, memory is an essential theme of Rosh Hashanah, which is also called Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. But becoming stuck in the past can be a trap, too. The opposite might also be true: “those who insist on remembering history are doomed to repeat it.” Rosh Hashanah challenges us, not only to remember, but to overcome our past, as well, to return to our better selves.

Perhaps at the akeidah Abraham acted even more radically - by defying God. Maybe that was God’s test of Abraham all along. Abraham’s greatness is his ability to break his cycle of trauma by not following his previous role models. Sacrificed by his own father, he declines to sacrifice *his* son. At Moriah, he makes a conscious choice to spare Isaac. Modern-day scholar Avivah Zornberg puts it this way: “Abraham’s work is to fathom the compulsions that led to filicide; to know in the present the full force of an experience of terror that lies enfolded in his past; to wake from his trance at the angel’s call.” (p. 200).

OF course, it’s both ironic and tragic that in the process of finally reckoning with his own childhood trauma, Abraham traumatizes his own son, scars which Isaac will carry with him throughout his lifetime.

After the Akeidah, Abraham becomes a different person. It’s as if the old Abraham had died. He starts to take an active role in shaping his own destiny. He sits shiva for Sarah, who has died, perhaps not coincidentally, just after the Akeidah, and immediately sets about negotiating his first purchase of land in Canaan - a family burial plot. He then turns to the task of finding a wife for Isaac, a necessary step for the fulfillment of the divine covenant. Finally, he marries a woman named Keturah and has six more children with her. Some Midrashic sources posit that Keturah is another name for Hagar, which is a nice way to think of Abraham doing teshuvah for having earlier expelled Hagar from his household.

According to Rambam, teshuvah is only complete when we find ourselves in exactly the same position we were in when we went wrong - when the state of alienation began - and when we choose to behave differently, to act in a way that is conducive to atonement and reconciliation. The unconscious patterns of conflict recur again and again. On Rosh Hashanah, we pray that God might grant us clarity of vision, and give us strength to return to our truest selves, to remember what is important in our lives.

Abraham set out with Isaac from home. He travelled to the mountain of bitterness

where he found clarity of vision, and he returned home, transformed. If you are moving along the circumference of a circle it might seem that the starting point is getting further and further away from you. Even at the moment you feel the greatest despair, at the time when you feel God is most distant, at the same time, you are actually getting closer and closer to home.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik cites the story of the prophet Samuel, who served the People of ancient Israel in circuit. Every year he would set out from Ramah, his home base, and travel to Bet El, then to Gilgal, then Mitzpeh and back to Ramah. But the moment he left Ramah he was already returning there, and so it is said, “Everywhere he went he was heading for home.” [On Teshuvah.” As quoted by Lew “This is real”]

On Rosh Hashanah we come together as a community to pray – as I recently heard Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explain - “to listen to God listening to us.” To give ourselves the courage to face our innermost selves, to refocus on what is important in our lives, and, as our forefather Abraham did, to break free of the ruts we find ourselves in. As Alfred Nobel understood when he read his own obituary, the akeidah teaches us that it is never too late to rebuild, to start the return home.

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