

Rosh Hashanah sermon, Rosh Hashana 2016

There's an old Yiddish expression or should I say kvetch. *S'iz shver tzu zein a Yid*. It's hard to be a Jew. And that was true with the very first Jew, Abraham. As we are reminded every Rosh Hashanah, God imposed a harrowing test on him—the near sacrifice or binding of his son Isaac. I've always wondered why God imposed a test, particularly one of such seeming cruelty, and over the years I've come to think that God was confronting Abraham with brutal realism and telling him: “You want be a Jew? Well let me tell you how hard it's going to be. Yes, your progeny will be as numerous as the stars, Yes, there will be blessings—Jews will be awarded 20 percent of all the Nobel Prizes, become the presidents of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, get jobs at Cravath, Swain and Moore, and Sandy Koufax will pitch four no-hitters. But there will be moments. “And boy, am I going to give you such a moment!”

To understand this argument, let's first examine the text itself. The first sentence of the chapter makes the nature of Abraham's exercise indisputable. “And God tested Abraham.” He did not punish him. He did not harass him. He tested him. As they say on those nuclear war alerts you periodically get on your radio and TV, “This is a test, it is only a test.” So we know from the beginning that what is about to occur will not end in tragedy. I emphasize this because many readers, I feel, do not put enough stress on the *akedah* as a test and see what is

about to happen as a *fait accompli*, an actual sacrifice. That is an understandable reading but I'm inclined to think that it is important to recognize that God is not asking Abraham to perform surgery on a live human being. He is, I believe, giving him an MCAT for admission to medical school, and as with the MCAT's, he just wants to see if Abraham is qualified.

God tells him he wants him to take his son—his only son, the one he loves, as the Torah puts it--and “go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you.” True, this is an especially peculiar test. Jewish law would soon forbid child sacrifices because they mirrored the barbaric practices of the surrounding tribes. Moreover, as a *midrash* points out, a sacrifice of Isaac would have contradicted the divine promise that Isaac would become Abraham's heir and produce offspring numerous as the stars. Finally, to many of us who have studied this *parsha* it is a test of appalling heartlessness. We come away agreeing with Blanche Dubois who said in “A Streetcar Named Desire”: “Deliberate cruelty is the one unforgivable sin.”

We also cannot help but notice how docilely Abraham goes along, something that I know from previous sermons has ruffled feathers among some congregants. “*Hineni*. Here I am.” he says more than once. We are disturbed by his acquiescence and then recoil in horror and condemnation as Abraham rises early in the morning,

saddles his donkey, splits the wood for the offering, and heads onto the spot that God has now revealed.

When he gets there, unwitting Isaac says “I see the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the sacrifice?” Abraham replies that God will see to the offering. Several translators insist on using the words “God will see to,” not “God will provide.” Indeed, the verb “to see” is repeated throughout this passage. Why? Perhaps it can be explained by Robert Alter’s observation in a commentary accompanying his translation: “Beyond the tunnel vision of a trajectory toward child slaughter, is a promise of true vision.’ But let’s hold that thought. The very next sentence tells us. “And the two of them went together.” That can be read as Isaac grasps what is occurring and goes along without challenge. Indeed Rashi says they go “with one purpose.” Perhaps Isaac too is being tested and his acquiescence is what eventually exalts him as one of the three Patriarchs. But let’s hold that thought too.

So Abraham builds an altar, binds Isaac to it and lifts up his arm to brandish a knife or cleaver aimed at Isaac. It is an Alfred Hitchcock moment. Cary Grant and Eva St. Marie are dangling from Mt. Rushmore. Jimmy Stewart stands on the precipice of a church tower fighting vertigo. But just as Grant and Stewart do not tumble, Abraham does not plunge the knife into Isaac. Instead a divine messenger intercedes and tells Abraham. “Don’t! I now know you fear God to such an extent that you have not even held back your son.” Abraham looks up and beholds a ram

caught in a thicket by its horns and he sacrifices it on the altar instead of Isaac. God has indeed provided, seen to it, just as Abraham promised, And so Abraham calls the place, “God will see,” the origin, according to a *midrash*, of part of the name of Yerushalayim—Jerusalem—where the Holy Temple would eventually be built. As the messenger tells Abraham: “Because you did not hold back your son, your only son, God is going to bless you and multiply your seed as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the shore. You have listened to my voice.”

So, if you can tolerate my extending the metaphor, Abraham has gotten a 1600 on his SAT’s. What God commanded he has done. That’s how strong his faith is, his trust that kindness will ultimately prevail or at that at least there will be consolation for whatever happens. Imagine if he had failed the test, if he had said: “God, this is a ridiculous, an inhuman, sadistic request. I’m not going along.” We would not have had Judaism. Adam, the first human, was asked by God after the temptation of the snake and Eve, “*Ayekha?*” “Where are you?” and Adam responded with a non-sequitur. Here in the *akedah* story Abraham says simply “*Hineni.*” Even if I shall be forced to suffer, I will abide. That’s what it means to be a Jew. Perhaps that is why Abraham and not Adam is the first Jew.

Let me interject here for the many of us who see the Torah more as a historical curiosity or literary artifact rather than a divinely inspired scroll that such tests were not an uncommon feature of the ancient world. Hercules, to get back in

the graces of the Greek Gods after killing his wife, son and daughter, endured the twelve famous labors. And the *Akedah* is not the Torah's only test, though it is the most explicit one. We can argue that Jacob was tested by having to work all those years for Lavan in order to win the hands of Rachel and Leah. We can also say Jacob was tested by wrestling the angel, where he not only became a candidate for a hip replacement but received a new name—Israel—which means, significantly enough for the theme of this *drash*, “he struggles with God.” God imposed several trials on Moses also, one of which he failed by striking the rock to draw water. The price of failure was steep: Moses was banned from entering the land of Israel.

What is the rationale behind such tests or trials? We can see them as a measure of devotion, of faith, of fervor. In Abraham's case, God is gauging Abraham's passion for his adopted Judaism. “Let me see how much you want to be a Jew, how indispensable it really is to you. And let us see whether you really trust that things will work out in the end, cruel and puzzling as the steps along the way might be.”

Now I know that many congregants who have spoken about this reading deplore the test God has chosen and see what Abraham is asked to do as pernicious. They find points in the story where they can discern Isaac or the servant or the ram or the angel scorning God for imposing such a test—the sacrifice of a son. Indeed, Elie Wiesel said “the binding of Isaac was not God's test

of man. The binding of Isaac was man's test of God. God barely passed." In his memoirs, Wiesel, who struggled with faith till the end of his life though remaining observant, even contrasts his own story to the *akedah*. He and his father went to Auschwitz, like Abraham taking Isaac to be sacrificed, but "the angel did not come to rescue them from the quiet black night.'

Yet I would argue that the idea of a test is essential to understanding the meaning of the *akedah*—whether we take it literally, which most of us in this congregation do not, or as a parable or tale with a moral lesson. We, the readers of this tale, know the actual history of the Jews that would follow Abraham, something Abraham, did not, and we know it is a history scarred with anguish, loss and near annihilation. The enslavement in Egypt, the plunder of the First Temple, the exile to Babylonia, the destruction of a Second Temple, the massacre of the students of Rabbi Akiva, the massacres of the Crusades. The Spanish Inquisition. The pogroms. And of course the Holocaust, a term by the way that Elie Wiesel says he conceived while preparing an essay on this very *Akedah* story. The word for sacrifice, he said, was *Ola*, burnt offering or holocaust—a total annihilation by fire, and Wiesel was drawn to its mystical overtones.

Yet the paradox is—and it is a paradox because it would be foolish to claim there is a resolution—the paradox is that most of the Jews who suffered through those historical calamities continued to believe, or to observe or to acknowledge

Judaism or to remain part of the Jewish people. Many of us are old enough to have lived through the Holocaust era and the rest are close enough to it so that it continues to resonate emotionally, The Germans killed 6 million Jews, 1 million of them children. God or the human race allowed this to happen. If ever there was a test of faith, a reason to question our adherence to Judaism that was it. And yet we're all here this Rosh Hashanah, wearing our kippas and tallitot. How do you explain it? I can't. The suggestion, expounded by some, that the state of Israel is a kind of reparation for that suffering does not do it for me. Nor does the flowering of several generations of Jews in the Shoah's aftermath.

The idea that the *akedah* represents a symbolic test of faith across Jewish history, by the way, is not a novel one. Among others, Ismar Schorsch, the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote in a volume of Torah commentaries that the *akedah* "foreshadows the human cost of the covenant, the dark side of Jewish history."

"There was nothing idle," Schorsch says, "about [God's order to Abraham] to sacrifice his son. History would make that inhuman demand of his descendants many times. Were you Abraham, ready to expose your children to such a fate...?"

God knew that the faith he was imparting to Abraham would not be an easy one. Jews as a people have been particular victims of hateful demagogues. And beyond the suffering of the Jews as a tribe, the lives of many of us have been

touched by heartbreaking ordeals that severely test our faith in God and Judaism. And yet we abide and cling and come to shul.

I think of my parents, both survivors. My father grew up in an Orthodox home in the peasant village of Borinya in what was then Poland. He had the good fortune of getting drafted into the Soviet army after Hitler attacked Poland and the Soviets seized the eastern third of the country. But my father's parents and the six sisters he left behind were killed. He had no one left. While he drifted away from his Orthodox habits during the war when he had to eat canned pork to survive and after the war when he came to the United States and found a job that required him to work on Shabbos, he never lost his visceral attachment to Judaism. On Rosh Hashanah, he strode to synagogue, made sure to drape himself with his yellowed wool tallis and murmured his prayers with fervent swaying. That yellow tallis, those murmured prayers, his swaying became the sensations that fostered my inexplicable attachment to Judaism. Similarly, my mother, who lost an equal number of siblings, made sure her children went to yeshivas and she went to work stitching hats to pay the tuition. She murmured blessings over the candles each Friday night and made us feel there was something ethereal in the flickering light.

Somehow they had gone through their ordeal and come out on the other side as believing Jews, still trusting in God. I wonder if they may have balanced the

losses they suffered with the gifts of each other and the three children they loved deeply. Whatever disillusion they experienced, it did not cancel out their blessings.

During the first world gathering of Holocaust survivors in Jerusalem in 1981, my parents sat with 7,000 other survivors at the Kotel, the Western Wall, and listened to the speeches and plaintive songs. I asked my father a few weeks later when we were looking at slides of the ceremony what he had been thinking. He said he was angry at God for having taken away his six sisters. I had never heard him confide such feelings. Yet toward the end of his life he walked around Riverdale with a yarmulke and every shul in the neighborhood would call him to make a minyan. So deeply ingrained was his faith that even after a devastating stroke, unable even to tell time or utter a complete sentence, he would be called up for an aliyah at the synagogue inside the Hebrew Home for the Aged and was able to mumble the Hebrew blessings over the Torah flawlessly.

Why did my parents cling to their faith? I cannot say for sure, but somehow the belief they had been nurtured in since childhood proved unbreakable, even in the face of such brutal events. Faith is not just a whim or a convenience; if it means anything, it is deep, sometimes all encompassing. Yes, faith taken to extreme can produce the so-called martyrs that have killed people in Paris, Nice, Brussels and in Israel's intifadas. But faith or belief in an idea can also produce generations willing to live in Israel surrounded by hostile neighbors knowing their children will

have to join the army and risk their lives. Beyond the Jewish world, it can produce a Nelson Mandela who was willing to sacrifice decades of productive life and family warmth to end apartheid and seek reconciliation.

Yes, none of us if forced to choose between faith and a child would choose faith. Yet we go on believing in the face of the tragedies and setbacks we suffer. One possible answer to the riddle is in the *Akedah* story. Isaac asks his father, “you have the fire and the wood where is the sheep for the offering?” And Abraham answers depending on the translation: “God will provide or God will see to it.” Abraham’s trust is that things will work out in the end, cruel as the events along the way may be. Maybe those of us who continue to cling to our Jewish faith look to the ram in the thicket caught by its horns. We trust God will provide, our Jewish faith will provide—perhaps in the form of a congregation like this that offers the consolation we need at times of heartbreak or in the Jewish ideals that enrich our daily lives or in an identity that helps carry us through the adversities and confusions of life.

It is not irrelevant, by the way, that we are Reconstructionists. As Rabbi Bronstein reminded us on shabbos a few weeks ago, theologically Reconstructionists have always talked about God as the foreground and background of all being, or the saving power in the universe, not as a causer or stopper of events. So we don’t have to explain why God allows bad things to

happen to good people. The God we've talked about does not start or stop events like 9/11. "Yet we do believe in God's healing and consoling presence."

The test Abraham went through is a test not so dissimilar from ones we have all gone through or many of us will go through in the coming year, as life metes out misfortunes as well as sweetness. It is why we read about the *akedah* on Rosh Hashanah. God created a world where humans were free to act and in that world terrifying crimes would be committed and unspeakable tragedies would occur, death would occur whether by water or fire, by sword, beast or famine, as we say in the *U'Nesannah Tokef*. It would not be unreasonable to become a nonbeliever. How could you blame somebody for forsaking Judaism after unbearable suffering?

So it is not too far-fetched to speculate that God is not just testing Abraham, he's testing all of us. Do you have the right stuff? Can you bind yourself to Judaism and stick with it even if you endure the suffering that life sometimes metes out? Can you go on believing in a God, believing there is a reason to observe some of the Torah's demands, believing there is a need to sustain the Jewish people? Can you trust? I would venture to say that many if not most of us have been tested in this way and the fact that we are here today shows that somehow we could not abandon our faith either.

And what is the point of that faith and that trust? Schorch says that Jews were "destined to be a distinctive minority, the embodiment of a lofty worldview

and high moral standard.” Others add that it is our job as Jews to repair the world, to do *tikkun olam*, as a way of enhancing and advancing our species. Still others believe that faith is justified because the world will ultimately come right, the benefits outweigh the hardships. A *midrash* says that our forefathers presupposed the existence of a world beyond this one so Abraham and his Jewish progeny can tolerate misfortune knowing that they would be repaid in *Olam Haba*—in the world to come.

All of these are possibilities. Nevertheless without a faith, it may be hard to see a point in life that starts, as they say, in dust and ends in dust. Even if we can't exactly articulate, or touch what it is we're talking about, our faith gives us an essential optimism, a feeling that life will produce enough goodness and sweetness to give us the strength to endure the pain. That God will provide a ram caught in a thicket. It is symbolically what we all pray for on Rosh Hashanah. Shana tovah.