

All Tied Up  
Some New Year's Reflections on the Biding of Isaac

Rabbi Barry M. Lutz  
Temple Ahavat Shalom  
Northridge, CA  
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In the spring of 1984 I was finishing coursework towards my Master's degree in Jewish education and looking for my first job. I met with several rabbis and lay leaders, each of whom came equipped with his/her own list of questions in order to discern who would be the best fit for their congregation. Among the individuals with whom I met was a rabbi who came quipped with all the regular questions. But, hidden among them was a question that I still remember. After discussing my background and experience, my philosophy of education he sprung it on me: "How would you teach the *Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac, to a class of second graders?" I was stumped. The question caught me completely off guard. How would I teach such a difficult story to a group of seven year olds? How would I answer a child's questions about why Abraham was so willing to sacrifice his son Isaac? How would I make a student understand that his/her own parents would not do the same? Well, I stumbled through an answer that I no longer recall. But I do remember the look. You know the look. It comes with just the slightest shaking of the head. With a shrug of his shoulders the rabbi responded, "I wouldn't teach it at all. There are plenty of other opportunities. This is isn't the appropriate time." Then he stood up, shook my hand, and left. "That was totally unfair," I remember thinking. Obviously, I didn't get the job. But hey, it seems to have all worked out for the best.

I am reminded of this meeting each Rosh Hashanah because this is the day when we read the story of the Binding of Isaac. What makes this, our entry into the New Year, the appropriate time? After all, today is *Yom Harat HaOlam*, the birthday of the world. The creation story would seem to be the more appropriate text. Not only is it more fitting, but also certainly the easier text, on every imaginable level. Well, maybe that's it. Our entry into the New Year is not supposed to be easy.

That is why our celebration of the New Year looks and feels so different than our Dec. 31 celebrations filled with party hats, dances to the latest tunes, noise makers, and meaningless resolutions. Instead of party hats we wear kipot, Instead of noise makers we attempt to awaken our souls through the soulful blasts of the Shofar, rather than meaningless resolutions, we take ten days to seriously consider the direction of our lives, urged on by the thoughtful words of our prayers and the challenging readings from our scriptures.

We read this story today because Judaism is about more than just feeling good. Judaism's primary concern is with creating a life out of our existence by continually challenging us to become more human. So, the creators of our ritual of entry into the New Year wanted to make us squirm in our seats. For them it was critical we move beyond our comfort zones and identify those places where we might make a positive change in our lives and in our world in the year to come.

And so, to the Rabbi's question, "When is the appropriate time to begin to learn this story?" Our sages answered, "Now, exactly because this story is so problematic; exactly

because it draws us in and rankles us. We become bound up in Abraham and Isaac's journey. Their tale wraps us up in questions of relationships and theology and faith: all core issues that must be weighed and considered if we have any hope of making the next year more filled with meaning than the year we are departing. So today, I invite you to return in your prayer books to page 125 and to join me as we consider some of the questions and challenges this powerful story raises for us as we enter a new year.

But, before we begin, we must remember what precedes this story, setting the stage for this difficult journey we are about to take. First there is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which Abraham protests most vehemently with God, arguing to the very end for the salvation of these cities if even the smallest number of righteous people be found within.

And then there is the birth of Isaac; a child born to Abraham and Sarah at a time when such a possibility seemed, if you will excuse the pun, inconceivable. So, improbable and so precious was the birth of this child that they named him, Yitzchak, "laughter" for the incredible joy that they felt upon his birth.

And so we come to the first verses of our story:

"Then came a time when God put Abraham to the test, "Abraham!" God said to him, and he answered, "Hineni" ... "Here I am." Then God said: "Take your son, your precious one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the Land of Moriah; there you shall offer him up as a burnt offering upon one of the hills which I will point out to you." Early the next morning, Abraham having first split the wood for the burnt offering, saddled his donkey, took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac, and set out for the place of which God had told him."

What?

We are already drawn in and tied up. The questions come fast and furious:

Why does Abraham, who just verses earlier has argued so vehemently with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, now silently acquiesce to the unthinkable command to make his own son, into an offering to God?

What about Sara? Poor Sara left alone, with seemingly no awareness that her husband is taking her only son, the precious, improbable son of her old age, to offer as a sacrifice.

Why does Isaac willingly go along? He is, after all, no little boy. He is thirteen according to most sources, even older according to some. And yet, there is no sign or sound of struggle.

And what of God? What kind of God demands such a thing? What kind of test is this? What do we do with the image of God portrayed in this story?

What is going on here?

Of course, one of the plain meanings of the story, the one we are most often taught, is that through this 'test, God teaches that human sacrifice is unnecessary. To which I wonder, couldn't God just have told him? So, there must be another level on which this story works. Of

course, you know there is ... Actually, on whatever level we understand this story, literally, metaphorically or symbolically the message remains the same: true worship does not demand that we sacrifice those most precious to us.

We find ourselves at this moment of the world's creation challenged by this story to move beyond our celebration of the creation of the world to a consideration of the world that we are creating and the sacrifices we are making in the process. This story binds us to that enormously difficult task and it does so in nineteen painfully silent verses.

On their three day journey Abraham and Isaac barely speak, sharing only one ominous and haunting conversation: "Then Isaac broke the silence and said to his father Abraham, "Father" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "I see the firestone and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replied, (in words that are cryptic, horrific and the last ever spoken between them in the Torah) "God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And then the silence continues.

If there was more, if we had detailed conversations between Abraham, Isaac and his servants, if we were allowed to know Isaac's thoughts as he walked along, then we might respond: "Oh, that's not me. I would never say that. I would never think that. I could never do that." And we could dismiss the story.

But in the deafening silence, in the huge, dark, blank spaces, we are left on our own to wander and to wonder: "What were they all thinking?" And there is only one way to begin to create an answer: by looking inward and considering our own response.

"What would I do?" "How would I answer this request?" "What kind of faith does it take to acquiesce to such a demand?" "How strong is my faith?" "In what do I place my faith? In God? In country? In the S&P 500? In the Dodgers? In my family? In what do I truly believe?" "How do I express my faith through the actions and behaviors of my life?" "To what causes am I sacrificing?" "What is it that I am sacrificing?" "Are these causes worthy of my sacrifice?"

In these questions and so many more the Akedah is transformed. The questions become about the ties that bind us. The test placed before Abraham, Isaac and Sarah becomes our own.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, of blessed memory once wrote: "We are all tested. We are always tested. Whether we are aware of it or not, life is constantly springing little quizzes on us. Every day is examination day. ...As husbands we are tested and as wives we are tested. As children we are tested and as parents we are tested. The doctor confronting his patient is having his dedication tested. The lawyer consulting with his client is having his integrity tested. ... The teacher preparing a lesson is having his or her devotion tested. The businessman on the telephone, the carpenter building a shed, the mechanic under the car, the painter on the scaffold—each is having his character tested. When our neighbor has been bruised our kindness is tested. When we have been blessed our generosity is tested. When we have been hurt our forgiveness is tested. When we have hurt our humility is tested. Trouble tests our courage. Temptation tests our strength. Friendship tests our loyalty. Failure tests our perseverance. Success tests our gratitude. No day is free from its full quota of tests. Indeed the uses to which we put each day, the purposes to which we dedicate it, the deeds with which we fill it—constitute perhaps the supreme test of all.

There are those that say Abraham failed this test. That, although Isaac was not physically sacrificed, he did indeed become a sacrifice offered in the name of Abraham's faith in God. As proof they point to the end of the story: "Abraham then returned to his servants, and they left together for Beer-Sheva." Where is Isaac? Why does he not return with his father? What effect has this experience had upon him and upon his relationship with his father? Perhaps they suggest, this was a different kind of test; God, they argue, wanted to see how far Abraham could be pushed. At what point Abraham would stand firm and declare, "No, God, not this time. This is too much." From this perspective, Abraham failed.

It's a hard argument to challenge as it seems supported by all that follows in the Torah: Abraham will never speak to Isaac again. Nor will he ever see Sarah alive again. Writings both ancient and contemporary blame her death on the stress and anxiety caused by the realization of what her husband has set out to do to her only child. And, even more interesting, God never speaks another word to Abraham. This man of faith, devoutly following what he thinks are God's instructions, seemingly ends his life isolated from those he loves most, his wife, his son and his God. At the end it seems his long journey has left him as truly the lonely man of faith.

By my way of thinking a rather depressing notion for the New Year. So, I find these more instructive and cautionary messages in the story: First, we must each carefully consider to which gods and to which causes we are faithfully making our sacrifice. For, as our Shabbat liturgy reminds us, "We will worship something, have no doubt of that ... and that which we are worshipping we are becoming."

Second, the journey of each of our lives, like that of Abraham – and for that matter, Sara and Isaac is a journey of faith. We are all on a journey to a place we do not know. Abraham is told to journey to the Land of Moriah; literally to the land of vision. We might understand God as instructing Abraham, "Go to the land of insight, of understanding, of perspective. There offer up your son. Offer him to the future." As we read this story we must ask ourselves: To what land are we journeying? What mountain are we ascending? And, what are we bringing as sacrifice?

I see in Abraham's journey, the faithful trek we each make and that we begin anew this day. It is a journey towards the future, a bittersweet journey to be sure. Like Abraham, we can only journey so far into the Land. Abraham has led Isaac to the place where the boy becomes the man. Now Isaac's journey becomes his own. At some point all we can do is stand upon the mountain top and, like Abraham, gaze out upon a land which we will never walk. There, we must let our children go, we must offer them up to the future, and pray that there they will both be the source and recipients of many blessings. Then, like Abraham we must return from whence we came.

It is not an easy journey, this journey through life, to be sure. As this story reminds us, each moment along the way tests us, tests us mightily as we attempt to build a better world for all of our children. But, if our discomfort and unease leads us to listen with ears more carefully attuned and hearts more open to the Divine voice guiding our journey, we may be able to stand on the mountain top with Abraham and declare, "*Adonai-Yireh*" this is a place of Godly vision.

I pray that the sacred journey of our lives through this next year of 5767 will bring each of us closer to that Mountain of Vision. There may Abraham's blessing become our own:

May the entire world be blessed by our children because we have heard God's Divine voice calling out to us.

l'Shanah Tovah tikateyvnu v'taychateymnu – may we all be written and inscribed for a good year– a year of promise a year of blessing and a year of peace.

Amen