

Drash – The Akedah  
Second day Rosh Hashanah – Sept. 17, 2023  
Debbie Goldman

On this second day of Rosh Hashanah we read one of the most troubling stories in the entire Torah, the Akedah, the binding of Isaac.

G-d tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac, to offer as a burnt offering. Without question, Abraham takes Isaac on a three-day journey, and when they reach Mount Moriah, Abraham lays Isaac on an altar, on top of kindling, and reaches out with a cleaver in his hand to slaughter him. But just at that moment, G-d's messenger calls out and tells Abraham not to sacrifice his son and tells him: "now I know that you fear G-d and have not held back your son, your only one, from Me." As a reward, G-d will ensure that Abraham's descendants will multiply "as the stars in heaven," they will triumph over their enemies, and in fact "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" because Abraham listened to G-d's voice.

Nineteen lines from Genesis 22. Who cannot be troubled by these 19 lines? Certainly, if you saw the beautiful love between father and child in Haninah and Asher Levine yesterday as they chanted together in our musaf service, you have to question the simple literal telling of this story.

Is our religion really one grounded in blind faith? And if so, in a G-d that tests the father of our people with a command to sacrifice his only child? And what about Abraham? Where was the Abraham that challenged G-d so many times until now? But in this story, Abraham asked no questions, he simply said, "hineini," here I am, and obeyed.

Here at Fabringen, we've wrestled with the meaning of the Akedah every time we read it. We join a long line of Jewish commentators who have struggled to understand the meaning behind this powerful story. For more than 2500 years, scholars have proffered creative, contradictory, conflicting, paradoxical, often illuminating, sometimes baffling interpretations of these 19 lines in Genesis 22. They have fostered a tradition that is in conversation and often in argument across the generations, borrowing insights from earlier periods, shifting emphasis to confront new philosophical, political, and social realities. These midrashim have created an archive of biblical interpretation, always shifting, always probing, struggling, debating, sometimes even brawling.

Whether these commentators believed that the Torah was the word of G-d or a compilation put together by human beings, they all chose not to reject the text, but rather to wrestle with it, to argue with it, and to seek deeper meaning in this archetypal story of the relationship between a parent and a child, a human being and one's spiritual source, and the tension between faith and reason as the basis for a moral code for an individual, a community, a people.

In the few minutes that I have for this drash, I cannot do justice to the variety of interpretations of the Akeda story over the millennia. Let me just cite a few among the many highlighted in this wonderful text that I consulted in preparing this drash. The book is called *But where is the Lamb? Imagining the Story of Abraham and Isaac* written about a decade ago by James Goodman, a professor of history and creative writing. Professor Goodman, like many of us, was troubled by the rise of religious fundamentalism in our time, and began his study of the Akedah to understand how scholars and religious leaders over the ages have interpreted this story which on its surface seems to glorify blind faith, to demand human sacrifice as a test of devotion.

In the second century BCE, an ancient rewrite of the Torah known as Jubilees, changed the angel's directive to Abraham. In the Torah we read the angel tells Abraham that "now I know you fear G-d." But the Jubilee text reads: "Now I have made known to everyone that you are faithful to me." G-d was not testing Abraham, he was showing his devotion. During this period when many Jews were enamored with Greek philosophy, the Jubilee writers wanted to emphasize the primacy of Abraham's devotion, to instruct Hellenizing Jewish that if they remained faithful to their religion, G-d would take care of them.

The historian Josephus, writing after the Roman destruction of the second Temple, embellished the story. He imagined a mature Isaac at 25 years of age accepting the sacrifice which made his life a worthwhile one, just like the survival of the Jews during exile made them worthy of the sacrifice of the second Temple.

Talmudic rabbis gave multiple answers to explain why G-d tested Abraham. After all, an all-knowing G-d knew Abraham was already righteous and knew the outcome of the story. Some answered as the Jubilee authors, others that G-d wanted to give Abraham the opportunity to transform potential into actual good deeds. Some imagined Abraham stalling for 3 days rather than acting on G-d's command, others that he rose early and rushed to do the deed. Some saw Abraham weeping when he left Sara, others that he prayed to G-d to spare Isaac, while others argued that Abraham pleaded with G-d to let him go through with it. The Rabbinic sources recount all these interpretations, never adjudicating among them. That is left to us.

Johanan ha-Cohen in the 7<sup>th</sup> century wrote a poem that focused on Abraham's irresponsibility to his son: "But he did not beg for mercy for his only son, He wished to spill his blood like a cruel man. In order to fulfill your will wholeheartedly. As he was certain that G-d is good and merciful. He should have, however, begged to spare his only son, And save him from the burning coals. No mercy would have been shown his son if the Lord of mercy had not taken pity."

Medieval commentators during the time of the Crusades focused on the sacrifice of Isaac, emphasizing that Jewish faith was worth the ultimate sacrifice. This to console the Germanic Jewish communities at a time of when marauding crusaders were slaughtering the Jews.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher who aimed to harmonize reason and religion, found fault with Abraham. According to Kant, Abraham should have said: "That I ought not to kill Isaac is certain. But that you are G-d, of that I am not certain." For Kant, only a false G-d would demand an immoral action. Two centuries later, Martin Buber gave a similar interpretation. Our relationship with others should mediate our relationship with G-d, not the other way around. But the 19<sup>th</sup> century existential philosopher Soren Kierkegaard rejected this interpretation, which put human reason above G-d. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* argues that "faith begins where thought leaves off." Life, just like the Akedah story, is filled with absurdity.

Abraham Gieger, the founder of Reform Judaism, says the message of the story is simple: reject human sacrifice. Modern feminists focus on the silent partner in the story: Sarah. What did she say and do? Did she die soon after in reaction to the shock of what her husband did and G-d

commanded? Ra'yah Harnik, an Israeli poet who lost her son in the first Lebanon War, penned these words: "I will not offer My first born for sacrifice. Not I. At night Gd and I Make reckonings Who can claim what. I know and am Grateful. But not my son. And not for sacrifice."

Needless to say, many writers have queried the Akedah story in light of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel writes that the real hero in the story is Isaac who survived. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim rejects the medieval commentators who found solace in the meaning of sacrifice. Jews don't die for G-d, Fackenheim emphasized, we live for G-d.

I could go on and on. But I won't. My point is that the meaning I find in the Akedah story is really in the history and art of commentary, disputation, and argument about the meaning of the story. From the beginning, people have had powerful misgivings about the literal text. But they couldn't get rid of it, so they asked questions. They birthed and fostered a tradition of dissent.

"I couldn't imagine a better foil for the fiction at the heart of fundamentalism," author Goodman writes at the end of his survey of the long and protean life of Genesis 22. "The fluidity, the multiplicity, and variety of revelation over time, the thinking and rethinking, the talk and the argument, the writing and rewriting, the vast array and mélange of meanings, the engagement with troubling texts, and the marriage of tradition and innovations."

This for me is the meaning of the Akeda story – that we Jews must struggle with the complexity, contradictions of faith and reason, never settling for simple answers, acknowledging that there are multiple paths to the truth.