

Akedat Yitzchak – The Binding of Isaac Genesis 22:1-19

Each year, on *Rosh HaShanah*, we find ourselves confronted with the story of the *Akedah*, the story of Abraham's binding of his beloved son, Isaac. Each year, we are tried, attempting to make sense of its meaning, hoping to uncover a layer in the story we had not previously contemplated which would finally explain it away for us. We pray, in the midst of our discomfort, to awaken to yet another purpose we believe the story may serve. Each year, we are shocked out of our comfort zone, forced to wrestle with a story which at best unsettles our religious convictions and at worst profoundly disturbs us.

This year is no different. This year we are back debating whether Abraham is to be regarded as the Knight of Faith, as Kierkegaard called him, willing to sacrifice it all in his obedience to God, or as a child murderer, as Kant painted him, devoid of any moral judgment whatsoever.

This year, I want to take the most controversial position that Abraham is, in fact, neither. This year I want to claim that Abraham was absolutely intent on sacrificing his son, but that he did so in utter defiance of the God he had come to reject, resolute to go through with the worst of all ultimate ethical decisions and break once and for all a divine covenant he could no longer abide by.

Genesis, Chapter. 22, begins with: “Vayehi achar HaD'varim HaEleh – And it was after these words...”

What words? What is the Torah alluding to? Since this is about a dialogue between God and Abraham, what were the last words exchanged between them? Or more specifically, what were the last words God said to Abraham? For the Hebrew word *devarim* understood as “words” is mostly used in Torah when God is speaking. What were these last words from God to Abraham? They could be

God's call to Abraham to listen to Sarah's angry request and to sacrifice his first son, Ishmael, by sending him to die in the wilderness. Or, if we insist on the plural form of "*D'varim* – words," we could also include the last words of God to Abraham at the end of his plea to save the righteous people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Either way, these last two episodes, these last two exchanges between God and Abraham have left Abraham in a deep spiritual crisis.

The episode of Sodom and Gomorrah is particularly disturbing. To begin with, God hesitates at first telling Abraham what He is about to do. God has this inner conversation, transcribed in Torah, where He convinces Himself to tell Abraham anyway, because He feels Abraham needs to know, since, and I quote: Abraham is "to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right."

But as he learns about God's plan, Abraham begins to bargain aggressively with God to not destroy the sinful cities if God can find at least, a handful of innocent people there. Abraham starts with finding 50 innocent people, then 45, then 40, 30, 20, all the way down to finding just ten innocent people and save the cities from being obliterated.

At the end, Abraham leaves God's presence content, secured in his knowledge that he has, in fact, saved the cities from destruction, since, he knows, his nephew, Lot, and his family are there, which guarantees the presence of at least 10 righteous people in the cities.

But, unbeknownst to Abraham, God's angel will remove Lot's family from the city and allow the destruction to proceed. The scene in Gen. 19:27-28 is most poignant. Abraham, on the morning after the destruction, in total disbelief, runs to the place overlooking the plain where he had bargained with God to save the cities, and witnesses utter desolation and death. Abraham is in shock!

Why else would the Torah go out of its way to let us know what Abraham did that morning? He didn't go to gawk at the scene to just see what it looked like when God decides to cause utter destruction. He didn't go, cynical, to make sure that God finished the job. He went because he

could not believe God went through with Her plan despite his bargaining with Her. He saw, and was greatly disturbed.

A few episodes later, the Torah says that Sarah's bitter request to (I quote) “cast-out that slave woman and her son... distressed Abraham greatly.” He certainly was unwilling to do it.

You can therefore imagine Abraham's disbelief and consternation when God intervenes and tells him to heed Sarah's request and sacrifice his son, Ishmael, anyway. Sure God assures Abraham that She will take care of Ishmael, but after the Sodom episode, Abraham doubts.

So when God, “after these words,” asks Abraham: “Take your son, your favored one, whom you love, Isaac, 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”, that is, as far as Abraham is concerned, the straw which broke the camel's back.

Abraham is done with this covenant. He doesn't want to have anything to do with this God anymore. He had gone through a lot in the 62 years since he heeded the call to leave everything and according to his account, his relationship with that God did not amount to much. He had endured test after test, he had sacrificed his marriage, he had believed and trusted beyond human resolve but what he had seen was deception, war, destruction, betrayal, the promise of his descendants being slaves and oppressed only to become warriors and oppressors themselves once freed, and to top it all, child sacrifice. Not only once with Ishmael, but now a second time with Isaac!

If this was the God which, through him and now through Isaac, was going to lead generations upon generations in an everlasting covenant, Abraham was not going to let that happen, he had to stop it. He was going to follow through with the test, but not to please this God, to prevent instead the continuation of this covenant from ever happening. Yes, he was going to sacrifice his son, the most unethical, amoral, despicable act a father can do. But it was not Isaac he was sacrificing.

Through Isaac's death he was putting an end to this everlasting covenant.

Based on his experience of this God and God's track record with him, a God who demanded child sacrifice was not what Abraham was willing to pass down to the next generations. For Abraham that was the most painful and most ethical thing to do. And he would probably have taken his life too, on top of this mountain.

And so here is Abraham, in the depth of his darkest depression, walking silently but resolved, for days, toward the land of *Moriah*. As he approaches the mountain, he leaves his two servants behind. He and his son continue the climb alone, and Isaac asks him where the sheep for the offering is? Abraham answers: “God will see the sheep for His burnt offering my son,” adding under his beard “*if He really wants this covenant to continue.*” (my italics)

We know the rest. Abraham binds his son upon the altar of wood and picks up the knife to slay him and put an end to this covenant. But at the last minute an angel calls him to stay his hand, a ram miraculously appears to take Isaac's place and the angel says to Abraham: “By myself I swear, the Eternal declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favorite one, I will bestow My blessings upon you. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have listened to my Voice – Ki Shamata B'Koli.”

“Because you have listened to my Voice” ???

What **is** the Voice that Abraham listened to?

“Ki Shamata B'Koli – because you have listened to my Voice” can not refer to an explicit statement from God. If it were an explicit statement, God (and therefore the Torah) would not go out of It's way to mention it. Of course Abraham is going to heed any explicit statement from God!

The only statement of God directed to Abraham that Abraham did not hear was what God, in silence,

said to Herself before sharing with Abraham Her plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

There God said: "...Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him. **For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right** in order that the Eternal may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (Gen. 18:18-19)

These are the silent words that Abraham never heard God say until that moment on mount *Moriah*: "I have singled him out... to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right." That is the Voice, the still small Voice that Abraham listened to. That is the Voice of God inside, the inner Voice of God which defined Abraham from before *Lech Lecha*, the inner Voice Abraham awakened to, as God "singled him out" to enter into His covenant and "keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right..." For test after test, Abraham remained true to his inner Voice. Test after test, Abraham continued to "keep the way of the Eternal..." Unwaveringly, obstinately, Abraham stayed true to the Voice within, to that which God utters in the silence of our soul. The Voice was always Abraham's inner compass. Staying true to that Voice, trumped by far becoming the patriarch of a child-sacrificing people in the name of a God. By rejecting the divine covenant in the face of a God who, *Abraham had all reasons to believe*, had betrayed everything he stood for, Abraham passed God's test. His Faith in the ultimate truth of his own being, "doing what is just and right," the very reason why, unbeknownst to him, God had "singled him out" in the first place to enter into the covenant, this Faith stood above God Itself. To let the covenant go through with Abraham, God could not afford to have a patriarch as a blind follower. God could not enter into a covenant with a patriarch who would surrender his free will without a single complaint. At the same time, God needed to know that Abraham would direct his free will to walking "the way of the Eternal" no matter the tests that life brought him. God singled Abraham out because God knew that this was who Abraham was. God needed Abraham to know it too.

I suspect that each and everyone of us has been “singled out” by God. I suspect that to each and everyone of us God has said to Herself the very reason why God has singled us out. But we can't hear it. We can't hear it with our outer ear. This is not an explicit statement. We can not wait for the heavens to open, we can not wait for the thundering voice of God to call us. For God is always already calling us. God is always already telling us about the blessing that we are. It is not about hearing, it is about listening. Not about hearing the thunderous call from outside, but about listening to the Voice from within. What is that inner blessing that we are to awaken to? What is the message for our lives, inside each and everyone of us, that is yearning to be listened to, waiting to be expressed, waiting to be manifested in our lives and as our lives. What is it that God has singled you out and singled me out for? What is our unique gift, our unique blessing, that driving force within us so powerful that no external circumstances can derail? On this *Rosh Hashanah*, as we enter into this new year, the Torah is challenging us to listen and heed the inner Voice calling out the very purpose God singled us for.