

## THE AKEIDA

Isaac's Binding, Rosh HaShanah 2007

Our passage begins with: “It was after these things, God put Abraham to the test.” Why would God be compelled to put Abraham to the test? Didn't Abraham already leave everything he knew at God's behest to go to an unspecified destination? Didn't he circumcise himself at age 99? Did he not plead to save lives in the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Didn't he wait patiently, faithfully until age one-hundred to be blessed with an heir? And finally, upon God's instructions, did he not ban his son Ishmael? And after all that, **NOW God puts Abraham to the test???**

Are you kidding?

What kind of a God is it anyway who would require the sacrifice of one's own child in order to prove one's faith? This is spiritually nonsensical, not to mention nonsensical in practice: talk about member retention issues or next generation continuity! I don't think so!

To my mind, to understand this story is to 'get' that it is not what we think it is about. It is not a story that can be understood literally. It is a story that has challenged generations of commentators and every New Year it offers its challenge to us, giving us yet another opportunity to unlock its message – to dig a little deeper. And why is this the passage of choice to start off the New Year?

I suspect that it serves as a cautionary tale – a reorienting parable, which points to a common roadblock on all of our spiritual paths – that of “strive-drive.” What I mean by that is: that aspect of our ego which wills us towards enlightenment, the over-achieving self who signs us up for every workshop, every seminar, buys every book, but keeps us caught in our own intellectual and rational ego-bound loop.

Let me back up and explain why the literal level will not do. The story itself is barbaric even if we try to put ourselves in the mindset of the writers of the biblical era. In fact, the stories in Torah of the loss of one's child are always depicted as traumatic: A distraught Abraham refuses, at first, to banish Ishmael until God assures him of Ishmael's future success. Believing Joseph to be dead, Jacob is inconsolable. Aaron is devastated after the deaths of his sons, and perhaps most telling, those recording these stories clearly considered the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the death of the first born in Egypt, the most unbearable of all plagues.

Even if we try to rationalize it, the story of the "Binding of Isaac" can not be taken at face value. Many modern commentators have argued that because the Angel prevents Abraham from going through with the dreadful act, we can derive that Judaism stands against human sacrifice. But does it really matter that the Angel stayed Abraham's hand at the last second? Perhaps it does at the gross physical level, but what of the psychological level? Does it make a difference to Isaac? To Abraham?

Contrary to their modern counterparts, commentators of the Middle-Ages, influenced by the prevailing Christian world, even went so far as to say that Isaac was, in fact, killed by Abraham and then resurrected later on. They based the possibility of their interpretation on the fact that, at the end of our episode, the Torah mentions that Abraham leaves the Land of Moriah by himself, without a word about Isaac.

Worst of all, were we to read this story at the literal level, we would be compelled to conclude that Abraham not only failed the test miserably but that he had totally missed the point, that he never, in fact, awakened to the Oneness that is all.

Why? Because in the awareness of Oneness, each life, each being, is understood as the manifestation of the One. The fact that Abraham would even entertain the possibility of the reality of this test would negate Abraham's awakening to the core principle of monotheism.

In order to redeem monotheism, we have to assume that something else altogether is

happening here.

My contention is that this story is unfolding within Abraham as opposed to without; that this passage of the “Binding of Isaac” is the depiction of an inner process. Perhaps this sounds like a radical departure from traditional commentary, but let me assure you, all the evidence comes from the text itself – grounded in the literal Hebrew.

The Torah portion in which our episode appears, is called: VaYera. VaYera, translated as “He saw” or “He had a vision,” is the first word of this portion. This theme of vision, in fact, dominates the portion. 18 times do we find allusions to “seeing,” throughout the text, eight of which are found in the passage of the “Binding of Isaac” alone. This portion is all about “seeing,” but I read the textual clues to point to an inner seeing. The first sentence of the portion reads: “The Eternal appeared to him (*Abraham*)/He had a vision of the Eternal ...while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent...” The rabbis are puzzled by this sentence. Why? Well, how could Abraham be sitting while in the presence of the Eternal? Why is he not “falling on his face,” prostrating himself? Think about it. How are we to understand this? Well, to those of you who sit and on occasion are graced with visions, it is obvious – Abraham was meditating. But if you are not yet convinced, note the use of the word “Hineni” – appearing three times in the few verses of our episode. “Hineni-here I am,” is what Abraham first replies when he hears his name called by God. It is what our mystics have learned to identify as expressing one's radical presence to the moment, as in a state of meditative awareness, available to hear.

If Abraham's experience is viewed as an inner meditative experience, then the characters in this story must be seen as aspects of Abraham's self.

So what aspect of Abraham is represented by Isaac, for example? Torah says: “Take your son, your unique one, whom you love...” What is that part of self that we have birthed, that is so

uniquely “us,” that we love above all? Well, our selves, our personal identity, our own ego. What Abraham hears is: “Take your ego, that which makes you unique, that which you love... and kill it, so that you can prove that you have transcended it all, that you are, in fact, an awakened spiritual being.”

And what could God possibly represent? Funny you should ask because, throughout the passage, Torah uses the word “HaElohim” for God. This is a very curious choice of words.

“HaElohim” is often translated as “Rulers” or “Judges.” I suspect that the aspect of self, leading Abraham through his meditation, is the insistent Judging or Controlling voice of the ego that we know all too well. So as it turns out, this trip to one of the hills of the Land of Moriah may truly be...  
...an ego trip.

An ego trip, indeed, but where to? What is that hill in the Land of Moriah? In the physical world, Torah is here referring to Mount Moriah, or what is known as the Temple Mount. Abraham is traveling to the Temple Mount, to the highest spiritual peak. HaElohim, the “controller” within, is leading Abraham to a peak meditative experience. Nothing short of that will do for the over-achieving self, for it mistakenly believes that, there, at this highest state of consciousness, it will be able to sacrifice the ego.

But Abraham struggles. On the third day of his meditation he feels he has made no progress. As Torah says: “On the third day Abraham had a vision and saw the place from afar.” But “The place,” in Hebrew “HaMakom,” is one of the many names of God.

But at this point the story intensifies. Abraham gets very deep in his meditation, he reaches Mount Moriah, he has a peak experience, he puts his ego in a bind, grabs the knife, raises his hand, but inner competing voices arise, he can't do it, he fails the test. Why? Because the only thing that wants to get rid of the ego, the only voice which wants to kill the ego, is the ego itself.

So Abraham is stuck, his spiritual bullying attitude caught in the thicket by its horns, caught

in impossible inconsistency of his own making. And in the midst of this cognitive dissonance the answer appears to him. The Torah says: “VaYar VeHineh A-yil – And he had a vision and he saw (*his inner*) ram.” This attitude, this spiritual bullying that he imposes on himself, this ego strive-drive to enlightenment, this is what he needs to let go of, this is what he needs to surrender, to release, to offer up to his Higher Self.

Yes, Abraham failed the test, but in failing the test he awakened to a deeper realization. He did not kill his ego but befriended it, he awakened to a place of stuckness where his over-achieving self had driven him, and released it. He accepted the limitations of his ego and in doing so he dis-identified with it and reintegrated it as part of his being. And when the rabbis in the middle-ages had imagined Isaac left dead on the altar and Abraham walking away alone, I imagine Abraham as a fully integrated being, walking away having reclaimed all parts of himself.

On a day such as this, we reflect on the year that has been, on the events we have lived through. The story of the “Binding of Isaac” helps us remember that our life, our circumstances, our experiences are not part of a divine test. Instead – the story seems to convey – it is us who place on ourselves impossible expectations, who drive ourselves to push beyond our own limits. This Rosh HaShanah, Abraham is telling us that, we too, would do well to fail these absurd self-imposed tests.

This year, I take away a new spiritual instruction: discover, embrace and release your inner ram.