

Once again, on this day of Rosh HaShanah, we find ourselves confronted with this most challenging story. Every year we are asked to wrestle with a text which, at first blush, makes little sense—if at all—to us; and seems appalling. Why, we ask, did our sages choose this foreboding story from the Torah to be chanted on such a solemn day, and what does it have to do with the work that we are called upon to engage in through these ten Days of Awe? If the core purpose of the High Holy Days is for us to work on making amends to those we have hurt and forgiving ourselves and one another, what in this text can possibly inspire us to do so? Abraham certainly never even attempts to make amends to Isaac for putting him through this ordeal. God never apologizes to either Abraham *or* Isaac for dishing out such horrific life-altering trauma.

What, then, to make of this story of *Akedat Yitzchak*, The Binding of Isaac? An interesting name considering that the text begins with “And God put *Abraham* to the test.” [Gen. 22:1] And, why, following this episode, did our sages add another name for God: *Pachad Yitzchak*; Fear of Isaac? (This name for God, incidentally, is used many times throughout the traditional liturgy of the High Holy Days.) Maybe we have been placing our attention in the wrong place, focusing on the wrong actor in the story. Could it be that this was never about Abraham. Perhaps Abraham is just the foil, the incidental player in a story that has his son, Isaac, as the main protagonist.

In order for us to understand why our focus rests on Isaac, we need to understand who he is at this point in his life, and, for that, we need to go back to the time before he was born. Isaac is arguably the *most wanted* child on early written record. Throughout Abraham and his wife Sarah’s life together, conceiving a child is an obsession. Finally, in the early verses of this Torah portion, the one that contains the *Akedah*, an angel appears to 99 year-old Abraham to announce that, by next year Sarah, at 90 will have a child. The absurdity of the angel’s prediction causes Sarah to laugh. Isaac, *Yitzchak* in Hebrew, whose name means “laughter,” is named after his mother’s skeptical laugh. And since our tradition believes that names carry the life energy or the destiny of the person, Isaac’s name can be understood to reflect not a joyous carefree disposition (which he never displays in any case) but, at least for the early part of his life, a skeptical even distrustful temperament.

We learn little about him after that. The first words we ever hear him utter are the question he asks his father on their way up Mount Moriah. He, like his son Jacob, is a mama’s boy; a tent dweller, not a hunter or a warrior. And Sarah is the quintessential helicopter parent (although I wonder what expression was used in biblical times). She is overprotective and overbearing. She does away with

competition by sending off Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael, and his mother to die in the wilderness. Commentators also write that, Abraham rises up early in the morning to depart for Mount Moriah, so as to avoid waking Sarah, as she would have opposed it with all her might; and neither Abraham nor God, were prepared to face her wrath.

A telling clue regarding Isaac's stage of development as he is about to face this ordeal, comes from the rabbinic argument on his age at this time. It makes sense to suppose that at the time Abraham fetches him from his tent that early morning, Isaac is a mere boy. Big enough, perhaps, to be able to carry the pile of wood on his back up the mountain. But in looking more closely at the text, this assumption is challenged. The majority opinion of our sages is that Isaac is much older. They base their conclusion on two passages in Torah. First, the *Akedah* opens with: "And it was, after all these things..." [Gen. 22:1] leading our rabbis to believe that a long period of time has elapsed since the previous story that was just relayed in Torah. Second, the chapter immediately following opens with Sarah's death at the age of 127, but with no indication of any length of time having passed; suggesting that she died at once after hearing of Isaac's sacrifice. From Sarah's age at her death, our teachers deduce that Isaac must have been 37 at the time of the *Akedah*, his mother having been 90 when she gave birth to him.

With this understanding, we can appreciate the subtle subtext underlying this rabbinic argument: *both* interpretations are true. Isaac is a 37 year old child. He is a 37 year old child whom Abraham has to steal away from his mother. He is a quiet (the kid hasn't spoken in 37 years), distrustful adult-child who has fearfully never left camp and has had all major life-decisions made for him up until this point. Something *has* to shift, some major—perhaps life-threatening—event has to be provoked to kill off the fearful child and coax the adult out of Isaac.

And so Isaac's journey begins. His 37 year old taciturn self is woken up early in the morning and made to leave with his father, two servants, some wood and a donkey. Abraham doesn't say a word and Isaac, being Isaac, doesn't think to question. Three days! Three days, we imagine, they walk, they camp, they eat, they walk some more. Not a word exchanged. Not even a "Daaad!! Are we there yet?" as one might expect. On the third day, Abraham separates himself and Isaac from the others. He has seen, the text says, "the *place* from afar." "The Place – *HaMakom*" in Jewish tradition is another name for God; God being *every* place, every "where." But it is no mistake that, in this case, "The Place" is a mountain top. The journey of personal transformation is a journey toward the metaphorical "higher Place." But what Abraham can see, Isaac is still blind to. Yet the distrustful voice within Isaac, one can

only assume, must now be screaming so loudly that he finally breaks his silence to ask Abraham: “Here is the firestone and the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?” And his father answers: “*Elohim Yireh lo; HaSeh l’olah b’ni* – God will see for Himself that the sheep for the burnt offering is my son.” [Gen. 22:7-8] In that moment Isaac realizes the true nature of his journey. Simply asking his question opens his eyes to what he couldn’t see before. In that small blank space on the parchment at the end of Abraham’s answer, Isaac’s life turned. He thought his life was going one way and now—what? In that textual gap we can only imagine the battle raging within Isaac: to go or not to go? *That* is the question. For Isaac, the choice is between transforming into the human adult he could become or staying the human child he is, for the rest of his life. I am reminded of a famous quote from Trina Paulus in *Hope For The Flowers*: “How does one become a butterfly? She asked. You must want to fly so much that you are willing giving up being a caterpillar.” But being willing to give up being a caterpillar, or a human child, means entering into the Fear that convinces us that we are afraid of what we think we have to give up in order to fly. Because, from the perspective of the caterpillar, becoming a butterfly means the caterpillar has to die. One looks so different than the other that, as far as the caterpillar is concerned, a butterfly has to be a different species altogether. It cannot fathom that a butterfly could be a transformed version of itself. This is the overwhelming fear, the fear of his impending death, that, I imagine Isaac wrestling with. So much is happening in that pregnant silence that it will take the Torah the stories of Jacob, Joseph *and* Moses to unpack it for us. We also find it retold by the Jewish authors of the story of Jesus at the scene of his prayer to God in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of *his* crucifixion. At first he—as I imagine Isaac—doesn’t want to go: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me” he begs. Furthermore in Luke 22: “being in agony he was praying fervently; and his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.” So did Isaac. But despite their agony, both men know that there is no turning back. They each did the only thing there was to do: stop struggling and surrender into the fear; “Thy will, not my will be done – *Ken Yehi Ratzon*” is what Jesus says as, we infer, Isaac does. In Isaac’s narrative, however, the Torah omits this passage, and moves quickly to the “grand finale” of the story knowing, perhaps, that the readers of old assumed the omitted scene. Why would they assume a scene that never was written? Because it is impossible to think that Abraham, advanced in age as he was, could have ever physically overcome an able-bodied 37 year old man, tie him up and lifted him up on an altar of wood, without Isaac’s consent. The *Akedah*, we can only surmise, had, for all intent and purposes, already taken place within Isaac by the time we read: “And the two of them went on together.” Isaac has already begun his transformation into a human adult, he has already died to his inner child, in the moment that he joined his father in the final climb of Mount Moriah.

Many of you, undoubtedly, have gone through such a life-altering moment. Some have not. Isaac's story is one of possibility; the possibility of attaining human adulthood—often elusive, but available to all of us.

Seeing Isaac's story as the quintessential journey to human adulthood, came very clearly to me as I was reflecting on the events that befell me back in October of last year. In the minutes and hours surrounding my heart attack, I was Isaac; and the events of that night felt like a personal *Akedah*. The details of the story differ. I didn't leave the donkey and the lads behind. In my case, the donkey came as an ambulance and the lads as EMTs. And though I didn't carry anything, I felt the heaviness of Isaac's wooden burden on my chest as crushing pain. Whereas he climbed up Mount Moriah, I was rushed to Cherry Hill.

The similarities don't stop there. Isaac's, like mine, was a choiceless choice. Both of us were bound: he to a pile of wood, me to a gurney. You would think—would you not?—that this situation would bring on sheer terror, panic. Yet, for me, the process of letting go began then. At the hospital, the heart surgeon appeared above me and said: "You are having a massive heart attack, and we will do all that we can." It was then that I completely surrendered. This was when *my* life turned. And I felt then, what I imagine Isaac must have felt.

Many well-wishers empathizing with my plight have exclaimed: "That must have been very scary!" Yet, somehow, it never was. From the onset of the heart attack, when the pain became quickly unbearable, to the EMTs arrival, to the rush to the hospital; at no point during this time did fear ever arise. Why? Maybe, at first, because I was too busy being in pain. Extreme pain, like pleasure, has the tendency to bring you (and keep you) right in the present, with all your energy and attention directed at what is happening moment to moment. There *is* no fear.

Even in the moment when the heart surgeon said the words he said, even in that moment of grasping the full meaning of his words—the experience was that of a state of calm lucidity, and of great clarity. Strapped on that gurney, and even after the pain medication took effect, something within surrendered, knowing through and through that there was absolutely nothing I could do. The need for control dissolved, there was no power to be had over anything. But neither powerlessness nor lack of control triggered any fear; the opposite is true. They triggered release, a quiet opening. Whatever was happening next, if I lived or if I died, was clearly not in my hands. It was no longer my concern. Within,

all was completely peaceful. These could very well have been the last minutes of my life, yet an eerie sense of abiding calm washed over me. Whatever was to happen this next moment was OK.

This was *Akedat* Olivier, my personal version of the Binding of Isaac. As for him, an angel somehow appeared at the last minute and stayed the hand of death. After this experience, in the months that followed, I became curious about Fear. What is it exactly? And how does it manifest within us? How big of a role does it play in our lives? If death was supposed to be what I was expected to be most fearful of, yet—in my experience at the doorstep of death—not only fear disappeared but a sense of calm and peace overtook me, then is there anything to fear really? In other words, if fear is a lie, why should I believe it and why should I let it rule my life?

These are critical questions because, in truth, this not about Isaac and his journey, nor mine; but about you, about each of us. We all have to make the journey to Mount Moriah. If we want to live lives liberated from the stranglehold of fear, if we want to see fear for the lie that it is, then we, too, have no choice but to make that climb. And I would strongly recommend you don't wait for *your* medical emergency, for the moment you too will be tied down to that gurney, to make it.

The problem is, we don't want to make that journey. We are afraid; afraid of losing what we have, afraid of losing those we love. And so we keep on struggling, resisting, trying to control everything and everyone. Loss, disease, decay and death are not evil, they just are. What, then, causes us such distress? Consider the steep price we pay when we struggle, resist, cling to, or insist on controlling. Aren't we condemning ourselves to forever remain caterpillars? Isaac's story is a story about our own potential to embark on such journey from human-childhood, to human-adulthood. Our relationship with fear makes all the difference. See if you can approach fear and expose it for the lie that it is. Become a student of fear, seeing it manifests all around you, and within you; until you no longer can stand it lording over your life. Then you will have taken the first step toward your personal transformation.

In the writings of one of my esteemed spiritual teachers, Jed McKenna, I found an analogy that speaks directly to this profound shift. He writes: "In the first Star Wars movie," (yes, that's right—Star Wars!) "do you remember when Luke makes this transition? [The moment he begins to] trust the Force... Flying through those canyons of the Death Star, everything on the line, total success or total

failure in the balance; he switches off his navigational computers... and chooses to rely entirely on the Force. That's the transition. The old way is fully exited and the new way is fully entered, not by word but by deed, when it matters most, when everything is on the line..." [Spiritually Incorrect Enlightenment; p.230]

So here is my prayer, on this Rosh HaShanah 5776; that all of us might be able this year, to have a taste of an Isaac or a Luke Skywalker moment. That we may be graced with the resolve to enter into our fears, fly right into our own Death Star, and find that space in consciousness where we are able to disengage the automatic pilot of our fearful conditioned lives, remove the vision goggles through which we think we look at reality and look at reality as it truly is. That we let God, the Fear of Isaac, Life, or The Force be with us, move through us, that *Its Will* not *our will*, be done. May we all journey toward realizing the potential of being a full human adult, and live our lives from that place. May this become our living reality. *Ken Yehi Ratzon!* Amen.