

Before we continue with our Torah service, there is a story I feel compelled to share with you. This is the story of the Beloved Son. You have likely heard this story before. And if you thought that this story was disturbing before, just wait. The story is that of a childless woman who is visited by an angel, who pronounces that, soon, she will bear a child. The mother-to-be, balks at such absurdity knowing that there could be no possible natural way she could become pregnant. But human limitations do not deter angelic beings, and the angel responds to her: “Is anything too miraculous for the Eternal?” For this is the story of the Beloved Son, of the Son of God, born to be the father of a new nation, to fulfill God’s promise. But who was he?

We don’t know much about the early years of his life. The text does a “fast-forward,” and he only reappears on the biblical scene in his thirties. What we know most about are the events surrounding his death. He is 37 on the day he is to be killed. Two men accompany him on his last journey to the mount upon which he is to die. The story describes him as having to carry the wood—the wood onto which he is to be sacrificed—all the way to the top of the mount. There he is bound to it and slain. But the story doesn’t end with his death. In fact the greater story only *begins* with his death and what follows; his resurrection.

By now you’ve figured out who I am talking about. Yes? No. I am *not* referring to the *other* sacrificed Jew, to Jesus. This is Isaac’s story—but there are good reasons for your confusion. The truth is; I *could* have been referring to the Gospel of Luke when I mentioned the angel announcing the future mother’s pregnancy, and the interaction between Mary and the Angel Gabriel; but I was, instead referencing the Book of Genesis where an angel makes virtually the same announcement to Sarah. You probably thought that what prevented her pregnancy was that Mary was a virgin, when; rather, I was referring to Sarah who, at age 90, was too old to bear children. Maybe you had in mind that the verse from which I was quoting the angel’s reply was from Luke as well, where Gabriel says to Mary: “Nothing is impossible with God,” when, in fact, I was quoting Gen. again and the angel’s reply to Sarah which is roughly identical.

But since this is new information for most of us—it was for me—let me explain. The first verse of Genesis chapter 21 begins “*VaAdonai pakad et Sarah ka-asher amar, va-yaas l’Sarah ka-asher diber.* – And the Eternal delivered Sarah as He had said, and He did *to* Sarah what He had said [through the angel]. Sarah conceived and bore a son...” We never read in these passages that Abraham “knew” Sarah, which is the traditional biblical idiom for “they were intimate.” Abraham seems like an afterthought, playing the role of father to Isaac not unlike Joseph to Jesus. This might explain why

rabbis spend so much time trying to shed light on Abraham's lack of certainty when God commands him to go sacrifice Isaac. God says: "Take your son." And the Midrash has him reply: "Which one?" Because, to Abraham, *his* son was Ishmael. But then God continues: "Your favored one." And Abraham is still unsure. "The one you love." Uh...?. Finally, God spells it out: "Isaac!" Ooooooh! ***That*** one!

The parallels continue. Both Isaac and Jesus were said to have been 37 at the time of their deaths. The two men who went on this journey to the mount of sacrifice, were the men who accompanied Abraham and Isaac on their three-day journey *or*, in the Jesus parable, the two men who were crucified next to him. Isaac carried the stack of wood for the burnt offering, and of course Jesus carried the wooden cross for the crucifixion.

Surely this is where the similarities, although striking, must end, right? Death and resurrection cannot be, *is not*, part of the Jewish narrative. In the full Torah narrative Isaac does *not* die and, therefore, there is no possibility of resurrection. End of story. Well... don't be so sure. If you take a closer look at the text you notice that there isn't just one but two interwoven stories in the telling of the Akedah, written by two competing authors—which is not uncommon in Torah. The two authors are easy to tell apart because the first one calls God "Elohim," while the second one calls God "YHVH/Adonai." The Akedah is the story originally told by the 1st "Elohim" author, which was later edited by the 2nd one. The 2nd author is the one who inserted the whole story of the angel who intervenes to stop Abraham from going through with the sacrifice. And he might have succeeded in rewriting the story in a way that may have prevented us from ever detecting its dual authorship if he hadn't left behind clues to the original one.

Listen for yourself. Here is what the original version recounted: "Abraham built an altar [...]; he laid out the wood; he bound **H**is son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay **H**is son...[the act is erased] The angel of [God] called to Abraham from heaven, and said, 'Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me. By Myself I swear, [God] declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore... because you have listened to My Voice.'"

Now for the kinder, gentler edited version: The 2nd "Adonai" author—the therapist—added the following after Abraham picks up the knife: "***Then*** an angel of the Eternal called to him from

heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.” And the angel said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.” When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.” How convenient, huh?!

But the 2nd author left-in the verse which concludes the original story of the Akedah: “And Abraham returned to his servants, and they rose and went together to Beersheva, and Abraham dwelled in Beersheva.” Notice something missing? *Nowhere* is there any mention of Isaac coming down with Abraham; because, as far as the original author is concerned, Isaac never did come back. Abraham sacrificed him as God had commanded. By keeping intact the original ending, the 2nd author left behind an undeniable inconsistency in the text.

Even the Talmudic Sages in the first centuries of the Common Era—unintentionally or not—suggested proof that Isaac had been killed. In their relentless logic they held that, while performing Isaac’s sacrifice, Abraham had to have *precisely* followed the priestly laws from the Book of Leviticus: “And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire upon the altar, and lay wood upon the fire.” As such, Abraham had to have kindled the fire *first*, placed the wood on top of the fire, and put Isaac “on top of the wood.” And so, perhaps—as the first angel exclaimed—he did “*not do anything to the lad;*” he did not remove him speedily from the wood upon the fire that was burning, and in a flash the whole pile went up in a blaze and Isaac along with it—and “he was reduced to ashes” and dust.

Even the great rabbi, Rashi himself, quotes this interpretation in his Torah commentary. He writes: “An aggadic Midrash interprets the verse ‘*The Eternal will see*’ this binding, to forgive Israel because of it every year, and to save them from punishment, so that it will be said, on this day, in all the future generations ‘On the mountain of God there will be seen’ the ashes of Isaac still piled up, for atonement on behalf of Israel.” What is striking here is: not only does Rashi reference a teaching that supports the conclusion that, like Jesus, Isaac was, indeed, sacrificed; but also that Isaac died for our sins!?! Now, some might dismiss this piece of evidence because Rashi lived in Catholic France in the 11th century, and thus was bound to be influenced by Christian Scriptures. And it would not have been much of a leap to assign Isaac’s sacrifice the same purpose as that of Jesus. Yet there is an even deeper structure at play here, an older narrative at the source of it all: The Paschal Offering of Passover.

In pagan times, the night of the full moon in the middle of the first month of spring—what became the night of Passover in *biblical* times—was considered a time to appease the gods so that they might

forgive our sins and spare the upcoming spring harvest and the firstborn animals. For generations, child sacrifices were offered to placate the gods in this way. This age-old ritual got mixed into Isaac's original story and, forevermore, became associated with his sacrifice, as the Akedah was said to have taken place on that full moon. It didn't take much, later, to connect the blood of Isaac's Akedah with the blood from the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb of the Passover myth since it, too, was said to have happened that same night. Isaac, now, *was* the Paschal Lamb whose blood was taken to have both protective and redemptive qualities. The lamb was to serve as a substitute for child sacrifice. And yet millennia old practices and beliefs die hard. Prophets like Micah continue to rail against idol worshipers who insisted on believing still that sacrificing their firstborn son served as atonement for sins. It is, therefore, not surprising that this theme persists in the minds of the Jews who wrote the gospels of Jesus in the first decades of the Common Era. From these varying strains over time, we see that the blood of Isaac's Akedah remains present in our tradition's psyche.

So, perhaps by now you'll concede Isaac's slaying, but still—resurrection?! Really?!

Before I proceed in exploring this aspect of our story, I feel the need to pause and acknowledge how outrageous drawing this kind of parallel may seem to many of us. We've been taught that this idea of resurrection belongs exclusively to Christianity. I know it was surprising to me when I first came upon it some years ago as part of my rabbinic studies. A whole course was dedicated to the study of the Akedah where I discovered not only many Jewish sources spanning the twenty-five hundred years of our tradition that corroborated the claim I am making, but writings from the other Abrahamic faiths, as well as other traditions. So, now, resurrecting the *possibility* of resurrection, let's see what the rabbis have to say.

With the only offspring of Sarah dead, resurrection *is* how we reconcile God's promise of "descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven." Rabbi Yehudah of Barcelona writes: "When Father Isaac was at the point of being sacrificed...he beheld the light of the *Shechinah*, and his soul flew out of him, but the Holy One, blessed be He, resurrected him." *Shibbole Leket* explains: "When Father Isaac was bound on the altar and reduced to ashes and his sacrificial dust was cast onto Mount Moriah, the Holy One... brought upon him dew and resurrected him." We even find *midrashim* timing Isaac's resurrection to take place on the third day. Scholars date the influence of such concepts back to Babylon and Egypt where the three day interval between the death and resurrection of the gods was a common belief among the peoples of the ancient Near-East. Some *midrashim* keep the three but turn days into years. Benjamin Bar Samuel explains: "The Holy One, blessed be He,

brought [Isaac] to the Garden of Eden and there he stayed three years.” Paneach Raza continues “And what was he doing all that time in Paradise? They were healing him there.” Why did the rabbis feel compelled to explain this three-year period? Because the next time we see Isaac in Torah is three years later, at age forty, when he meets Rebecca for the first time. As Isaac arrives on the scene we read in Torah: “And Isaac *came from* the way of *beer-la-chai-roi* (the well of the vision of life)... and Isaac went *out* walking in the fields...” The Hadar Zekenim, intrigued by the conflicting verbs in the verse, with Isaac first “coming from” as well as mysteriously “going out” asks: “Whence did he go out?” And he answers: “From Paradise.” And R. Yehudah bar Eliezer adds: “No wonder Rebecca lost her equilibrium ‘and she fell from the camel’—for what she perceived was Isaac coming down from Paradise...”

Now that we have traced the origins of the Isaac and Jesus stories back to pre-biblical times and have noted their striking parallels; why do we care? What at the core of this story is so compelling to us? Why has it endured over time? What does this myth of sacrifice and resurrection have to teach us? You will likely come up with your own answer. Here is *my* current one: Step 7 – the Spiritual Edge.

Those of you who are in the “12 Steps as a Spiritual Practice” class have heard me say that I am stuck at Step 7. For those of you who don’t happen to have the Big Book in hand, here’s Step 7: “We humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings,” to release these aspects of self that cause so much pain to us and to the people around us.” This is *my* spiritual threshold. Step 7 is also the edge to which the High Holy Days bring us if we stay with its process. The process begins with realizing how deeply conditioned we truly are. What we consider to be a separate, individual, and autonomous self, reveals itself to be nothing but a *conditioned* self. We notice how hurtful, how miserable, always dissatisfied, always struggling to control everything, this conditioned self is, and resolve to free ourselves from its destructive hold. As we do in community with the *Al Chet*, we acknowledge our hurtful ways aloud in order to make the unconscious conscious, and take responsibility. And if we embark on this spiritual journey of profound forgiveness that characterizes the High Holy Days, then we find ourselves right here, ripe for Step 7: entirely ready to let God remove it all. In other words, Step 7 *is* the sacrifice.

But we have a problem. Despite our best efforts at truly shedding light on the destructive limitations of our conditioned self, we still love it. This conditioned “me” that, somehow, we have created, that we have birthed, *is our* firstborn, our Beloved Son, our Isaac, and we are deeply attached to it. And though it has many imperfections, the “me” I know is a familiar entity, a multifaceted character I just

love to play. A “me” freed of these endearing quirks *others* call “character flaws,” a “me” without all the dramas that make up what my life is, such a “me” is unknown; and the unknown is scary, the unknown is like death. And to the little “me,” to the ego, this feels like self-sacrifice.

But that is exactly the point, isn't it? What the High Holy Days invite us to do is to sacrifice our inner Isaac; to sacrifice this old way of being that is holding us back, keeping us stuck; to break through the walls of self-righteousness, of *our* truths and opinions, of *our* way, *our* point of view, in order to be reborn, resurrected into a new way of being, a new way of seeing. If we don't cross over this Step 6 threshold and release these layers of self that no longer serve us, our lack of forgiveness will continue to collapse our sense of identify into an ever shrinking version of ourselves. So every year, when we fully engage in the spiritual practice that the High Holy Days offer, we gather together as a community on Rosh Hashanah to sacrifice Isaac again and again. We come to the edge of the old version of ourselves and—if we find the courage to heed the Voice of the Spirit within—let our constricted self be surrendered and jump into the unknown of the next evolution of our being.

This is the edge that I have come to in my life. I have no idea who the Olivier may be that will be resurrected on the other side of that edge. And *that* is very scary. Yet like Jesus in his process, Isaac and Abraham on their journey, I feel that there is no other choice but to climb that Mountain. To be honest, I am seriously digging my heels as I am walking along, constantly asking where the *other* offering is, hoping that, maybe, I won't have to go through the process of self-immolation and yet still get the resurrection part.

Perhaps you are in that place as well today; ready to move on to the next evolution of your being yet afraid of letting go of who you have believed yourself to be for so long. And although you are alone at that threshold, you also have a lot of company. Many of us here, spiritual wrestlers, are on this journey. It is a journey back to the center of our being, to the center of Being itself. And so if you, too, are standing on that edge today; then this year's chanting of the Akedah is especially for you. May its melody pierce through the last of our resistance; that we may find the courage to bring this process to completion and be resurrected to new life in this New Year.