

“*Vay’hi achar had’varim ha-eleh, v’ha-Elohim nisa et Avraham* - And it was, after all these things, God put Abraham to the test.” [Exod. 22:1] Thus begins our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading.

Many commentators see in this opening verse the set up for the test of faith that God puts Abraham through. If Abraham has faith in God, the presumption asserts, then he will unequivocally do what God tells him to do *even if* -- or perhaps *especially if* -- God’s demands go against every ounce of his rational being.

Last year, I shared with you that biblical scholars have deduced that there were two interspersed authors of the Akeidah (which happens many times in Torah) who wrote at different times. Some assert that in the original version Abraham did, in fact, kill Isaac. But, the argument goes, the second author couldn’t fathom having Abraham commit such a deed, especially at a time when the religious leadership sought to do away with human sacrifice. So, he wrote-in the last-minute-appearing angel who stayed Abraham’s knife-wielding hand; thus reinterpreting Abraham’s willingness to murder his son as a tremendous act of faith: “For now I know that you fear God!” exclaims the angel. This author can’t accept Abraham as murderer. He has to imagine a different unfolding, and transform our view of Abraham from an infanticidal fanatic to *the* archetype of true faith. And we have read it this way ever since. From Rashi to Maimonides and to this day, we have been assured that not only was this a test of faith; but furthermore, that Abraham represents the complete faith we are to aspire to.

But I don’t think so. Given what we know about Abraham, was another test necessary to prove the depth of Abraham’s commitment? Didn’t he, at God’s call, leave his birth place, the family and the life he knew at the drop of a *Kippah*, to blindly travel to an unknown destination? Didn’t he surrender his Sarah to Pharaoh who took her as a wife? What about having to go to war against several kings at once? What about sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the wilderness? And circumcising himself at the ripe old age of 99? Wouldn’t we say: “*Dayeinu!*” By then, God *must* have been convinced of Abraham’s unshakable faith.

So if God wasn’t testing Abraham’s faith, what was the test about then? In order for us to answer this question we need to understand who Abraham was, in his relationship with God. For this, we have to go back to the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah just a few turns of the scroll earlier. There is a striking passage in Torah where we get to eavesdrop on God’s self-talk. God is wondering whether to tell Abraham that He is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah: “Because,” God reflects, “I have selected him, so that he may teach his children and those who come after him to keep the way of the Eternal, doing what is right and just...” That’s why God had chosen Abraham in the first place,

what He was looking for in the father of future nations; what Abraham not only embodies but is charged to transmit to his descendants: to always do “what is right and just.” God knew, therefore, that Abraham was going to give him a hard time about His destroying the two cities. And God was right. Abraham argues with God on ethical principles to spare the lives of total strangers in the wicked cities if only a few righteous souls could be found there. So why, then, *this* time, when it comes to his *own* son, is Abraham completely silent? The contrast is so powerful, the break in character so radical—what could possibly motivate someone to blatantly deny all that he stands for and be willing to sacrifice his own child? Well, what is the only ultimate thing that stops us from “doing what is right and just” when we know better ... Only fear!

But not just any fear. Abraham is *so* afraid of losing his connection with God if he doesn't obey, *so* scared of God no longer seeing him as worthy of the Divine Promise, that he yields to his deepest fear. In doing so Abraham compromises his core ethics, denying the deepest truth within himself, and abdicates personal responsibility, blindly submitting to the perceived will of authority. In so doing he betrays the very essence of what God saw in him in the first place. This was a test of personal integrity; and Abraham epically fails. No wonder God never talks to him again in Torah. In Abraham's deluded willingness to give himself fully over to God, he brought about exactly what he most feared: losing all his most cherished connections – with his wife, with his son, with God.

So how does this relate to us? If we start with the principle that all the characters in Torah symbolize what is universally present in all of us, what of Abraham's story is our story?

We seldom take a serious look at what underlies so much of our decision-making. What if we became curious about that? Investigate it a bit. In a world of constant flux, what makes us most miserable most often? And why do we resort to the predictability of set routines and ritualistic behavior? On a more subtle level, what powers our obsession with comfort, and most of our desires? If you look carefully, you will find that fear fuels all of these. And the “mother” of all fears? – that of Abraham – losing connection with others, of not being worthy of love or attention and esteem, of being ostracized, rejected, alone. Abraham's fear is among our most primordial. It is, for us, akin to the fear of death.

What is, then, the delivery system for this fear? Well, our culture, of course. And from the earliest stages.

Consider for a moment how fear is bred in our education system. Aren't our schools fundamentally exacerbating our fear of disconnection by creating a culture of right and wrong, not just academically but also socially? We, unwittingly, raise children to look for the "right" answer, and this gets translated into perceived intelligence or worthiness. And if one gets a wrong answer our fears are immediately reinforced as we find ourselves academically marginalized and socially rejected. In a book titled "How Children Fail," author John Holt makes the argument that contrary to what we would expect, our education system renders our children "unintelligent because they are accustomed by teachers and schools to strive only for teacher approval and for the 'right' answers, and to forget all else. In this system, children see no value in thinking and discovery, but see it only in playing the game of school. Children believe that they must please the teacher, the adult, at all costs. They learn how to manipulate teachers to gain clues about what the teacher really wants." (Sounds familiar? Think Abraham). "They fear wrong answers and shy away from challenges because they may not have the right answer." I see what Mr. Holt describes here, first hand, with children in my B'nai Mitzvah class who are terrified at the idea of learning Hebrew or trope for those same reasons. They live in a school culture that stifles their risk-taking, and exploring the new and unfamiliar. The Dean of Stanford's School of Education, Deborah Stipek, notices this too. In the journal "Science," she asserts that "schools incubate the fear of failure," a direct correlate to our fear of disconnection, "which causes stress and anxiety to perform, and which do not enhance learning. This is ironic," she laments, "since children are innately risk-takers. If there is a curb, they will try to balance on it. If there is a shiny object, they will reach out for it. This is how they discover the world. Failure and risk-taking are how they learn. However, that sense of discovery and wonder is squelched in the classroom."

What are we doing to our children? To ourselves? As a consequence of such conditioning, we train people from the youngest age to skip over their own knowing about "what is right and just," opting, instead, to excel at anticipating and second-guessing what everybody *else* wants the answer to be: mom, dad, the teacher, the boss, (God, in Abraham's case). Have you ever interviewed for a job? Did you tell the truth about yourself, or did you relate what you thought the interviewer wanted to hear? Such widespread social conditioning shuts down the possibility for us to reach deeper; and does quite a good job at training us to ignore the still small voice within.

So what's the big deal? How can what I'm not paying attention to hurt anything? Some time ago I came across this captivating TED talk that illustrates the problem. Alice Stuart was a brilliant doctor in Oxford in the 1950's. She became interested in the emerging field of epidemiology; the study of patterns in diseases that affect large populations. A puzzling problem was the rise in incidents of childhood cancers. Most diseases afflicting children had seemed to be poverty-related, but it appeared that this one overwhelmingly targeted children of affluent families. What, she wanted to know, could explain this anomaly? After months of trying to raise research money she barely managed to get 1000 Pounds. She knew that, with few resources, she had only one shot at finding the elusive cause, though she had no idea what she was looking for. It really was a needle in a haystack. So she created one all-encompassing questionnaire onto which she threw as many questions as she could think of about anything and everything that had to do with these children's lives. And when the questionnaires started to come back, one thing and one thing only jumped out; the statistical clarity of a kind that most scientists can only dream of. By a ratio of 2 to 1, the children who had died had mothers who had been x-rayed while pregnant. Now that finding flew in the face of that day's "conventional wisdom." Conventional – yes; wisdom – *not* in this case. The medical community held huge enthusiasm for the cool new technology of the x-ray machine, and maintained as a core belief that it was safe. Nevertheless, Dr. Stuart rushed to publish her findings in 1956. Her paper drew a lot of excitement, there was talk of a Nobel Prize, and so she felt she had to hurry up and document all the cases she could find before they disappeared. But, tragically (and in hind sight predictably,) she need not have hurried. It took a full 25 years—25 years of unnecessary doctor-caused children's deaths. It was not until 1981, that both the British and American medical establishments abandoned the practice of x-raying pregnant women. The data was out there, it was freely available, but nobody wanted to know. Though these doctors were not wielding knives over bound children atop an altar; like Abraham, their motivated blindness proved just as lethal. Why does it take us so long to act on what we know when the cost is so great? Why did it take so long to take on the cigarettes companies; why, with what we know today, do we still have resistance when it comes to reforming the soda industry, dealing with genetically modified foods or saving our planet from global warming?

Dr. Stuart's findings in 1956 flew in the face of doctors' ideas of themselves; authoritative trained professionals who help others and can never make mistakes. She threatened not only to tear down the conventional wisdom that propped-up their authority, but also to destroy the image they had of themselves. They, like Abraham, were the chosen ones with the inner access. They, like Abraham, could not face losing the high esteem, the sense of worthiness their profession bestowed upon them.

And we own our share of the blame too. We are all too happy to let ourselves be blinded by “conventional wisdom” as well. The inertia that prevents us from tackling such blatant dysfunction is fueled by the assumption, the need to convince ourselves, that the leadership, the voice of authority is right. This becomes pathological when we make our doctors, our generals, teachers, gurus, NFL Commissioners, or CEOs into demi-gods. We dangerously, unwisely grant them complete authority, thereby abdicating our own responsibility. We, too, are like Abraham, so afraid to risk losing our connection to others who follow “conventional wisdom,” thus finding ourselves ostracized or rejected from the group that we willfully ignore the voice within, calling us to do “what is right and just.”

Consider how this fear of disconnection, of isolation, of not belonging to a group plays out in our own day-to-day lives. Take, for example, our Facebook page. I couldn't help but notice, this summer, witnessing the overwhelming number of reactions, comments, postings and re-postings of dozens of articles, or in conversations between friends about Israel's attack of Gaza, that the way most of us relate to our world is by looking for matches. I watched with interest, how my world of Facebook friends became divided based on whatever they gravitated toward that confirmed what they already knew, what they already believed. It felt like, once we chose a side, we needed to be all-in because, then, we would be fully with the side that was obviously right. Most of us happen to surround ourselves and allow into our FB feed only the people and information that reinforce our opinions and match our worldview. But the unhealthy aspect of our human need to belong, to be part of and support a certain team, a certain side, a certain consensus is that it often means not only closing our hearts and minds and demonizing the “other” side, but, most critically, not being willing to see when our side, our beliefs are wrong.

Our wrestling with this Torah portion can help us look deeply into this all-too-human pattern of fear that Abraham's story is stressing. And we need to wrestle with this major driving force in our life because failing to do so will disconnect us from our authentic selves. This is the work we are here to do, on this Rosh Hashanah and through the Ten Days of Awe, and this is what this disturbing text offers us.

Abraham's failure is our cautionary tale. What we learn from the Akeidah, is not, as our rabbis have taught for generations: “Be like Abraham,” but rather, learn from Abraham's character flaws. He shows us in no uncertain terms that we can't people-please our way to intimate connection. It's just humanly harder than that. In order to earn the connection we seek, it behooves us to face our deepest yearnings, our strongest fears. We start by working at getting better at just noticing when fear

crops up, acknowledging it—along with our flaws and vulnerability. It is only then that we allow ourselves access to our deepest knowing.

To learning from mistakes – our own and others. To a year of ever-deepening authenticity.

L'Shanah Tovah.