

Every year, when summer is winding down and the High Holy Days become a looming reality, the same unsettling thought arises in my mind: What more can I possibly share about the Binding of Isaac? What other angle can I find to explore? Yet as soon as that thought settles in my mind an interesting process unfolds whereby, unconsciously, I begin to look for inspiration over the weeks that follow. And, lo and behold, through a conversation or a book I'm reading, an e-mail or a Facebook post, something appears in my life that causes me to say: "That's it! That's the message I feel compelled to share this year." And guess what? Abraham screwed up again! But I am getting ahead of myself.

It all began when God called out to Abram in Haran, told him to leave everything he knew behind and, in turn, made him the seductive promise we just heard: That he would become the Father of a great nation, as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sand on the sea shores. Abram was already 75 years old when God made him this promise; yet he and his wife, Sarai, after so many years of marriage, remained childless. Abram wanted to believe in this promise with all his being, yet, at the same time, he was having an understandably difficult time trusting that this would ever come to pass, as his laughter indicated when God told him Sarai would become pregnant. Nevertheless, even as the already old couple ages throughout the story, God reiterates His promise repeatedly. As God appears to him in a vision to repeat again the apparent empty promise yet again, a frustrated Abram is having none of it: "O Eternal One, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless...?" Maybe, Abraham surmised, he ought to take matters into his own hands; maybe he should force his destiny and adopt one of his servants' children to call them his heir? Maybe he should have a child with Hagar, Sarah's maidservant?

Abraham not only doubts God's word of a genetic inheritance with Sarah, he is also skeptical of God's assurance of a land to inherit. In that same vision, once again, God promises him the land of Canaan, yet Abram whines again: "O Eternal One, how shall I know that I am to possess it?"

Healthy skepticism, while also keeping "the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right" as God Himself once said about Abraham, appears to define our patriarch's character. Yet in deference to the Promise, Abraham expresses a less flattering side of his character (that, by the way, none of us are immune to either) that of: Abraham the blind devotee. To prove himself worthy of God's Promise, Abraham blindly and unquestionably obeys every commandment, follows every suggestion that God makes. In Torah, we see repeated again and again that Abraham: "Placed his

trust in God.” In those passages Abraham turns into the faithful, obedient, childlike character willing to do anything to get the Promise and his Father’s approval. The story of Ishmael is a compelling example. Sarah wants to ban Hagar’s son. Abraham is “distressed” as the Torah tells us. And though he had just argued to save the lives of complete strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, he doesn’t even protest to save his own son, when God intervenes and sides with Sarah. Worse, he is the one to get up early in the morning to send Hagar and Ishmael to die in the desert with only a piece of bread and a skin of water. To see God’s Promise come true is so paramount to Abraham, that he is ready to make whatever sacrifice is necessary. Which brings us to the Binding of Isaac.

There is a story, a *midrash*, in one of the oldest tractates of the Mishnah (one of the earliest rabbinic works that is the basis for the Talmud), which depicts the rabbis debating over various interpretations of the Akedah. They suggest that on the way to Mount Moriah, Abraham had prayed for Isaac’s life. Atop the mountain, God answered his prayers. God stops him. Yet Abraham calls God out on what he now sees as God toying with him. Abraham says to God: “Yesterday You said that through Isaac my seed would be acclaimed. Then You retracted and said, ‘Take now thy son.’ Now You say, ‘Do not raise your hand against the boy.’” And God responds, “Oh Abraham, I will not violate My covenant, or change what I have uttered. I said, ‘Take now thy son...’ But did I tell you to slaughter him? No, I said to ‘take him up.’” (The literal meaning of the word for sacrifice, *olah*, is “that which is brought or taken up.”) “You have taken him up,” God said. “Now take him down.”

According to this *midrash*, God never asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Yet, Abraham, singularly focused on the fruition of the Promise, does not stop and question the utter insanity of his interpretation of God’s directive. His deluded blind obedience comes with a steep price tag for the Promised payoff—the essence of himself, and his beloved son.

Appalled though we may be by Abraham’s behavior, it behooves us to look a bit closer, and closer to home. We might find that Abraham’s single-minded focus, the overriding of his sense of self and moral compass in the pursuit of an elusive Promise, may be uncomfortably familiar.

We, too, are far too willing to fool ourselves because of a dangling “carrot” we want to believe is at the end of the proverbial stick. There are endless examples in our history books where we can see this pattern playing itself out. Two specifically come to mind. In the late 1930’s, when Western Europe desired peace more than anything else, the soon-to-be allies sacrificed the Sudetenland to appease Hitler. Several months ago it seemed history repeated itself when the Western

world, once again, remained silent watching Putin invade Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. We all know too well where the promise of “appeasement” leads to, or do we?

Too often our own behavior belies what we say we most cherish, when we, in fact, sacrifice what matters to us for an ever eluding promise. The promise of success, the ever-moving target of career advancement is one of those whereby many of us sacrifice not our children but our time spent with our children and our family. There are too many examples that point to the ways we sacrifice our integrity, our values and our ethics for what we desire, come to depend on, live for or even simply crave. Yet there is one, specifically, that has captured the Jewish publications headlines in recent months, related to an issue that those of us who identify as progressive Jews are now confronted with.

The progressive agenda is increasingly emerging as a national political narrative. Those of us who are progressive liberal Jews, are aligned with most progressive political platforms. We are eager to promote their views, from gun laws to universal healthcare, gender equality to gay rights, from global peace and saving our environment, to civil rights legislation. To us these are expressions of a truly Jewish value, rooted in the famous biblical injunction: “*Tzedek, Tzedek, tir’dof*, Justice, Justice, shall you pursue!”—for all people. A lofty ideal, and one that Jews take seriously and, in fact, pursue actively. It is, therefore, important for progressive Jews to be viewed as playing a significant part in the advancement of progressive causes.

And yet. What happens when the organizations whose values and causes you wholeheartedly support and work to advance become misled by their own ignorance and blind spots? What do you do when those organizations cease to extend the same compassion and understanding and humanity to your own people? This is the unenviable position progressive Jews currently find themselves in. Progressives, as defenders of all oppressed people have singled out the plight of the Palestinian people as cause celebre. It follows from a simplistic un-nuanced childlike view that if Palestinians are suffering under Israeli rule, then Israelis are colonial oppressors. Black Lives Matter published, this summer, a powerful progressive platform as part of their movement; the kind of platform progressive Jews, and progressives everywhere, would normally enthusiastically embrace and support wholeheartedly. Yet, as part of their platform, the Black Lives Matter leadership—though they could have pointed their accusatory finger toward dozens of countries with far more horrendous human rights records—singled out and called Israel not only an apartheid state but accused the Israeli people of committing genocide against the Palestinian people.

As progressive Jews, when accusations of this kind are leveled at our people, we need to pause, reevaluate our role, and be watchful when it comes to the future evolution of the Progressive Movement as a whole. Though we seek acceptance and participation in a movement that represents what we believe in and stand for, we need to ask ourselves what price we are willing to pay for the promise of belonging.

This is not the first time in our history that we have had to ask ourselves such a question. We have wanted to be accepted and embraced by the communities and host countries in which we have found ourselves for 2000 years. We sacrificed our Judaism to convert to Catholicism in 1492 Spain. What we got in return was the pyres of the Inquisition. We became Frenchmen, Germans, Austrians, Polish, Ukrainians, Russians, often abandoning our traditions to dress and speak like our host Nation-States in the 17 and 1800s. We ate sauerkraut, and drank beer, pork blood sausage and Beaujolais, Borsht, Goulash and Pierogis, but we were still not accepted in the private clubs and swimming pools, in the highest echelons of politics, academia or military. No, what we got instead, was rising antisemitism, pogroms and, ultimately, the intentional systematic murder of our people.

But now, here in America, it seems that we are finally part of a nation steeped in the values and ethics we have advocated for generations, embodied in this Progressive Movement. Why would we not want to be a part of it? And you know what? —as we hear too many Jews express—if our belonging to this wonderful cause is always going to be tainted by the liability that Israel has become, then maybe we need to distance ourselves from Israel, or even renounce Israel altogether and side with its detractors.

Wouldn't we be too quick to ignore, however—in the name of this promise of belonging—that, today, anti-Semitism is hiding beneath the righteous cloak of anti-Israel sentiments and actions? And make no mistake, though the packaging looks different from generations' past, the content is the same.

For one, the historical conditions that gave rise to anti-Semitism in the past are revisiting us nowadays, but on a global scale. The world is in crisis. Too many global issues, all seeming insurmountable, leave people everywhere feeling overwhelmed, deeply concerned and afraid of a future that appears to be dark and grim. Radical Islam is rising and the violence it generates has people living in fear around the globe. No longer confined to the Middle-East, it is striking in Africa, in the streets of Europe, and in major US cities too. And who is continuously stoking the flames of Radical Islam by refusing to make peace in order to appease the Arab world for us, so that we—in

Europe and America—can sleep better? *Israel* of course! If only the Jews would make peace, or better yet disappear from the Middle-East, *then* the Muslim world would be pacified and we could be free of this fear of Islam. In the name of appeasement and the promise of peace in our own lives, why not sacrifice the Jews of Israel.

Blanket-accusations of Israel, Israelis and Jews by uninformed outsiders miss the nuance and deflect the blame from our own historical abominations here in the US—slavery, native American genocide, the treatment of minorities, of Muslims in general and Muslim refugees in particular currently; but also from our military and economic invasions of Muslim lands, in order to control their oil and benevolently bring to them our superior capitalistic democratic way of life. But rather than looking at our own shadow, isn't it easier to point the finger at Israel and the Jews for the rise of Radical Islam? It's comforting to know who's to blame.

And if you happen to think that my claims are too extreme, take for example what we've seen on campuses around our nation, and specifically recently at UC Berkley. Pro-Palestinian progressive youth plastered posters all over campus accusing Jews of being “bullies smashing free speech” because a group of concerned organizations some Jewish, some educational, and some civil rights advocates, had protested a course on campus titled: “Palestine: A Settler Colonial Analysis” taught by a pro-Palestinian professor whose avowed syllabus was exploring how Israel might be destroyed. As it is happening already on American campuses for our Jewish students, you might want to bear in mind that, soon enough, because of the rise of anti-Semitism within its ranks, progressive Jews will have to ask ourselves what we are willing to sacrifice for the Promise of belonging to this shifting Progressive Movement. Consider that if we, Jews, were to decide to align ourselves with the overreaching misinformed direction of the progressive liberals, wanting to bring justice to all people at the exception of our own, then we would have to recognize that we, in fact, would be working to become expendable.

On the other hand, if we decided that we cannot join-in with progressive organizations that harbor an anti-Semitic bend, accuse Israel of genocide or defend those who promote its destruction, we would still need to be able to hear the essence of the criticism they are raising when it comes to Israel. It is incumbent upon us to wrestle with their truth even though we do not share it. Just as it is critical that we work to achieve a peaceful two-state solution in Israel-Palestine that would satisfy both states need for security. At the same time, though we are to continue working in left-leaning progressive circles of peace-seekers, racism and justice fighters, we cannot abandon our wisdom and

discernment in the zealous pursuit of those, our most-cherished values. We cannot sacrifice Israel on the altar of our need to be accepted in these circles. We cannot allow our being Jewishly insecure to cloud our judgement in these matters. We cannot sacrifice Isaac, or in this case Jacob, on the altar of such Promise.

God never asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. But Abraham wasn't listening to God's voice. Abraham wasn't even listening to his own voice, that always questioned God. He was only able to listen to his own beliefs and desires, his overwhelming craving for the fulfillment of God's Promise. What about us? How can we know if we are listening to the voice of our deeper wisdom or that of our inner psychopath? How can we know that what's underlying our stand on a particular issue are our highest ethical values versus our need for acceptance, our greed, or our fear of rocking the boat? Which of the two sides of our inner Abraham are we giving voice to? The teachers of *Mussar*, of Jewish Ethics, tell us that when two opposite tendencies within us are in conflict with each other, instead of working on weakening the negative one, we are to build up the positive one. Consider, therefore, strengthening your inner questioner, your inner challenger. When was the last time you questioned your motivations, challenged your own hardened truths? At the same time, like in the story of the Akedah, we also need those we love to play that role for us in our life when we aren't able to do it for ourselves. We need someone with our best interest at heart to ask the question we don't want to ask ourselves. Isaac played that role in our story, as he tried to wake his father up from his trance when in the middle of climbing Moriah, he asked: "But where is the lamb?" What are you doing dad? Wake up!

Let that be our mantra this year. Before we post on Facebook, answer an e-mail, take a position on an issue, to ask ourselves: "But where is the lamb?" "What is my motivation in doing this?" And to allow those we love and trust to ask us as well, when they see that we are blindly climbing up our own Mount Moriah.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon...*