

Shir Hadash
Dvar Torah
Rosh Hashana, 5775
September 26, 2014
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The Binding of Isaac – The Akedah

The Akedah – Akedat Yitzchak – we know the story- we read on Rosh Hashanah.

In Genesis 22: 1-19, Abraham is commanded to take his son Isaac to be offered as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Abraham binds his son to the altar – the very altar that Abraham had built to sacrifice his son. “Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.”

“Then an angel of the Lord calls to him from heaven: ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ And he answers, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know you fear God.’”

The angel calls to Abraham a second time from heaven and said: “...the Lord declares: because you have done this and 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 sand on the seashore...”

Abraham then returns to his servants and they departed together to Beersheva. Abraham stays in Beersheva.

I first heard the story of the Akedah when I was in Hebrew School- I was a young child – I found this story creepy. In my eyes, it was scary. How could one’s own father kill his son? – It softened it for me that God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son. Yet, it was still creepy.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious presents Kierkegaard’s sensitivity to the story of the Akedah:

“The terror of the narrative is the plainest thing about it and the most mysterious. It permeates its every detail and its total structure. How has Abraham’s beloved God changed his tone! For Kierkegaard, sensitivity to this terror and mystery is the essential qualification for approaching the narrative:

“There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?” Implicitly, he dismisses those who have not lain awake at night, gripped by the enigmas of this last moment in Abraham’s life of conversation with God. Insomnia becomes the criterion for a true reading of Abraham’s experience, knowing the story blocks the heart; only in the sleepless dark can one engage with its paradoxes.”

Ok. Now let’s go back to the text of the Torah
(Genesis Ch. 22: 1):

וַיְהִי

אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה מֵהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי

Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he answered ‘Here I am.’ ”

And in Chapter 22:11:

קראוי אליו מלאך ד' מן השמים ויאמר אברהם אברהם ויאמר נניח

Hineini. Hineini. Hineini is the key word. A single word with so much meaning. Here I am to do whatever you ask me. Rashi describes Abraham's Hineini as the language of humility – the willingness to limit oneself in recognition of “the other.”

Hineini represents love in a relationship – The relationship between Abraham and God.

In Norman J. Cohen's Self-Struggle and Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and their Healing Insights for Our Lives, he addresses the importance and centrality of the relationship between God and Abraham based upon the word Hineini:

“Upon hearing God's call, Abraham responded with the word hineini, affirming his willingness to do whatever God would ask of him. Abraham did not wait for God to spell out any guarantees. This is exactly what the term hineini signifies – being ready to respond within the context of a relationship regardless of the nature of the request. Hineini can teach us about the very essence of relationship; about our relationships not only with God but with other human beings.”

In the Torah, Genesis 22:7, Isaac turns to his father, Abraham, and says: “ ‘Father!’ And he answers, ‘Yes my son.’” The JPS (Jewish Publication Society) translation of the TaNaCH is – yes, my son. Let us read this in Hebrew: ויאמר יצחק אל אברהם אביו

And, Yitzchak says to Abraham: Aviv (אביו)! His father answered – ויאמר אבי ויאמר הנני –

This verse is rich in the context of the word Hineini –

Isaac is frightened – he is calling out to his father avi – אבי – Father!

There is fear. Isaac is at the site of the sacrifice with his father. Abraham reassures him, calms Isaac, lets him know that he is there, he is his father, he is loving him –

Hineini- Here I am,
he answers.

Right after Abraham takes the knife, at the scene of the Akedah and then walks off with his son Isaac, the two together, Isaac calls out to Abraham and Abraham's response to the son he loves very much – the son who he finally got in his old age – the words of love- the words of saying this is a relationship that is holy, I love you, trust that this is an unconditional relationship. Hineini. Here I am.

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect – this period between Rosh HaShanah and Yom HaKippurim is called the Yamim Noraim – the Days of Awe – Norah – is awesome – is wondrous.

The age old question is: Why would a God, a God of compassion, ask his loyal prophet, Abraham – the father of monotheism – the man who believed in one God – the man who led the struggle and the revolution to bring a people and a nation to believe in one God, Why would he seemingly turn against Abraham whom he loved so deeply?

Remember, this is the last conversation that God had with Abraham directly. According to our text (Genesis 22: 1-2) “Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him ‘Abraham, ‘ and he answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Abraham, Take your son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering, on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

After Abraham binds his son for the sacrifice, an Angel of God calls out to Abraham (Genesis 22:9-11):

“They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood: he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: Abraham! Abraham! And, he answered, “Here I am.”

Once again, Abraham answers - Here I am. Once again there is a new relationship here – not one between God and Abraham, but one between the Angel and Abraham. The angel is acting as a representative of God.

Zornberg refers to this test at the Akedah as a culmination of the testing process.

“Such an idea, integrating the Akedah into the trajectory of Abraham’s history lies at the heart of the traditional midrashaic claim that this was the last of ten tests that Abraham had to undergo. Only here, at the culmination of a process and a relationship, we read explicitly, ‘ God tested Abraham.’

And what about the quality of the relationship between God and Abraham...Rambam treats the test as an expression of human freedom – ‘if he wishes, he will act, if he does not, he will not act.’” God tests in order to bring this freedom to its fullest expression, so that a potential may flower into reality. The test, therefore, is always for the good of the human subject undergoing it: it helps him/her to act out intuitive convictions, to make real what might otherwise remain hypothetical. The aim would be, then, to take the

subject through an experience that will remap a world of self-knowledge and transformative clarity.”

God takes Abraham through 10 tests, according to Zornberg, “an experience that extends and deepens his self-awareness. Zornberg continues: For the first time however, the test is explicit in the text: its physical reality makes indisputable, it defines forever something about Abraham and his way of loving God.

The sacrifice of Isaac, the binding of Isaac, the Akedah, is probably one of the most haunting and challenging stories from the Torah.

We have been looking at the relationship of God and Abraham – but now I would like to turn our attention to one of the supporting characters – Isaac.

As many of you know, I am a Jewish educator. A number of years ago, I pursued a course in professional development with Hebrew College’s Continuing Educational Initiative on Special Needs in the Jewish classroom. I was presented with an article from Reconstructionist Magazine (Autumn 1990): “Was Isaac Disabled?”

Judith Z. Abrams, the article’s author addresses Isaac’s lethargy at the site of the Akedah.

She writes: “How can we plausibly explain Isaac’s seemingly lack of energy and motivation? One answer may be derived from the text is that Isaac may have been mentally and/or physically disabled.”

To paraphrase Abrams, Isaac’s name traditionally has been associated with joyful laughter. Abraham when he learns that he will have a son, his reaction is to fall on his face. Abraham asks in

Genesis 17:17 Shall a son be born into one who is one hundred years old? And shall 90 – year old Sarah give birth? There are 2 opposing rabbinic commentaries on this passage. Rashi states that Abraham’s laughter represents joy but Onkelos states that this laughter by Sarah is a sneer. In the Torah, Genesis 21:6, Sarah cries out: “God has made me a laughingstock. Everyone who knows of this will laugh at me.”

Sarah is disappointed and not very happy about having a son.

Abrams contends that Sarah’s reaction makes sense when we understand that Sarah is disappointed in her son.

Sarah had wanted a son, a child, for a very long time. She finds out that she is going to have a child, and then she has her son, and is disappointed.

Abrams continues in the article in referring to Sarah and how Sarah speaks so bitterly at Isaac’s birth: “Sarah’s reaction makes more sense when we believe she is disappointed in her son. Her bitterness may also indicate that Isaac’s disability was immediately apparent at birth.

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California addresses the fact that Isaac had many disabilities: In Genesis 27:1 we learn that Isaac was blind later in life. He likely had Post-traumatic stress disorder and may also have had a developmental disability.

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California give the following reasons and sources for the rationale that Isaac had developmental disabilities:

According to rabbinic tradition, Isaac was an adult at the Akedah (37 years old; Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born)

-“Isaac is largely a silent patriarch;

- “Unlike other biblical heroes, Isaac’s wife was chosen for him; Abraham is clear that Eliezer should seek a wife for Isaac but leave Isaac behind. ((Genesis 24:1-9)

- Rabbi Deborah Goldmann points out that when Rebecca first sees Isaac (Genesis 26:64), she literally falls from the camel. Some commentators have read this as falling in love. But, perhaps, Rabbi Goldmann suggests that Rebecca was startled by Isaac’s appearance.

Rabbi Deborah Goldmann of Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf in California states in her Isaac’s Blessing Sermon on Chayai Sarah:

“Many people note that Isaac is never alone. His parents are over protective. He seems to overreact when Sarah perceives Ishmael to be mistreating Isaac. Abraham seems overly involved in finding a wife for Isaac. For reasons that are not clear, Isaac is never alone and is described as if he is incapable of doing anything independently. Perhaps Isaac had some kind of developmental delay that placed him outside of the ‘normal’ community. Perhaps Isaac had a developmental delay, explaining why those around him gave Isaac so much protection and help.”

And another point.

Isaac lives at his mother’s tent as an adult (Genesis 24: 67) - The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Isaac then brought her (Rebecca) into the tent of his mother, Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her and then found comfort with her after his mother’s death.

In Genesis, we have some possible evidence that Isaac had posttraumatic stress disorder. Freud addresses trauma in his

relation to the war neuroses suffered by soldiers in WWI. Many studies have examined the impact of trauma from violence on the mind. However, Cathy Caruth, Professor of Humane Letters at Cornell University, is described as one of the most innovative scholars on trauma. Prof. Caruth argues that trauma is not just a result of the external violent act but of an essential incomprehensibility.

She describes trauma as “an enigma of survival. It is only in recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical legacy of incomprehensibility of the fear of catastrophic experience.” (Traumatic Departures: “Survival and History” in Trauma and Self, ed. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn)

Zornberg asks what does it mean for Isaac to survive? She states that “we can say that it means to know the limits of his mind’s experience, to live with the enigma of a past and a future that are not entirely his own. He remains with a deepened awareness of the seam line between conscious and unconscious experience. Apparently unscathed, he descends from the altar. But, his eyes are intimately scarred; an essential blindness has begun to gather.”

There is other rich evidence that may support that Isaac had several mental and physical disabilities.

The Akedah had a deep impact on Abraham’s emotional life – his love of God and his love for his son were dichotomous. Isaac was deeply impacted by the Akedah and the emotional damage that it may have caused.

However, through this haunting and stunning story of Akedat Yitzchak, we learn one very powerful lesson. Our Judaic tradition is a culture of inclusion.

Judaism has as one of her forefathers, a man that may have had numerous disabilities. However, this man, Isaac, became one of our forefathers. Just like Abraham, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah.

Let us keep in our hearts on this day of the birthday of the world – that our forefather, Isaac, may have had multiple disabilities and was also a father of our people. Through this choice- we see – we witness that Judaism reflects a civilization and a culture of inclusion.

Shanah Tovah!