

D'var on the Akedah
Shir Hadash
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Here, in brief, is the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, as told in the Torah. As a test, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in the land of Moriah on a mountain to be named later. Apparently without further discussion, Abraham sets off the next morning with Isaac and two unidentified young men. Abraham evidently doesn't inform Isaac as to his special role in the ritual that lies ahead, because once they get there, Isaac asks his father: "where's the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham somewhat disingenuously but presciently answers: "God will provide one, my son." (Isaac's question does suggest that he was starting to feel a bit nervous at this point.)

Later on, after Abraham has tied Isaac up and deposited him on the altar, he takes out a knife with the intention of slaughtering the child. Just at that moment, though, an angel calls to Abraham from heaven and instructs him not to harm the boy. Instead, a ram has been provided to serve as the burnt offering. Subsequently, the angel again calls to Abraham from heaven, and makes a variety of amazing promises based on Abraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice his son. According to the angel, Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky or as the sands on the seashore.

So let's get something out of the way right now. I don't believe that God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son. First of all, if God doesn't exist, then the very idea that He might have ordered the destruction of a child is logically impossible. But let's suppose for present purposes that He does exist. There are many ideas of what sort of entity God might be. Arthur Green identifies God as somehow the essence of Being, the source of the Oneness in the world. Now this is an interesting possibility, but is it plausible that a God who is the source of all Being would seek to communicate with a particular individual? In my experience as a mathematician, anyway, abstractions are not very communicative — at least about personal matters. However, even if you believe in a personal God who does at times communicate with human beings, it seems impossible to imagine that God would misuse his powers in such an abusive way as to demand that a father murder his own child.

Now I was relieved to learn that Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, also believed that God could never have made this demand of Abraham. Moreover, his views are themselves derived from a tradition of Jewish commentary whose general thrust is that Abraham misunderstood what God was asking. I'd like to spend some time with you this morning thinking through this possibility that Abraham's actions were based on a misunderstanding.

There are at least two possibilities for how such a terrible misunderstanding might have come about. First, it is possible that Abraham suffered from a form of mental illness involving auditory hallucinations. He may, in other words, have literally experienced a voice that sounded to him as

if it were exogenous, a voice that claimed to be the voice of God demanding that he murder his son. Another possibility is that the idea of sacrificing Isaac simply popped into Abraham's mind, an idea that he subsequently attributed to God, perhaps thinking that such an extreme act could not have occurred to him in any other manner. Actually, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi, who lived in Spain in the early 14th century, suggested something like this very idea.

There is, of course, an extensive psychological literature concerned with the hypothesis that various influential religious figures were actually schizophrenics: schizophrenics whose hallucinations gave rise to much of our religious literature, such as is found in parts of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and other sacred texts. However, that's a topic for a different D'var.

Instead, what interests me today is the non-psychiatric explanation. Let's suppose that Abraham does not suffer from a mental illness. Instead, let's imagine that he is a reasonably normal person — but someone who is entranced by his own ideas, particularly by ideas that we think of as religious in nature, by ideas about God or relating to God.

Having set the scene then, I'd like to take a traditional approach to comprehending a story in the Torah that, on the face of it, seems incomprehensible. I'm going to tell you what might have happened in the form of a midrash. The Torah's stories facilitate midrash because they are generally lacking in details — and it is that paucity of detail that invites the imagination to do its work.

One day Abraham wakes up with the idea of sacrificing his child. Was this idea, perhaps, born out of a nightmare? In any case, in the surrounding society, people generally accepted that it was appropriate to engage in human sacrifice as a way of propitiating the local gods. Abraham thinks to himself that this act, however painful it might be, would be a natural way for him to demonstrate his complete dedication to the one God whose existence has come to preoccupy him. Maybe it would even enhance God's reputation among the heathen to know that Abraham has sacrificed his child to this invisible deity as a burnt offering. Presumably he doesn't tell Sarah of his plan — surely she would have put a stop to Abraham's homicidal intention.

So Abraham, Isaac, and the two other mysterious figures set off for the land of Moriah — but maybe only Abraham knows the ultimate purpose of the trip. Maybe even God doesn't notice what Abraham has in mind. After all, one imagines that God has a lot on His heavenly plate.

Now imagine God's consternation when He finally realizes that Abraham has shown up on a mountain in Moriah, has tied Isaac to an altar, and is now holding a knife over him in a menacing manner! I imagine God holding His head in His hands, wondering about His own sanity in having anything to do with human beings, and especially with this particular human being. God immediately calls to one of the local attending angels, and shouts something like: "Quick, go stop that meshugener (that's, of course, Yiddish for a crazy person)! Give him a ram to sacrifice instead. What could possibly have caused him to think that I'd want him to murder his son?"

But come to think of it, God now recalls, He did once whisper in Abraham's ear something about the need to "sacrifice" certain desires that we have in the interest of more important values. Could Abraham have been so very literal minded as to think sacrifice necessarily meant homicide? We'll come back to this question later on.

Then God thinks to himself: that poor little boy will never be the same again after the behavior of that religious fanatic father of his! What a shlemiel! He's got no seykh! whatsoever. First, there was that problem with the wives — they just weren't getting along with each other. In the end, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, presumably to die in the desert. Then I have to save them. And now this! I've gone to a lot of trouble to create these foolish human beings! Human life should be regarded as precious. Moreover, how can I fulfill my plan that Abraham's descendants shall be as numerous as the sands on the seashore or the stars in the sky if he keeps trying to kill off his children? What was Abraham thinking?

Let me note parenthetically that in my imagination, anyway, God expresses himself in English with a thick Yiddish accent, peppering his speech with a variety of Yiddish expressions, especially when He becomes emotional. But that's just me, I'm sure. By the way, "seykh!" refers to basic common sense or, maybe, even better, just "brains." I don't really know a good definition for "shlemiel" in English. Merriam Webster says it's an unlucky bungler. There are the old humorous definitions of a shlemiel as a guy who tends to spill his soup on other people, and of a shlimazel as a monumentally unlucky person on whom shlemiels inadvertently dump their soup.

So back to my own version of the story... Abraham is at the altar, he hears a sound, maybe a voice, was it actually someone calling his name, he wonders? He says "here I am" and looks up, just as he is about to plunge the knife into his child, and notices the ram whose horns the angel has plunged into the thicket after zooming down to Earth from the heavenly court. Where did that ram come from? — Abraham thinks to himself. How did he ever get his horns stuck like that? He wasn't there before. This must be a message from God. Maybe He doesn't want me to sacrifice Isaac?

So, thankfully, due to the swift intervention of God and His supercharged Angel, this story does not end in bloodshed, although there is every reason to believe that Isaac goes on to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder for the rest of his life. Abraham, on the other hand, gets the message that the one true God is not interested in having human beings kill each other for His benefit.

Abraham, of course, is not the only human being who has somehow conceived the idea that God desires him to commit murder. Indeed, even to this day, as we all know, there are people around the world who engage in killing, believing that they do so at God's behest.

But why has this story, the story of Isaac's binding and near-sacrifice, why has this remained so powerful even among those of us who know perfectly well that God does not desire murder? I think that the answer is related to quite a different theme, a theme that has to do with what God may have originally tried to tell Abraham: the message that somehow induced Abraham to mistakenly haul Isaac off to Moriah. So back to my midrash.

So what did God say to Abraham? Before I can venture an answer to that question, I want to remind you of the context. It is evident from the account in the Torah, that Abraham is fully devoted to the one true God. However, for God's plan to succeed — that is, his plan for spreading knowledge of Himself to Abraham's descendants — Isaac would also have to buy into his dad's monotheistic worldview! Maybe Isaac was a bit dubious about the whole thing? So God needed a way to help Abraham explain to Isaac the enormous importance of his religious mission, a mission that would transcend his generation and, it was hoped, continue into the indefinite future.

We humans, being finite creatures with a finite life span, sometimes conceive of our lives as being in the service of some broader mission that transcends our finitude. Some theorists have called a mission of this nature an "immortality project." So, to put it another way, God needed Isaac to adopt Abraham's immortality project as his own! Moreover, God needed the immortality project to be so powerful and compelling that it could be effectively transmitted not only to Isaac but to all the future generations that would emerge from Abraham and Sarah.

God did have a simple and compelling idea. It was the idea that lies at the heart of the Jewish religion, the religion that would emerge from the travails of Abraham and his descendants. It was based on the recognition that human beings were capable of both great good and great evil. To bring out the good and mitigate the evil, it is necessary that there should be Law: Law that regulates human life, Law that lead human beings, as Deuteronomy puts it, "to choose life." It was that concept of Law that would eventually develop into the "Halachah" — the Law that would be outlined in the Torah, elaborated in the Mishnah, and endlessly debated in the Talmud.

However, there was a problem. I'll get to that in a moment.

There have certainly been many intelligent Jews over the course of our history, people filled with Torah-inspired wisdom. We might refer to such a wise person in Yiddish as a "talmid khokhem." Unfortunately, though, there have also been many ... Well, how can I put this diplomatically? There are many words in Yiddish for a person who, let us say, isn't very learned or insightful. In particular, a golem is a kind of empty-headed, literal-minded person. That word is, of course, derived from the Hebrew term "golem" — which refers, among other things, to the hugely powerful but dutiful nitwit named Yossele (the Golem of Prague) that Rabbi Judah Loew supposedly conjured up out of some mud back in the 16th century. Through the use of a Kabbalistic formula, Rabbi Loew created Yossele the golem to protect the Jews of Prague from the local antisemites. Things went well until Yossele spiraled out of control, when he drew the wrong conclusions from his incompletely specified instructions.

The thing about golems is that they are very literal minded. So they can cause a lot of havoc if you don't describe exactly what they are supposed to do — and this is a theme that is common in the stories about Rabbi Loew's golem. Those of you who have experience programming computers will immediately understand how this can be a very serious problem. By the way, Jewish humor is full of jokes based on excessively literal interpretations. For example, Morris's wife says to him: "Morris, please close the windows! It's cold outside!" Morris responds with puzzlement: "If I close the windows, will it be warm outside?"

I am afraid that Abraham might, in the case of the Akedah anyway, have been more of a golem than a talmid khokhem, excessively literal minded instead of deeply insightful. God, I would propose, had done His best to explain to Abraham His view of the centrality of Law in turning a human being into a mensch. God, perhaps, waxed eloquent as He tried to picture for Abraham how successive generations of his descendants would come to acquire the knowledge of Halacha, and how they would help to reshape the future of humanity.

However, somewhere in the midst of God's peroration, He said something like: there will, of course, be the need for sacrifice. In context, God was explaining that it wouldn't be easy for human beings to adjust to a world regulated by Law. However, somehow, God's account sailed right over Abraham's head, and all that Abraham heard was the word "sacrifice." God might as well have been explaining quantum mechanics to Abraham! Future generations, of course, would come to understand what God had in mind. But Abraham was too enmeshed in his own world, too intellectually blinkered to take in what God wanted him to understand. So he seized on the one thing that he thought he understood: the word sacrifice.

After God's initial annoyance with Abraham's mistake, He took pity on the poor guy and found a way for him to save face both in his own eyes and in the eyes of future generations. God *pretended* that the Akedah had been a test rather than a misunderstanding, that Abraham had passed the test, and that he would be "rewarded" by having many descendants.

Abraham could only learn from this episode what he was mentally and culturally prepared to learn — namely that God does not desire human sacrifice.

But God learned something too. God realized that transmitting His message wasn't going to be a simple matter of giving a brief lecture about Law to Abraham and having him pass along its contents orally. No, Abraham's descendants would need written guidance and learned interpretations from great scholars. They would need prayers and rituals, and all the other features of Judaism if they were to grasp God's plan for mankind. Thus was born the need for the Torah, the Mishnah, and the Talmud; and, among other things, for Rosh Hashanah itself. The Akedah became our first lesson, the beginning of our collective education as Jews.