

The *Akedah*/The binding of Isaac = Genesis 22:1-24

“How terse and to the point the portion is, how unembroidered.”

V'ha'elohim nisah et-Avraham. G-d put Abraham to the test.

“Abraham,” G-d said, and Abraham answered, “*Hineini* -- Here I am.”

“Take your son, your only son, the son you love, take Isaac and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up (*v'ha'aleihu*) there as a free-will offering (*l'olah*) on one of the hills which I will name to you.”

That is the extent of the conversation between G-d and Abraham. It is not G-d but an angel that calls, “Abraham, Abraham!” when Abraham is about to slaughter Isaac.

“*Hineini*,” says Abraham, again -- “Here I am.”

“Do not lay hands on the lad, do nothing to him; I now know that you revere G-d, since you have not grudged me your son, your only son.”

Then looking up Abraham glanced round, and there was a ram caught in the brushwood by its horns!

Thus ends the family drama. Thus ends Abraham's period of taking directions, arguing, and communicating directly with G-d. We might read the subsequent divine silence as disapproval. In such a reading, Abraham was so caught up in what he thought he heard, in what he believed he had to do and how, that he could not notice the ram that was provided for him. But that interpretation would be a stretch. The imperative seems so straightforward – “bring him up there as an offering.” How could Abraham have misunderstood? Or worse, how could Abraham have just made it all up?

This text is traditionally chanted on Rosh Ha-shana because it is most straightforwardly read as an example of faithful obedience. In the traditional reading, the chapter epitomizes determination to serve G-d no matter how difficult the circumstances, no matter how great the sacrifice.

The rabbis read the story as the last of ten trials (as in ‘*try* the patience of a saint’ or even ‘don’t *try* this at home’) through which G-d established the worthiness of Abraham. This last one is the only trial explicitly called a “test” because it was not actually carried through.

Midrash renders *nisah* (test) in the sense of elevated, like a *nise*, a banner, that flies high above a ship or army or parading group. This interpretation puts an interesting spin on the verse: “And G-d exalted Abraham, through trial to greatness.”

In similar fashion, Rashi reads *v'ha'aleihu* (bring him up) as the focus of G-d's imperative, rather than *l'olah* (free-will offering, a specific type of sacrifice). Rashi makes a point of noting that G-d did not say, “Slaughter him”, because G-d did not

intend for Isaac to be slaughtered, but only that he be brought up to the mountain and be prepared as a burnt-offering.

The Midrashic rendering of “test” as “exalt” and Rashi’s emphasis on “bring him up” instead of “slaughter him” are excellent examples of the rabbinic tradition’s clutching at straws to resolve a classic problem in the text. In this case, the problem is with the notion of a trial or test, especially a test of faith that seems so likely to brutalize the spirit of both Abraham and Isaac.

It would seem Abraham is to be *praised* for not withholding from G-d what was most valuable to him. But Abraham is not to be *emulated*. This terse, dramatic story is supposed to emphasize G-d’s condemnation of human sacrifice. It is from the notion of holy condemnation of the ritual practices of others (rather like the demand in Leviticus that the Jews not have sex like an Egyptian or a Canaanite) that we can derive the possibility of reading the divine silence after this incident as holy disappointment that Abraham would think even for a moment that slaughter would be what was required. The whole episode is a bitter pill to swallow if you are (pun intended) bound to the idea that the patriarchs are exemplars of moral comportment.

But this *parasha* is not usually referred to as the “testing or elevating of Abraham.” It is known as the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac, because that is what Abraham does: *va’ya’akod et-Yitzak*. This binding was intense. Rashi tells us the root of *akedah* is the same as for the word “spotted” – the bonds were so tight that Isaac’s skin turned white under the cords. And this is where I want to focus our attention today.

I want us to listen to the *akedah* not for what it tells us about Abraham, who uncharacteristically does not argue with G-d in the face of what he hears as the demand to sacrifice the child who brought laughter to his old age. I want us to listen to the *akedah* not for what it tells us about G-d, who can look sadistic in the demand for obedience. I want us to listen to the *akedah* not for what it tells us about the conversation between G-d and Abraham, which reaches its climactic conclusion when the angel tells Abraham to focus less on his idea of the task and how he imagines it must be done and more on what is being provided for him. I want us to listen to the *akedah* not for what it tells us about Sarah, left at home to die alone and afraid while Abraham and Isaac were out for the ultimate (pardon the expression) male bonding ritual.

Instead, I want us to listen for what the *akedah* tells us about Isaac, and about what binds us and why, and about what might loosen our bonds so we can turn and return (that is, practice *tshuvah*) during these Days of Awe.

The rabbis suggest that Isaac understood what was happening fairly early on in the process. According to the Midrash, Isaac tells his father to bind him tightly so he will not flinch. What the Midrash suggests to me is Isaac’s wisdom in the face of the tremendous forces at work around him. Isaac knew that being a conduit for enormous energy sometimes requires utter stillness – which in turn requires not insipid piety but immense discipline.

To be in a tight place – such as *Mitzrayim*, where the Israelites were in bondage in Egypt – is to be “in a bind.” That is also to be in a coat with wrap-around sleeves, a straightjacket.

But also: A healer may “bind up a wound.” A contract or other agreement is “binding”, and can make it possible to act even under conditions of uncertainty or mistrust. A person may be “bound and determined” to succeed, traits we admire. This ambiguity in the meaning of “binding” is one way to listen to the *akedah* anew.

But I don't want to skirt the issue semantically.

What binds us up? In particular, what are the cords that bind us to the traditional reading of this story? One reason we read the *akedah* on Rosh Ha-shana is because from Isaac's perspective, we want to believe in the possibility of divine reprieve even when the knife is at our throat. The bonds of tradition, of responsibility, of duty, can help us face the sacrifices that are sometimes required of us. When we have to relinquish our pride, our stubbornness, or our insistence that things will be done "my way or the highway", the bonds of discipline can help us give up the familiar without flinching. We need more than faith to perform *tshuvah*. We need consistent practices that will help us to listen to our better selves, attend carefully to those around us, and do what it takes to get things right with G-d.

Anaïs Nin wrote, "There are those who dance, and those who tie themselves up in knots." What ties up the knots in the cords that bind us?

What binds us most devastatingly is attachment.

When we attach to certain feelings by labeling them "negative" or "horrible" or "unworthy," we bind ourselves to depression instead of holding still and simply being with the flow of "energy in motion" that is "e-motion."

When we attach to being right, we bind ourselves to judgment instead of opening to communication and forgiveness.

When we attach to being injured, or to thinking that we can know in the narrowness of our minds what G-d asks of us, we bind ourselves to martyrdom instead of turning toward healing and letting the bigness of our spirits come through.

What removes our bonds? What allows us to "let go and let G-d"?

According to the famous words of the spiritual, there is only one thing that will loose those knots:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me

I once was lost and now am found, was bound but now am free.

And how do we turn and open to the sweet sound of Amazing Grace? One possible answer is prayer. A.S. Byatt puts it this way (I paraphrase):

Praying is not asking; praying is loosing these knots of care into some dark running stream of energy between It and yourself so that things are delivered from you to It, to deal with.

Prayer, especially during the High Holy Days, offers us the opportunity individually and collectively to loose the knots of care, undo the cords of pride and attachment, and just hold still and notice the flow in and around us.

During the Days of Awe, through prayer and ritual and practice of *tshuvah*, we can cultivate a heightened awareness of what we need to let go and perhaps sacrifice or at least substitute with a new way of doing and being. For the knots of care and worry that furrow our brows and stoop our shoulders and clench our jaws, we can seek to release into noticing what is really going on. For the rigid dignity of stoic suffering, we can seek to exchange the suppleness of letting our pain soften and open us. For the

stony determination to demonstrate faith and persistence in adversity, we can seek the places of connection and compassion that are the angels reminding us there is another way.

Isaac's ultimate gift to us perhaps lilt through the words of Chris Williamson: "Follow your heart, love will find you, truth will unbind you." In the New Year, find a way to listen for the song of your soul, the sweet sound of Amazing Grace. Let that loosen the places where you are bound up in knots. Allow the truth of your life to unbind you from the old ways of reading and telling stories of sacrifice and discipline. And may your release result in health, abundance, and connection that is not bondage. *L'shana tova.*