



Dvar Torah - Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, Sept. 17, 2023

By Judy Remz

Three hundred words – that is the length of the Akedah or “the binding” as it is known in English. Spare, just the facts. Neither emotions nor scenery are described. There is no dialogue of what Abraham and Isaac say to each other. And this text, like many things we experience today, provokes diametrically opposed reactions.

To illustrate this point, I have some dramatists who are going to help me demonstrate reactions one can have to the Akedah. I would like credit Dr. Aaron Koller, whose 2020 book called “Unbinding Isaac” includes the thoughts you are about to hear. And this intriguing book helped me put many other thoughts together for this Dvar Torah.

Dramatist 1 (Noam Andelman): *How overwhelming is the might of God! How mysterious God’s will! How profound is the call to abandon the past and future for the sake of a present with God. How awe-inspiring is the religion that promises a glorious future to one prepared to sacrifice everything.*

Dramatist 2 (Ruthie Holzer): *What kind of monstrous god commands the sacrifice of a child? What kind of cruel deity promises his devoted followers a family, takes decades to deliver on the promise, then demands the child back – only to step away from that demand at the last minute and claim it was all a test? Can such a God be worshipped? Can such a god even be tolerated?*

Dramatist 1 (Noam): *How sublime is Abraham’s faith! One stands in awe at the devotion of a man willing to give up, to sacrifice, his most precious **possession**, for which he prayed and waited many decades-*

Dramatist 2 (Ruthie): *What kind of monstrous parent obeys such a command? Is God’s will really so clear that Abraham should murder someone because of what*

he thinks God wants? Can a person who is capable of murder for God really be a role model for an entire nation?

{Ruthie and Noam face each other, glare a bit and walk back to opposite sides.}

Do you relate to Noam more or Ruthie? For me, I wish I could look at the world through such deep faith as Noam but I am definitely in the camp of Ruthie.

So I will now attempt to pull these perspectives together and show that both contain truths to help us understand and make the text meaningful and multi-dimensional. I want to share with you 3 ways to approach the Akedah.

In famous Renaissance paintings or even Bible story books, Isaac is portrayed as a boy, maybe 8 years old. But there is a long-standing tradition that in fact he was 37 years old. On the contrary, there's no question about Abraham's age – he was a very old man at the time of the Akedah.

The text specifically says that Abraham placed the wood for the altar on his son.

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac.

I ask you to picture this – it wasn't a few sticks that they were lugging up Mt Moriah – it was heavy wood to set up a big fire. There is a logic then that Isaac could not have been a boy to do this heavy lifting. He was a man who actively participated in the preparation for his own sacrifice.

Now let's imagine what these two men would have said to each other as they climbed the mountain. The text doesn't reveal their conversation. It also implies that Isaac does not know where he's going. But what if Isaac was fully aware? To stimulate your imagination, I'm going to read a poem, in English, that was originally written in Aramaic during the Byzantine period. Perhaps this poem resonates with me because Jeff and I are the parents of children in their 30s. Our 30 somethings are not passive players in family dynamics. Furthermore, our 30 somethings are very sure of themselves in their faith or lack of faith, in what is right and what is wrong and how things should be done. So listen to this poem

and picture a robust Isaac, full of faith in God, speaking with his very elderly father.

This is the day that they will say,
A father had no pity, and a son did not delay.
How will you go and tell my mother Sarah,
How will you leave me and go home?
Isaac kissed his father Abraham,
Commanding him, saying to him:
Sprinkle my blood on the altar,
Gather my ashes and bring them to Mother.
My life and my death – all is in his hand,
And I thank him for thus choosing me.
Fortunate are you, Father, that they will say,
That I am the lamb for the offering to the Living God.
Let your anger triumph over your mercy, Father
Be like a man who has no mercy on his son!
Like a cruel man, take your knife
And slaughter me, do not defile me.....
Why should you cry? Said Isaac to his father Abraham.

Fortunate is the one whom the Lord of the world chose. (Koller, page 16)

Isaac is the leader here and minces no words about Abraham's gruesome task ahead. Isaac is the man with faith in God while Abraham weeps. This is one way to answer both Noam and Ruthie -- Isaac, the son about to be sacrificed, is leading the way and Abraham is a passive player.

While working on this Dvar Torah, I had a weekend visit with my father who lives in Fort Myers Florida. He is one of these super-agers whose mind is strong and

deep, with almost a century of experience in the world. So, I asked him what he thought the Akedah was about. He said this story was to demonstrate to the people of Israel that child sacrifice is not acceptable in Judaism. He talked about how child sacrifice was common throughout the middle east and this section of the Torah was meant to shock our people into stopping this practice. And this brings me to a second interpretation for your consideration from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. (It's hard to do a Dvar Torah without quoting him!) Rabbi Sacks provides a legal framework, using the concept of ownership to interpret the events of the Akedah.

Rabbi Sacks explains that child sacrifice was common in Mesopotamia and Canaanite cultures. Children as property is spelled out in the Laws of Hammurabi. Children were considered the legal property of their parents with no rights.

However, citing Shemot 15:16, a familiar line from Shirat Hayam as Bnai Yisrael crosses the red sea:

עַד־יַעְבֹּר עַמְּךָ יְהוָה עַד־יַעְבֹּר עַם־יִשְׂרָאֵל קְנִיָּתוֹ:

“until Your people cross over, O Lord, until this nation that You have acquired crosses over.” I’ve seen קְנִיָּתוֹ translated as “acquired”, “ransomed” or “purchased”. But clearly Bnai Yisrael is owned by God. Rabbi Sacks goes on with another prooftext Lev 25:42 which says “Because the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves.”

This is quite a departure from the idea of ownership in the ancient world where if a child is the property of parents, then it makes sense that children could be sacrificed to god. The Akedah is relating a critical message to the people of Israel - we do not own our children. God does. Children are not autonomous creatures at birth so parents must take care of them. But the relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship on God’s behalf. So, if we do not own our children, sacrifice equates to murder. Rabbi Sacks explains “God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce **ownership** in his child.” As my father explained to me, to make this point, we need the drama and tension of the

Akedah. While Isaac is the creation of his parents, Isaac belongs to neither Abraham or Sarah. All children belong to God, not their parents.

Does this legal framework explanation satisfy both of our Dramatists, Noam and Ruthie? I think it just might!

But lastly, I want to give you the punchline from Aaron Koller's book that takes Rabbi Sacks' interpretation one step farther. God wants faith and commitment from his people. God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham correctly understands this commandment and is prepared to carry it out. However, the idea that sincere individual faith can supercede ethical considerations is a very dangerous idea, say Dr. Koller. The sacrifice of Isaac is stopped so that a higher ethical principle is taught.

Let's recall the famous account in the Talmud about Hillel. He is approached by a man who wants to convert to Judaism. The man says he will only do so if he can learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel accepts this challenge and says *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this—go and study it!"* The story ends with the gentile converting to Judaism. So Noam and Ruthie – what do you think of this next idea? Judaism wants us to recognize the feelings, pains, and desires of others. Quoting Koller *"One person's religious fulfillment cannot come through harm to another. The trial of Abraham cannot involve the murder of Isaac."* Koller goes on to say, *"It is all well and good to celebrate the personal and individual faith that animates some people's life, but a society cannot afford to allow individual's sense of religious devotion to take precedence over the welfare of others."*

So as a sympathizer to Ruthie's view, I can better understand the terrifying Akedah story as a way of balancing faith with morality. We need both in this world. If you are in the Noam's spiritual camp, I sincerely hope that these ideas resonate with you too.

Shana Tova U-Metuka