

Rabbi Francine Roston
Congregation Beth El
South Orange, NJ

2nd Day Rosh HaShanah 5767 – “Did Avraham Pass or Fail the Test?”

We have a number of story books which my children love to have their daddy read to them. A new one they received from Grandpa is a collection of “Jewish Bible Stories.” One Shabbat afternoon we were sitting in our living room and Marc was reading stories and they picked the Binding of Isaac—the story from this morning’s Torah reading. As Marc began to read, I was horrified. “Oh my God, you can’t read them that.” I tried to whisper surreptitiously, making faces of shock and terror. “That’s a horrible story, scary, they’ll be terrified, they’ll have nightmares....” And then my thoughts drifted...What kind of story is this that I am afraid to tell my children, that I find horrifying—particularly now as a parent—and it is the centerpiece of Rosh HaShanah.

I find that my mission on Rosh HaShanah is to try to convince you of the gifts and joy of Judaism so that you will be drawn closer to God, to the synagogue, to Jewish life...I don’t see how telling you a story about a man willing to kill his own son in the name of faith is going to win you over to the cause...Yet, there it is, smack dab in the middle of the Mahzor...the Torah reading for the second day with the first day’s Torah reading serving as a build-up to it. It. The Akedah. The Story of the Binding of Isaac, the Test of Abraham.

What do we do with this story? I imagine that people might tend toward ignoring it as an immature version of religion or faith that we have developed beyond...or you say that it didn’t really happen, it’s just a story to teach that we **SHOULDN’T** sacrifice our children; it has nothing to do with faith in God...Well, personally, whether I believe that this event ever truly happened or not, I do believe that the Torah has been given to us to teach us truths about God and Judaism and humanity’s role in the world. This morning’s Torah reading is crying out for our attention, especially in this day and age.

“It came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham and God said to him ‘Abraham’ and he said, ‘Here I am.’ God said: ‘Take now your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac and get going to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on the one mountain that I will tell you.’”(22:1-2)

“They came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order and he bound Isaac his son and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the slaughtering knife to slay his son.

“The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham,’ and he said ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad and do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God because you have not held back your son, your only son, from me.’”(22:9-12)

How many of you ever watched the TV show West Wing (zichrono l’vracha) ? The West Wing was a show that depicted life in the White House and focused on the First Family. One year they had a storyline from one season to the next that was very compelling and contained echoes of our Torah portion. The basic storyline was that

because of the Jed Bartlett's interpretation of his responsibility as President, he took actions which led to his daughter's life being threatened. At the end of one season, the President ordered the assassination of a fictional Arab country's defense minister because they had proof that he was involved in terrorism. The season ended with the President's daughter being abducted. At the beginning of the next season we learned that an Arab terrorist group had taken responsibility and at the end of the show the newly installed President, former Speaker of the House...orders a military attack on the Arab country...It is clearly understood that the kidnappers will kill the girl if their country is attacked. The line that jumped out at me was in the preview for the next week's show: A voice says: The President is willing to sacrifice his own child's life for the benefit of the country...

I was horrified...yelling at the TV through my tears... "He is...what do you mean he is...He's willing to make a decision that will mean the death of his daughter because of his sense of responsibility or obligation or calling to his role as President...Absolute madness...

Forget about fiction, we know of countless acts in history done in the name of ideals and faith, we have lost count of the acts of terrorism, we have lost count of the number of dead from 9/11 and in Israel and Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq ... We know of acts of murder done in the name of faith and we reject their moral calculations out of hand... That is not the Jewish approach to life, to faith, to service of God...

Then, what was the Torah demanding of Avraham. He seems to be willing to sacrifice his son because of the command of God. He stacks the wood. He ties the boy down. He raises the knife. And we have a strong tradition of lauding his actions as acts of great faith and conviction we must strive towards.

Maimonides in his philosophical treatise Moreh Nevukhim offers two lessons to be learned from the Akedah. First he rejects the literal text that portrays God testing Avraham to learn how far Avraham was willing to go. As a philosopher he does not accept that the all-Knowing God would not know this about Avraham's character. Instead, Maimonides sees the story as an illustration to teach religious people that the fear of God must be the highest value, even above life itself. It is not for God or Avraham to learn but for them to teach us that faith in God must be placed above all other feelings and considerations. Maimonides also posits that the story is meant to teach us the validity and the reliability of Prophecy. The fact that Avraham was willing to sacrifice his son, because he received a vision, a communication from God, proves to Maimonides the power of Prophecy and its validity.

Again, this is madness. In Israel our brothers and sisters live under the veil of fear and terror because of the conviction of those who believe they have been called to kill and sacrifice themselves and destroy the State of Israel. We watch the parents of victims of suicide bombings mourn and grieve while the parents of the bombers rejoice that their child lived out his or her mission, showed the strength of their faith and gave up their lives on this earth to serve their God. We reject this absolute negation of morality in the name of faith. That is not Jewish. And even the Torah itself points out the dangers of false prophecy. Who is to know the will of God? Who is to proclaim his interpretation of God's word is truth? Who is to know whether that voice is prophecy or madness, truth or delusion?

And God called out: 'Abraham' and he said, "Here I am." God said: "Take now your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac and get going to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on the one mountain that I will tell you."
(22:1-2)

In dark periods of our history, when Jews were being persecuted and threatened with death or conversion, there were many Avraahams. As my teacher and noted Bible Scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky z"l taught in her approach to the Akeda story:

"In the Greek period Hannah exhorted her seven sons to die rather than renounce God; in the Roman period, Pinchas ben Yair and the other zealots on Masada killed themselves and their children rather than allow them to fall into Roman hands. Many Isaacs arose, willing martyrs to the divine decree, and the midrash began to portray Isaac as the willing accomplice to Avraham's sacrifice, neither struggling nor protesting, but submitting himself to God's demands for his death. The legend of the Akeda became the central story of Israel's spiritual formation, teaching the value of sacrifice to God ..."

(Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, "Akeda: The View from the Bible" in Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days)

Frymer-Kensky traces how the Biblical story of the Akedah can be read simultaneously in two opposite directions. The story has been used throughout Jewish history to promote the practice of animal sacrifice rather than child sacrifice and it has been used to promote martyrdom. The text is so dense, so revealing and yet mysterious, so vague and yet so dramatic that it sits open to multiple positions. You can not make an irrefutable text-based argument about the meaning of the story.

We can read Abraham as a man of faith, Keirkegaard's "knight of faith" that believes that the impossible is possible, that God will save him and save Isaac and so Avraham will take up the knife believing that the test is in his willingness to do the act not in his performance of the act. It is a "colossal game of 'chicken' and God blinked first." Avraham wins. In this reading the Akeda is a test of Avraham's submission to God's will above all other considerations and Avraham passes the test. He is rewarded and we, his legacy, are awarded through him. As we hear the shofar we know that God is being reminded of Avraham's faithful act and must forgive us because of our father's sacrifice.

After Avraham lifted the knife: "*The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham,' and he said 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad and do not do anything to him. Indeed I know that you fear God but (now) you have not held back your son, your only son, from me.'*"(22:9-12)

The Hebrew in this last verse is ambiguous. It can read that God now knows what He did not know before about Avraham, atah yadati, and that it was a good thing for Avraham not to hold back his son....**Or** it can be read that God knows Avraham is God-fearing **BUT** he did not hold back his son from God...Believe it or not, that all hinges on one ambiguous letter, the letter vav which can mean "and" or "but."

The text explicitly states at the beginning of the story that God is testing Avraham. The question is, however, does Avraham pass or fail the test because he was willing to sacrifice Isaac? Will Avraham proceed to slaughter his son, or will he fight for his son as he fought for strangers in Sedom and Gemorrah? It is not a departure from the

text to look at the story this second way—showing the Avraham failed the test...Look at what happens after the Akedah.

Avraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beersheva and Avraham stayed in Beersheva. The next five verses are genealogy told to Avraham and then, the next verse in the Torah after our reading this morning announces the death of Sarah. *Sarah's lifetime...came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiyat-Arba, now Hevron, in the land of Canaan; and Avraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her...*

It is generally understood that Sarah's death came as a result of the Akedah. She heard of it and died in shock and horror reads one midrash. She cried out in terror the cries of the shofar in another midrash. She yells at Avraham in anger in yet another. And then she dies. Where is Isaac? Avraham mourns alone. After the Akedah, for the rest of Avraham's life as revealed to us in the Torah, he does not interact with his family. Sarah died. He never speaks with Isaac or Ishmael and also never hears directly from God again. Yes, he is promised that future generations will be blessed, but does this sound like a man who is blessed, who won the greatest contest and so the greatest rewards from the God to whom he was faithful?!?!

Indeed I know that you fear God but (now) you have not held back your son, your only son, from me.

Again I quote my teacher of blessed memory Dr. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky: This crucially ambiguous sentence leads to utterly different conclusions—one, that binding Isaac for sacrifice is a mark of Abraham's special virtue and fidelity; and the other, that binding Isaac was a failure of Avraham, who was after all only human and who missed his opportunity to rise in defense of justice...The story can support *either* position. We who believe that humans are supposed to be responsible moral agents can explain that Abraham did not act appropriately without doing violence to the text. We have no need to be angry at the Bible's values, for the story allows us to see our own position reflected in it. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the Akeda does not resolve the question of submission/moral agency, for verse 12 also allows the more traditional interpretation... Part of the impact of this story lies in the fact that it makes us aware of our own values as we read it. We cannot remain neutral.”
(pp.134-5, Frymer-Kensky)

My challenge that I lay before you this morning is this.

You cannot remain neutral. *Lo tuchal l'hitale'm* as we are commanded in the Torah. You cannot remain indifferent. You cannot hear the news and watch the events in Israel & Lebanon, in Iraq and around the world... You cannot follow the news and the reporting of the events in America and remain neutral about the evils of Islamic fundamentalism and moral neutrality or moral equivalency.

You cannot remain neutral. You need to speak up in support of Israel. You need to let our government know of your opinions. You need to let our brothers and sisters in Israel know of your support. And if you do not agree with Israel's tactics, you need to speak up as well. Just remember, please, to use caution and always remember the basic need for the existence of the State of Israel.

You cannot remain neutral. You must show your support and express your opinions and beliefs. You must support Israel in whatever way you can—send money, send school supplies, send messages. Support whatever Jewish organization that appeals to you and your interests. Support the Conservative/Masorti movement in Israel and their synagogues. Support organizations that are working toward peace such as Americans for Peace Now or Brit Zedek. Choose the organization that fits your interests and objectives in supporting Israel and help them. And, then, please contribute to the UJC Israel Emergency Campaign. The UJC supports social service organizations around the country and around the world and can do more good in supporting the Jewish community than any one of us can do as individuals.

Whatever you do, you cannot remain neutral. *Lo tuchal l'hitalel.*

You cannot remain neutral. You sit here every year and hear the story of the Binding of Isaac, the Trial of Abraham. You must take a stand. How do you understand the story? I'm not giving you the answer. You need to find your answer. What does Judaism demand of you? It is not blind faith. It is not remaining blind to faith. It is acting out your faith....whether that is accepting God's words in faith and working to submit your will to God's greater, incomprehensible logic....whether it is accepting God's challenge to stand up for justice, to fight against laws that are immoral and governments that are immoral...whether it is a combination of these religious quests.

I was once sitting with a congregant and visiting over a cup of tea. In discussing her life and her faith and her past interest in studying Judaism, it occurred to me that I don't see her at services or in study classes and that she might really enjoy them. I suggested she join one of our classes offered this year to reconnect with her interest in the Torah. Her answer went something like this. "Oh rabbi, I shouldn't. You wouldn't want me there. I would be too argumentative. I have a lot of questions and challenges and it wouldn't be right." God bless her. I told her that was the whole point of my classes and of Conservative Judaism—to struggle with the texts and traditions, to question and challenge and come up with the answer that is both true to tradition and to our ethical perspective.

One of the reasons I became a rabbi is because I had a horrible rabbi when I was younger. Luckily, I was blessed to grow up in a large Temple where there were two rabbis so I actually had one challenging senior rabbi and one great assistant rabbi. They were both inspiring in their own ways. The senior rabbi would respond to questions and challenges most often by saying: "that's the way it is, because I said so, don't ask questions." Now, remember I didn't grow up Orthodox, I grew up Reform. It doesn't matter what stream of Judaism. There are some who have the arrogance to teach that Judaism's teachings and traditions are without question, that they know and understand God's wills and ways and you are not to question. Well, I became a rabbi to make sure that no child and no learning/striving grown-up for that matter was ever told "don't question."

My challenge to you is to question and challenge and struggle. Wrestle with the text and traditions and wrestle with God. And as you do you will grow in your understanding of Torah and Judaism, of God and yourself. This is the way of faith. This is our mission as the people of the book.

“It is a tree of life to all who hold it fast. It’s ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.” If we truly study Torah and travel its paths, we will find peace, we will find a way to peace.

That is my challenge. That is my prayer.
L’shana Tovah.