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AKEIDAT YITZCHAK

Akeidat Yitzchak, the Binding of Isaac, is not only the centerpiece of the Rosh Hashana Torah readings, it also anchors one of the High Holy Days' central themes.

After God promises Abraham that his descendants will be “as numerous as the stars in the sky,” he and Sarah find themselves childless. Three divine messengers appear and tell them that they will soon be blessed with a child. Sarah laughs bitterly because, as the Torah explains:

וַאֲבָרָהֶם וְשָׂרָה זָקְנִים בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים חֲדָל לְהַיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֶרֶח פְּנֵשִׁים:

“Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.” (Gen. 18:14)

Nine months later Sarah laughs again, this time in delight and joy as she bears a son. She names the child *Yitzchak*, meaning “laughter.”

Soon afterwards God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable:

קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֶּתְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה

וְקַעַלְהוּ שָׂם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֵמַר אֲלֶיךָ:

“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights I will point out to you.” (Gen. 22:2)

Abraham, the man of obedience and faith, takes Isaac up Mt. Moriah, binds him, and lifts his knife to slaughter him. At the last moment his hand is stayed by an angel who informs him, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.” (Gen. 22:12)

Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in the thicket. He offers the animal to God instead of his son.

We read this story on Rosh Hashana to remind God of the zeal and dedication of our ancestors. Even if we, through our own deeds, are unworthy of forgiveness, we ask God to remember the righteous acts of those who came before us and forgive us for their sake. It is as if the divine reward earned by our ancestors through their good deeds was placed in a bank for us to withdraw from today. In Hebrew this is known as *zechut avot*, the merit of the ancestors.

Although I have spoken about *zechut avot*, the merit of our ancestors, during the holidays, up to now I had not focused on the story of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac. While I understand its historical and theological place in our liturgy, the tale itself is troubling. No matter how

you look at it, despite the angel's reassurance,

כִּי | עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶתָּה

“For now I know that you fear God...,” no one comes out a winner.

First, let's consider Isaac, the would-be victim. In the end he was not sacrificed, but it's hard to imagine how much damage was done to his psyche and soul by his near-death experience. Although not explicitly in the text, Isaac may have suspected his fate. He asked his father: “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering my son.” (Gen. 22:7&8) After his father's enigmatic answer, Isaac continued to trudge up the mountain in silence next to his father. He may have wondered if would be the sacrificial lamb.

Any doubt that remained that Isaac would have certainly disappeared when his father bound him on the altar and raised his knife to slay him.

Although the angel stopped Abraham, Isaac was already damaged. He did not become a great leader of his people, but spent the rest of his life in the shadow of his father, Abraham, and was soon eclipsed by his son, Jacob. Isaac was weak and easily manipulated by his scheming family. And as far as we know, he never spoke to his father again. After the

akeidah Isaac, the child born in laughter and enormous promise, was never the same again.

Next, let's consider Abraham, the so-called hero of the story. Our tradition lauds him for his forthright and determinative actions. We are taught that he incurred God's favor by unquestionably acquiescing to the divine will. Judaism considers Abraham the paradigmatic brave and steadfast man of faith. However, on a personal and human level, he was a failure as a father. Can we think of anything more horrific than killing one's own child? Who in their right mind would ever consider such a thing? When we learn today, much too frequently, of those times when parents do kill their own children, don't we shudder in pain, sadness, disbelief, and repulsion?

How could Abraham have even considered sacrificing his son? Why didn't he fight and argue and protest, as he did when he learned of the God's planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Afterwards, could Abraham have ever looked his son in the eyes ever again knowing that he had almost put him to death? He must have known that Isaac would never trust him again. How could Abraham live with himself, knowing that he had almost murdered his son, his precious one, the child for whom he had longed his entire life?

And how did Abraham explain himself to Sarah? I can't even imagine the words the two of them shared or how their relationship changed after the *akeidah*.

Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother, Sarah, is another victim of the story, even though she does not appear in it. Sarah was stunned by her pregnancy and the birth of her child. So desperate had she been to produce progeny for Abraham that she had given him her handmaid, Hagar, as her surrogate. Toward the end of her life, through the miraculous intervention of God, Sarah bore a child of her own. Sarah laughed with joy at Isaac's birth, watched him grow, and fiercely protected him from pain, even exiling Hagar and Ishmael when Ishmael mocked Isaac.

In the *Akeidah* she almost lost everything. The Torah does not tell us if Sarah knew what Abraham was up to. Had he consulted his wife before taking Isaac up the mountain? Did she know of God's demand for Abraham to slay him and Abraham's acquiescence? Although the Torah doesn't tell us, my guess is probably not. If Sarah had known, fierce Jewish mother that she was, I doubt she would have let Abraham take Isaac, at least without putting up the fight of her life.

And if she hadn't known Abraham's plans, after learning of Isaac's near death she must have been racked with guilt. Even if she didn't know

what Abraham planned to do she would still feel responsible for entrusting him with her son. I don't know what words they might have shared when Abraham returned, but I am sure that their relationship was never the same again.

And finally, what about God? Even if you read the story as a polemic against human sacrifice, that is, God was teaching Abraham that God does not want, but rather detests human sacrifice, at what cost was this lesson learned? Why did he put Abraham and Isaac through such horrible conflict and pain? Wasn't there another way this lesson could have been taught? What kind of God asks a father to kill his or any other child as a test of obedience and faith?

It is not only we moderns who see these problems in the story. So did the rabbis of old. For the most part they apologetically leapt to Abraham and God's defense. They tried to rationalize God's irrational demand and Abraham's irrational response. Some of the sages, for example, suggested that Abraham wasn't eager to take Isaac to the altar but resisted the divine command:

הָאֵל זָנָדָה. הָאֵמֶר לוֹ, שְׁנֵי זָנָיִם יֵשׁ לִי

“[God said to Abraham:] Take your son:

He [Abraham] said to Him, “ I have two sons.”

He-[God] said to him, “ Your only one.”

~~(He said to Him,)~~ [Abraham replied: each is an only son]“This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother.”

~~He said to him,~~ God said to Abraham: “Whom you love.”

~~He said to Him,~~“I love them both,” [said Abraham to God.]

He [Finally God] said to him, “[Take] Isaac.”

(Rashi, Midrash Rabbah)

According to this *midrash*, Abraham knows that God wants him to sacrifice Isaac, but he keeps asking questions, avoiding the inevitable, hoping that God will change God’s mind.

Another *midrash* suggests that Abraham, and perhaps Isaac as well, knew that God was only testing their faith and that God would never allow Abraham to harm his son:

“Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.” (Gen. 22:8)

Why did Abraham say to his servants that both he *and Isaac* would

return to them? Because, says the *midrash*, Abraham knew that in the end, Isaac would not die.

Another *midrashic* approach has Isaac become a willing participant in the drama. On the way up the mountain Isaac asked his father, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” Abraham replied,

אֱלֹקִים יִרְאֶה-לָּךְ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלֶה בְּנִי

“God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.’

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

And the two of them walked on together.” (Gen. 22:7&8)

Rashi comments: “Although Isaac then understood that he was traveling on to be slain, ‘the two of them walked on together’—[Abraham and Isaac continued together] with the same ready heart.”

According to the *midrash Genesis Rabbah*, Isaac was 37 years old when he accompanied Abraham up the mountain. Surely, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out, at that age he would have been strong enough to overpower his elderly father if he did not want to go along with the plan. Instead he was ready to die for his God. Isaac thus becomes a willing participant and not a victim.

Despite all of the problems inherent in this story, which even our rabbis of old acknowledge is problematic, it has established deep roots not only in ancient, but also contemporary culture and society. Throughout human history, martyrs, those willing to die for God or sacred principles, have been glorified. Even today parents are willing to sacrifice their children for noble causes and are praised for it.

This is the theory advanced by Bruce Chilton in his book “Abraham’s Curse - The Roots of Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.” Chilton traces the justification for violence in general, and martyrdom in particular, to the religious glorification of Abraham’s willingness to murder Isaac, with Isaac as willing accomplice, for a “higher cause.”

The story of the Binding of Isaac is not only a formative narrative in Judaism, but in Christianity and Islam, as well. Christians see the crucifixion and martyrdom of Jesus dying for their sins as being prefigured in the willingness of Isaac to sacrifice himself for God. Muslims also glorify the willingness of Abraham’s son to die as an act of self-sacrifice to God, though in the Koran it is Ishmael and not Isaac who is the favored and martyred one.

As I have pointed out before, martyrdom, the willingness of our ancestors to die *al kiddush hashem*, for the sanctification of God’s name, is

a central theme of the High Holy Day liturgy. On Rosh Hashana we read about the near sacrifice of Isaac on Mt. Moriah. On Yom Kippur an entire service is dedicated to the martyrs of our tradition. In its original form, *Eleh Ezkarah*, the Martyrology centered around the willing deaths of Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues for the sake of God and Torah during the Hadrianic persecutions. Modern *mahzorim* have expanded its scope to include those who died during the Inquisition, the *Shoah*, the establishment of the State of Israel, and victims of terror. We mourn them the murdered but at the same time praise them for giving up their lives for a “higher cause.”

The story of *Akeidat Yitzchak* is also echoed during Chanukah, when Chanah, after the death of her seven sons at the hands of Antiochus, proclaims, “My children, tell your ancestor Abraham, ‘You bound only one son upon an altar, but I bound seven.’”

Christianity has its share of martyrs, as well. Not only Jesus, who died for the sins of humanity, but there are many of the faithful, such as St. Stephen and St. Sebastian, who died for the sake of God rather than give up their Christian faith. One contemporary and controversial Christian martyr is Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. Why is she controversial?

Because, although the Catholic Church claims she died for her Christian faith, the Jewish community asserts that she was murdered because she was born Edith Stein, a Jew.

According to Dr. Reuven Firestone, who spoke at *Yom Limmud* at the JCC a couple of weeks ago, Islam condemns suicide and the death of civilians. But that has not prevented radical Muslims from strapping on bombs, walking into crowds of people, and blowing up themselves and innocent civilians for the sake of Islam and Allah.

In a conference held in Sharm Al-Sheikh in 2005, Professor 'Abia Kahlawi of Al-Azhar University in Egypt declared, "We must declare loud and clear that resisting the aggression, and resisting the enemy is a legitimate right, and that a fighter who risks his life has that right. When he perishes along with his enemy, this is a resounding cry of truth through which the martyr declares: 'This was mine and it has been plundered—let the whole world see.' This is how a Muslim should act when he defends what is his, and I don't accept anything else."

Lest we become too comfortable with the notion that it is only radical Muslims who glorify martyrdom, here is what Chilton writes about us:

"Despite the Enlightenment's view of human nature, human behavior since the eighteenth century has shown little sign of constitutional change.

Even without official rituals of sacrifice, sacrificial acts abound, concentrated in times of war, but also ambient now...Adolescents and preadolescents join up with the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda...Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the Aryan Nation in North America, National Fronts in Europe and Australia, and Maoist cadres in Asia. However willing these children and youths may or may not be, the groups they belong to freely expend their young lives in war, calling their deaths a sacrifice.

That reflex is as basic to these groups as it is for nations to organize armies of youthful men and women and to commemorate their patriotic and sacrificial deaths on national holidays. However twisted Abraham's offering may seem, generations of people—with every kind of faith and with no particular faith—have repeated his actions millions of times since he lifted his knife over his son, only unlike Abraham, they have brought the knives of war down on their children, convinced that such slaughter is necessary and right.” (Abraham's Curse, p. 19-20)

I was stunned when I read Chilton's critique, but the more I thought about it, the more it resonated. The Torah sees violence as part of human nature. “...the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth..,” (Gen. 8:21) observes God after the flood. Perhaps there is something innate in human DNA which predisposes us to violence. However, instead of

working to overcome our violent nature, we seem more intent on justifying it.

I am not a pacifist, far from it. I know that some wars have to be fought, the wars against Hitler and Nazi Germany and Al Qaeda being just two examples. But even so, who among us does not cringe when we think about the toll that war has taken on human life and civilization?

During the American Civil War there were 750,000 casualties. During the War in Vietnam and Indochina, 1,102,000 to 3,886,026 casualties. During the Arab-Israeli conflict, 121,315 have been killed through war and acts of terror.

As horrific as these numbers are, they pale in comparison to World War I in which there were 16,563,868 casualties, and World War II, in which 60,669,200 to 84,589,300 people were killed, including the 6 million victims of the *Shoah*.

More recently, the Second Iraq War has claimed more than 162,000 civilian and combatant deaths, and the war in Afghanistan to date lists 16,179 dead, including 2,266 Americans. What about the Syrian Civil War? More than 110,000 men, women, and children have been killed, most by bullets and bombs rather than sarin gas.

Have any of these wars made our world a safer place to live? Do we

live in less fear for our lives? Certainly not today, when what once would have been construed to be local battles threaten to flare into regional conflicts. Israel is in range of close to 65,000 Hezbollah, Syrian, and Iranian rockets, (Haaretz, May 23, 2013). Bellicose countries such as North Korea and Iran are approaching the day when they will be formidable nuclear threats. We live with the threat of international and local terrorism every day, and are reminded of such every time we board a plane.

Please understand me clearly: I am not saying that Bashar al-Assad should be allowed to murder his people while the world stands by or that nuclear threats from Iran should be ignored. But we would be deceiving ourselves if we believed that military action alone will bring democracy, justice, and peace to the Middle East. It may just make it worse.

Sadly, violence is not just global, it is local as well. Chicago expects 400 homicides this year. That's good news because it is less than the 500 murders recorded last year. San Diego is heaven by comparison. Only 47 murders last year, and 19 to date this year.

Hardly a day goes by when we do not witness or are reminded of the plague of violence which darkens our country and our world. We are overwhelmed when we think about the shooting sprees that took place at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and in a theater

in Aurora, Colorado. We mourned with Boston after domestic terrorists set off bombs that killed and maimed at its beloved marathon. Almost every day small children playing on their porches are killed in the gang crossfire, and collegiate baseball players and 88 year-old war veterans are robbed, beaten up, and murdered by bored teenagers. We worry each time we send our children to school, or we travel, or visit the mall.

We fear and decry violence, yet at the same time we glorify and perpetuate it. Movies and video games celebrate war and mayhem. Body blows, concussions, and intentional physical injuries have become part and parcel not just of boxing, but hockey and football as well.

We, as a society, have become complacent about warfare and violence. We accept them as facts of life rather than as evils to be protested and abolished. We have despaired or simply don't care about making Isaiah's vision a reality:

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks:
Nation shall not take up
Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war.” (Is. 2:4)

I do not agree with Chilton's hypothesis, that the story of the *Akeidah* is the root of violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but I do agree

that the *Akeidah* has been used to justify martyrdom, the sacrificing of human life for God or some higher cause. Abraham should be challenged about the *akeidah* and not lauded.

Although in the end, Abraham is praised for his obedience to God, for me this is not the message I want to take away. I wouldn't want such a God in my life, a God who demands that I sacrifice my child in order to prove my love for him, a God who wants human beings to die for Him.

I reject such a God.

Instead, I affirm my belief in the God who sent his angel to stop Abraham:

אַל-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעַר וְאַל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי | עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹקִים
אֲתָה

“Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God....” (Gen. 22:13)

I affirm my belief in a God who detests warfare and violence, wants them to cease, for great peace and justice to be spread over the land. I affirm my belief in a God who desires life and not martyrdom. And I affirm my belief that God wants us to be partners in ushering in a messianic era in which

וּוְגַר זֵאֵב עִם-כֶּבֶשׂ וְנֹמֵר עִם-גְּדֵי יִרְבֵּץ וְעֵגְל וּכְפִיר וּמְרִיא יַחְדָּו

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard lie down with the kid...

לֹא-יַרְעוּ וְלֹא-יִשְׁחִיתוּ בְּכָל-הָר קִדְשֵׁי כִי-מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דְּעָה אֶת-ק' כַּמִּים לַיָּם
מִכֶּסֶּים:

In all of My sacred mount
Nothing evil shall be done;
For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord
As waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6, 9)

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ

אָמֵן.

May the One who creates harmony in the universe empower us to
create peace on earth. And let us say: Amen.