Will I Go Through With This? Re-Reading the Binding of Isaac

Rabbi Scott N. Bolton

We are challenged to make sense of the Akeidah. The story does not sit well with us, and each Rosh HaShanah and every time we read the parsha we are troubled, shaken and upset. "How could Avraham bind his son and lift a knife, to offer him as a sacrifice?! How could God ask for such a thing?!"

The Rabbis of the Talmud blame Avraham for misinterpreting the command by God to offer his son "up" - ויעלהו - *v'ya'aleihu* (Genesis 22:2). "Take him up" means go on a father and son journey up the mountain towards a spiritual experience - not burn him up on the altar! We can imagine intimate moments in God's presence and the two, father and son hearing the commanding voice of God who promises a robust future: "Now, lift your eyes my children...look out at the Judean Hills, east, west, north, south; all this land is yours and the heritage of generations to come. After your mystical moments on the mountain, Avraham, take Yitzhak down the slope. Inspire him to lead a nation like I inspired you.

The moral of the Rabbis' midrashic story and Rashi relying on it to make his commentary on the first verse of chapter 22 of Genesis is that we must be more discerning when it comes to human interpretations of extremist positions. Committing immoral acts and crimes in the name of God comes too easy to human beings

whose propensities to give into fundamentalist tendencies rage in every generation. Be warned.

Let's explore what might have been possible on that mountaintop. The theme of quest or journey up a mountain is a popular one in religious literature. After all, it was a mountain in the wilderness at which the Jewish People received the Torah. That peak represented for Avraham and Isaac, the subsequent leader to be of the next generation, a vantage point that differed entirely from built up civilization in the land they left as a family and even the city-states of the Canaan plains. Nature itself can be a powerful, transformative experience. A father telling his son about the story of his religious awakening can "lift" a child and make him a different person, before they would have come down the mountain.

Consider this from a climber who wrote a spiritual journal:

> But by virtue of its nature - climbing - some of the environments you find yourself in...Man, that is so awesome! Out in the desert on a spire, or an ice climb up in Rocky Mountain National Park up in the alpine...It's awe-inspiring! In a way it's a mystical experience. It's like, 'Wow!' ("Investigating Climbing as a Spiritual Experience," Michael F. Pond, Thesis, May 2013.)

Another outdoors adventurer wrote:

> In fact...the natural environment is our closest connection to the Creator. And it's where we see evidence of what the Creator has done, not evidence of what we've done...You say, who is the artist? Hello?

The grandfather of the Jewish Nation misunderstood God's new way of using the verb "raise him up" - it would not as an *olah* (burnt offering). *V'ha'aleihu* meant climb up that mountain I will show you, for a spiritual experience with your child. I see God saying to Avraham, in this line of commentary, "Testify as to the discovery you made that I am Creator of the Universe, Maker of All, Demander of Justice and Righteousness." The potential spiritual or mystical experience was beyond comprehension, and afterwards when they went down the mountain the father and son team of leaders would have been ready to make more souls, as Avraham and Sarah had done in Haran.

Maybe Avraham got it right when he said in verse 5 of Chapter 22:

ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם
אֶל-נְעָרָיו, שְׁבוּ-לָכֶם פֹּה
עִם-הַחֲמוֹר, וַאֲנִי וְהַנַּעַר,
נֵלְכָה עַד-כֹּה; וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה,
וְנָשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם.

5 And Abraham said unto his young men: 'Stay here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and *we* will worship, and *we* will come back to you.'

When Avraham said "we will come back to you" did he reveal a deeper understanding? But why then was he committed to the pageant of binding his child and lifting a knife above him?

The journey up the mountain could have in and of itself been revelatory and mystical for Avraham and Yitzhak. Yet, the Torah describes not only two private journeymen in ancient Jerusalem. The story is one that would have reverberated throughout the Ancient Near East just as Avraham's military victories stood to gain him respect. When we examine the tale in its Ancient Near Eastern framework we understand what leaders must risk in order to

influence and even help change errant ways in their own and subsequent generations.

Seeing the Akeidah as part of the revolutionary manifesto - the Torah - puts the narrative in perspective vis a vis its lesson about pagan worship and child sacrifice. The story challenges those who actively sacrificed children and even addresses a prevailing idea about children in the family structure that existed through at least Roman times.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that the Akeidah presentes a fundamental rejection of Patria Potestas - the authority of the father or head of family who controls the children who are regarded as property (and potential offerings). A patriarch had his own gods, among them spirits of dead ancestors, to whom sacrifices would be offered - including children. Not only the Akeidah but each instance of rejecting first-born ascension in family rulership challenged prevailing mindsets in the ancient world. Child sacrifice and first-borns taking the reigns to inherit the other children as property was rejected. The story needed to be dramatic, when it came to children on the altar.

If the story indeed responded to very “this worldly” thought patterns and broke the prevailing mindsets of religious adherents in the ancient Near Eastern world, we must continue investigating the story for clues about what messages concerning God, religion, faith, and ethics were being taught to the Jewish People ourselves. We can not claim that the Akeidah came to reject only the ways of the Pagans; we must ask ourselves what hard truths and ethical lessons can be drawn out of the story for ourselves?

We have already mentioned that the Rabbis wrote midrash that challenged Avraham's interpretation of God's commandment. Taken more broadly, putting ourselves in Avraham's shoes, each of us with a unique relationship with God is commanded to do mitzvot. Read not for its historicity or accuracy of reporting but as an exhortative story the Akeidah comes in the Torah to address a number of real issues that arise when human beings commit to religious practice and lives of faith.

First, the Akeidah and commentaries (together they make the Jewish canon) warn us against taking sacred text too literally. Secondly, not regarding the commandment to sacrifice a child but regarding other mitzvot Jews throughout time have been challenged to see the morality and goodness or reason behind the rituals, customs and laws that are commanded through the force of history let alone through hearing the Divine Voice or echoes from the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. How are we to square retreating from the marketplace on two days of yom tov, if it causes our business or job performance to suffer? (one among many examples) Further, the Akeidah challenges parents to reflect deeply on their parenting skills and what they ask their children to engage in. Then, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explored, there is the religious struggle one engages in when defeat instead of victory is experienced, as we are kept from achieving or realizing that which we desire most.

To address these issues briefly, the interpretive tradition stands in Judaism as essential to the religious adherent. And as the categories of Jewish law and Jewish values have developed over the ages, ethical considerations are more and more considered when it comes to making rulings about ritual matters. We have only

developed more and more respect for children's lives and women's places in the context of ritual community.

As to Jewish People rejecting the "asks" of God or tradition because they see them as morally wrong or less severely the opposite of "life-giving," this is a slippery slope. Some rituals deserve our attention because only after engaging them do we come to comprehend the meaning we may derive from having engaged them. The one who embraces the traditions of shiva will only come to understand the wisdom of Jewish mourning customs, after the weave of life is created around the mourner. The power of tfillin on one's hand and one's head only comes to light after a morning of prayer and considerations of how one will use one's hands, heart and mind to further just and righteous causes. They become strong reminders of how to live with purpose.

With parenting, do we not sometimes overwhelm our children with towering responsibilities that we feel will make them more responsible, better informed or more prepared for the world "out there?" Too often parents are unwilling at all to press their children into religious service, because coercion of any type has a bad name in the modern world. Would they be better for it if we sat them down to write a thank you note after someone made a tzedakah contribution? Might children who come to synagogue on Saturday mornings and who see adults taking prayer seriously and learning wisdom from Torah be better and more productive Jews and citizens of a free nation where religious culture creates the very diversity we celebrate?

And Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik is onto something exquisite. His read of the the Akeidah hearkens back to the way that ancients read the text or heard the story - as exhortative and to teach a lesson beyond

any about child sacrifice or climbing mountains. Soloveitchik explains that we all must be ready to face loss and defeat. What Avraham wanted most - a child, a family, a Jewish future, a stable marriage, wonderful relationship with his child - was not guaranteed.

There are times when we feel victorious and spans of our lives that challenge us and demand our withdrawal. Sometimes we wish to fulfill God's wishes, and we are so certain that we know just what God would approve of. Soloveitchik explains that we must retreat from our fundamentalist concepts and certainty. Heaven makes you go back on exactly what you might have thought was the absolute right thing to do. Awakened to the absurdity of our interpretations, or worse immoral acts and even crimes, we are sometimes "saved by an angel."

יא וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה, מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם, וַיֹּאמֶר, אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם; וַיֹּאמֶר, הִנֵּנִי.

11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.'

Twice the angel called out Avraham's name. Here are two possibilities for what the angel really was: first, it was Avraham's inner voice, moral compass, and second, it was a man like any other who saw the unfolding violence and murderous religious ritual who came to stop Avraham in his tracks.

Should the Torah have written: "The angel came running up the mountain. And the angel, with divine trembling in his voice (or her's), called: 'Avraham! Avraham! Put down your knife! Don't lay a hand on that child!'." Does "Hineini" mean Abrham had a sudden flash of insight and every bone in his body collapsed: "What am I doing?!"

There is a strong tradition that angels in the Jewish tradition are human beings and that human beings can fulfill divine missions. Dialogues with angels lead to inner-reflection and laughing at oneself, as in the story of Sarah hearing she would have a child in her later years.

In chapter 18 of Genesis three *anashim* - men - appear at Avraham's tent to deliver the news about Sarah's pregnancy. They are considered angels. They encouraged the couple to keep trying! Sarah heard their stories of how others were still able to have children. She laughed maybe at them, if not to herself.

When Jacob sends *malakhim* - messengers - to his brother Esau they are considered to be on a divine mission - angels according to some traditions. When Joseph finds the man in the field to tell him which direction his brothers went, Rashi comments that the "man" was none other than the angel Gabriel האיש ההוא גבריאל. The medieval *m'farshim* (commentators) disagree with one another; some say angels are indeed divine beings but others assert that what we mean by angel is a human being sent with Godly inspiration and a specific mission.

The angel that stopped Abraham in chapter 22 of Genesis during the Akeidah could be an unnamed human being who seized the moral moment to stop the father sacrificing his only son. What better way to stop someone than to shout their name twice? Were words enough to stop the knife from being plunged into Isaac's flesh? Or, did this "angel" grab Avraham's arm and shake loose the weapon?

The Book of Genesis is more aligned with the Book of Deuteronomy when it comes to conceiving of angels as human beings with divine missions to accomplish. That is to say that the Book of Deuteronomy does not conceive of a God with legions of heavenly creatures and active angels on Earth. There is none other than God, the Holy One.

In Devarim (Deuteronomy) there is one God of Israel who communicates with the Israelite nation. There are no hosts of heaven or ethereal beings. Despite mystical poetic traditions in the Book of Psalms and books of the Prophets, in Deuteronomy there is one God. There is none other and nothing beside Him. As it says in Deuteronomy 4:35:

לה אַתָּה הָרְאֵתָ לָדַעַת,
כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים:
אֵין עוֹד, מִלְּבַדּוֹ.

35 You were shown, so you would know that the LORD, He is God; there is none else beside Him.

The angel of the Akeidah (Genesis, chapter 22), as with other stories in the first book of the Torah makes more sense when a human being with a divine mission to accomplish performs his or her task, in the world below.

The Torah says an angel appeared and relayed God's retraction. Calling out twice the *malakh* stopped the sacrifice. Here is a radical suggestion: was it Sarah herself who followed her husband and waited to see if he would follow through with his crazy plan? Did she come screaming at her husband, grabbing his arm and shake the knife loose? Or, was it one of the servants who had come with Avraham who followed him up the mountain? Was it one of the souls they had "made" in Haran? Someone Sarah sent?

Did a passer-by "sent by God" (is it odd or is it God that he was in the right place at the right time) take up the responsibility to save the child? That would have been just as powerful, to awaken us to the need to listen to others as we clarify what we believe God truly demands of us.

And, still, can we push our interpretation to understand the term angel to mean "Abraham's inner, divine consciousness?" Did he understand that the God of Israel could never want child sacrifice? Did he conclude that this was not the way forward? Even if Kierkegaard allowed for "a teleological suspension of the ethical" in the I-Thou relationship between God and the adherent, we must reject that the ultimate commanding voice of God was to sacrifice the child. How could we live otherwise? How could we, Jewishly, hold that what God asks of us is ethical and promotes life, when Avraham was told to take his child, bind him and slay him? We will not give carte blanche to religious fanatics to claim God wanted their immoral acts or supports criminal behavior.

Ultimately, God must represent the ethical and life-sustaining force of the universe. After all, God says (Leviticus 18:5):

ה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וָחַי בָּהֶם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.

5 Ye shall therefore keep My statutes, and Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall *live by them*: I am the LORD.

The inner Divine message to Avraham was: put down the knife. Even when a state of confusion overcomes you, like when there was a seeming retraction of the commandment to bind and offer Yitzhak as a sacrifice, the God within tells Avraham and ultimately

all of us to stop bloodshed and limit our primitive, even instinctual forces.

How often primitive, instinctual desires rise up within even religious souls. This is why Abraham Lincoln caught our attention with the use of the phrase "our better angels." This is why the Torah points out that help comes from those who appear at the right time, in the right place and not always from the sources we expect them to come from.

Through the Akeidah, the Torah teaches that we must rely on our deepest, spiritual, soul dimensions - our inner Divine voice - to stop ourselves at critical moments and create reflective practices of our lives.

How shall that be accomplished? When in the midst of something that just might be crazy, say your name twice, to yourself, and answer, "Hineini!" The Akeidah narrative has us ask ourselves: "Is this really the person that I have become? Will I go through with this?"

Sometimes, we must put down the knife.