“V’HaElohim Nisa et Avraham”
And God tested Abraham
V’Yomer Aylav - Avraham!
And God said to him - Abraham!
Va’Yomer - Hineni
And he responded - Here I am.

These are the opening words of our parasha for the second day of Rosh Hashannah.

We are now rounding the corner into the home stretch - We have been together for a
day and a half of prayer - the words and melodies that last week felt like sweet
memories, now are familiar again. We are singing along with confidence, our machzor is
well thumbed. We have breathed in in the themes of Rosh Hashannah - Renewal,
remembrance, repentance - We’ve got this. We’ve eaten our brisket and our apples with
honey, and we’ve had time to think about what we need to do and say and feel before
we are ready for Yom Kippur. Like Abraham, our God, our tradition has called our
names, and we have said Hineni, here I am. We have shown up.

But this Torah service asks us to dig a little deeper. Today, on the second day of Rosh
Hashannah, after a day and a half together in beautiful, lengthy prayer - this Torah that
our ancestors bequeathed to us is quite a doozy. Yesterday we read about the miraculous birth of Yitzhak, today we read the infamous Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac - The near miss child sacrifice of the first born Hebrew. If yesterday represented the beginning, the first new day of the year, the freshest start - then today is day one of the middle - we must by liturgical design begin our year and continue the Yamim Noraim with this story ringing in our ears.

God begins:

*Take your only child, your beloved Yitzhak, and go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains...*

Avraham wastes no time - he arises early the next morning as God has directed. They journey to the mountain, Avraham builds the altar, he arranges the wood, he binds his child, then places the bound Yitzhak on top of the altar. Now he raises his knife to slay his son - and blessedly at the penultimate moment, God calls again - Avraham, Avraham. And Avraham replies, hineni, here I am. God shows Avraham a ram caught in the thicket, he sacrifices the ram and Yitzhak is safe.

How could Abraham obey, without even a single protest? What is God trying to prove?

Whenever I spend time with this text, I always get stuck on how this is not a commandment, it is a test - “V’HaElohim Nisa et Avraham” - A test suggests that Avraham’s responds with a free will, and that his response is meaningful. Also, the
response to a test can be judged as right or wrong. But how do we know Avraham passes the test?

The common rabbinic interpretation is that God is testing Avraham’s faith. God put Avraham in an impossible situation to see what he would do. The situation is beyond Avraham’s interests, if he is to obey God, it means that his faith and obedience go beyond reason. He must step outside of reason, outside of his most basic self interest, outside of morality and do what God asks, even if he does not understand. If this is the test, Avraham passes with flying colors and God rewards him, saying, because you have done this thing and you did not withhold your son... indeed I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens

Here, our obligation to fulfill God’s will or mitzvot is not rational. A mitzvah is here most emphatically not translated as a “good deed,” or even a necessarily positive action. The Israeli scholar Yeshayahu Leibowitz took a step further and taught that the Akedah is a reminder that the mitzvot are not only non-rational, but we have an obligation to overcome any sense of human ethical duty in favor of our unconditional obedience to the Divine command. Anything God commands must be done, even if the commandment seems ethically problematic, or worse, evil.

This interpretation is hard for me to swallow. First, this is in moral opposition to the most consistent Torah themes - humans are created btzelem Elohim, in the image of God - do not murder, love your neighbor as yourself - Also, go forth and multiply - children represent God’s blessing. Avraham and Sarah are our first biblical couple experiencing
fertility issues, and Yitzhak is their miracle. To sacrifice a person, particularly a child who represents the continuation of the nascent Jewish people, represents a stark reversal of values, a shadow narrative that seems absolutely absurd in juxtaposition with everything our tradition holds dear. This is the Avraham who argued with God to save even 10 righteous people in Sodom and Gemmorrah - How can this man be willing to murder his own son?

Second, I must critique Leibowitz - If following God’s mitzvot is totally outside the bounds of moral inquiry, then we risk dangerous fanaticism. The Torah is written in human language, our understanding of God’s will is necessarily colored by the individuals who interpret and teach Torah. We see this too often in our world, in every religion. One voice is called truth - opposition is heresy, and violence and oppression are justified as Godly. This brand of religious certainty makes me nervous. I agree with the late Rabbi David Hartman who argued that: “when halakha violates essential principles of justice, moral outrage is a far more appropriate response than passive acceptance of the authority of tradition.” How could we possibly valorize Avraham’s brand of passive obedience, when we see the violence and danger it produces in our world? Is this the legacy of the Akedah?

Perhaps, there is another way to understand the test. Perhaps we can read against the grain - Did God really command Abraham to sacrifice his son? According to Midrash Tanhuma, it all hinges on the word – olah. God said to Abraham v’ha’a’lay-hu sham l’olah, bring up Isaac as an olah. The Hebrew word olah, comes from the root Ayin-
*Lamed-Hey*, meaning, “to rise up.” This root has two meanings - one is “sacrifice,” as in the smoke of the sacrifice rises up. Or it could be connected to the familiar word *aliyah*, which refers to a spiritual lifting up, like when we are called to give the blessing over the Torah. It possible that Avraham misunderstood God. Perhaps God was asking for him to prepare his son for some spiritual elevation, not destruction.

Or, more simply, I think we are allowed to disagree with Avraham. We can push back. We can say this is a lesson in what not to do. As Rabbi Milton Steinberg said - “From the Jewish viewpoint - the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances and not for anyone, not even for God. Especially not for God.” From this read, Avraham is wrong, he has failed his test, he has interpreted God with violence, and seriously missed the point.

If we are to reread God’s test then it raises the question - why is Avraham praised and rewarded, not rebuked?

As a teacher, I know it is easy to be misunderstood. You say one thing and the student hears another. However, when a student responds to a prompt earnestly and tries their best, you don’t reprimand or fail them, you encourage them, love them and then make sure that they know what they were supposed to do. At the end, Avraham understands that he should never kill his child and that he is a loyal servant of God. God then repeats his covenant - Avraham does not gain some newly earned blessing, God
reiterates that their relationship is intact. He messed up, but God sees his faithful intention.

However, this primary emphasis on the ethical has its risks - If we are to say that Judaism is an ethical faith and to be a good person is to be a “good” Jew, then we obscure Jewish particularism - our ritual becomes pointless and unnecessary, our God nothing but a selfish reflection of our selves and our human will. Commandedness is an essential aspect of being Jewish - God is bigger and greater than human understanding - faith is a leap beyond ourselves, beyond our abilities, beyond everything that can be tested or tried using human means. Commandedness is the simple assertion that God can ask something of us, and being Jewish demands something more than just being good.

The Akedah leaves us with two Jewish paradigms - first, the vision of the obedient Jew who follows God’s commandments without question; and second, the Jew who asks “what is moral? what is good?” without necessary connection to tradition.

I spent this past summer studying in Israel. There, these two paradigms of the modern Jew are dominant, and starkly contrasted. Though there are of course many exceptions, there is a pervasive conflict between the Haredim, the ultra orthodox Jews who reject modernity and have a socially restrictive view of halakha; and the secular Jews who identify nationally and culturally Jewish, but have little interest in God or ritual practice. As a queer, female bodied rabbinical student, it was extremely difficult to find any place
where I belonged. When I told secular Israelis that I am studying to become a rabbi they were confused as to 1. how this is possible and 2. why in the world I would ever want to do this.

It felt like the Haredim and I live on different planets. Though we study the same Talmud, read the same prayers, teach the same parshiyot, at best there is absolutely no connection, and at worst there is open hostility. On Rosh Hodesh Av I prayed with Women of the Wall, an organization of Jewish women from throughout the religious spectrum who are fighting for the right to pray at the Kotel, the last remaining wall of the ancient Temple. It was a surreal experience - The prayers were so familiar, the melodies felt like home, and yet thousands of men and women were blowing whistles, drowning out our singing, throwing eggs and calling us horrible names. These protesters were there because they truly believe they are doing God's will. And yet, to me, they seemed to be transgressing dozens of ethical mitzvot, let alone common decency.

My experience at the Kotel was heart breaking - but it also made me extremely proud of American Judaism and TBZ. In this building we do not live by one paradigm alone - we are Torah Jews and we are humanists, we have a relationship with tradition and we care about our neighbors and communities. We thrive in complexity and pluralism, we fight for meaning in a life filled with uncertainty, we struggle with God and with ritual, we push ourselves to go deeper, to be more moral, to ask the hard questions and recognize when there are no perfect or simple answers.
Like my experience at the Kotel, the tensions apparent in the akedah can be heart
breaking, or, so very hopeful. Our community, our Judaism is born from the creative
tension between our commitment to God and tradition and our deep sense of morality
and commitment to justice. We are actively creating a Judaism that the world has never
seen before - We do not need to reject our past. We do not need to reject God - and we
also do not need to reject the world we live in. In this coming year may we dig deep into
this tension, challenging ourselves spiritually to discover what it means to be faithful,
challenging ourselves morally to fight against oppression and for justice where ever it is
needed; May our community be made strong through this tension, and may our work
create a space where God and goodness lives.

Shana Tova