

“There’s No Going Back Now”

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Since 1925, the New Yorker has been publishing the most hysterical, clever cartoons in print. One of my favorites was clipped and sent to me by a congregant this past year. It features Abraham standing over his son Isaac, bound to the sacrificial altar. While holding the knife in his hand, Abraham looks up at the heavens and says: Must I sacrifice family for career? I had that under the glass on my desk for a long time, until it just became too depressing.

There is no single story, no episode no vignette in the Hebrew Bible that has been discussed, debated, wrestled with, anguished over, questioned, second guessed, analyzed, and yes, featured in cartoons more than the story we read just a while ago this morning...the story of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac. Was Abraham the Knight of Faith as Kierkegaard put it, for obeying God’s command, as unthinkable as it was? Is this indeed a story of the ultimate act of piety and obedience...Or did Abraham fail the test? Where was his moral indignation? What happened to that legendary chutzpah that gumption he displayed to God when God shared with him the plans to destroy the cities of S’dom and Amorrhah...*Ha’shofeit kol ha’aretz lo ya’aseh mishpat* he rages to God...Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly...and this of course is followed by a protracted back and forth between Abraham and God...if there are 50 righteous people, 40, 30, 20, 10 righteous inhabitants...then how can you destroy these cities...and God acquiesces each and every time. You’re right Abraham, if there are that many righteous souls in those cities, I can’t possibly destroy them. But when it comes to Abraham’s own son, the only son he has with his beloved Sarah, the one son who is meant to carry on the promise of the Abrahamic covenant of becoming a great nation, a light unto the nations...when it comes to sacrificing Isaac on an altar, that request is met with deafening silence. Not only does Abraham not protest, he goes about his task with astonishing diligence...*va’yashkeim Avraham baboker*, he wakes up at the crack of dawn to begin his preparations...gathering all the materials he needs to perform this rite, saddling his donkey, prepping his servants, and getting Isaac out of bed. And then of course there’s the question of why in the world God would even make this request of him in the first place. Hasn’t Abraham done enough already to demonstrate his

obedience? After all, he left his family, his home, his native land, everything that was familiar to him and followed an unseen God into the wilderness, resettling in a land he had no connection to...his friends probably thought he was a total meshuggenah. So long neighbors, I'm moving a couple thousand miles away because I heard a voice telling me to pack my bags and never come back. God needed additional proof of Abraham's loyalty?? And there are myriad other questions, about Sarah's role in all of this, about what Isaac must have been thinking the whole time. He says so preciously little, not a word as his father is tying him down to the altar. There are so many questions...so many elements of the story that are bewildering and challenging to our faith and our sense of morality.

And if that wasn't enough, I want to direct your attention to the very end of this morning's Torah reading. Take a look with me if you will for just a moment on page 105 in your mahzor. It was the fifth aliyah this morning—read so beautifully by Steve Susswein—the very last paragraph there in the middle of the page. Now remember, the breakdown of the aliyot, which verses are read on what days and in what order was formulated by the rabbis, by tradition. God, as far as I know, did not tell Moses on Mt. Sinai that the 5th Aliyah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah must be Genesis chapter 22 verses 20-24. Our Sages determined that reading. Take a look at those scintillating verses, and consider why in the world would a Torah reading of such towering importance, such unparalleled religious significance, and assigned to a day as holy as today, end with five verses of dry, genealogical data? Why not end at verse 19? Or even better at verse 18? What more fitting conclusion could there be than Ve'hitbarchu b'zaracha kol goyei ha'aretz: All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendeds Abraham, ekev asher Shamata be'koli—precisely because you obeyed my command to bring Isaac to the altar? But ending with Uz and Buz...I don't get it!

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote a magnificent opinion about why these 5 verses constitute the end of such an important story in the Torah, and he draws a critical connection to Rosh Hashanah as well. What those five verses represent: this one begat that one; this one is so and so's father, that one is so and so's concubine...these five verses represent the mundane; the normal; the commonplace. Rav Soloveitchik said that the reason these verses appear at the end of the reading is that tragically nothing changed after the Akeida! Everyone just went back to their regular everyday lives! Here we had one of the most earthshaking, revolutionary moments in

religious history, in human history, and what happens the very next day...nothing special; nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone's back to their regular routines. Did the folks in Beersheva ask Abraham what happened on the mountain. Did the Mesopotamian Post run a front page article declaring an end to human sacrifice once and for all? The answer says Soloveichik is no. The Akeida should have shaken the foundations of the world! But instead it seemingly had little to no effect at all. And those mundane verses appear at the end of the reading to warn us against the danger that awaits us, when? Tomorrow. How will tomorrow be any different, because of today. What difference will Rosh Hashanah make in your life? What are you going to talk about at lunch today...how nice the Hazzan's voice sounded? How well the shofar blowers did? How long the rabbi's sermon was? Or are you going to think about or even talk with your loved ones about how what you prayed for, what you meditated on during this time in shul really is going to cause you to live differently in the coming year. Will Rosh Hashanah be a religiously irrelevant experience, or will some of those negative behaviors, habits, attitudes actually be left back in 5775 and not brought along with you into a new year? That's the point of ending the Torah reading in this way. To ask us the fundamental question: Does this day mean anything to you at all? Will tomorrow be any different for you? Is Wednesday, September 16th just back to work, back to school, back to the daily grind [some people already went back today] or is Wednesday, September 16th the 3rd of Tishrei, the beginning of a new you for the new year?

Now there's another way to read this anticlimactic conclusion to the Torah reading. We're Jews, right, there's always another interpretation! We could see these verses as an indication that although Abraham had the most extraordinary, the most holy, the most mystical, the most transformative experience of his life on the top of that mountain...angels calling out his name, the Creator of the Universe speaking to him and praising his peity, a dramatic last-minute sacrifice of a ram in place of his son...what might we assume would happen to Abraham after that? Well, either extensive therapy and possibly even institutionalization, or that Abraham would become a recluse...such a holy man that he couldn't relate to anything mundane or earthly. Rather, the return to normalcy after the Akeida shows us an Abraham who doesn't get caught up in his own greatness or untouchable holiness, but an Abraham who gets back to his responsibilities and his family. And this too is important...we must be able to transfer what we have prayed and meditated about here...the lofty goals, the ideals, the resolutions we've

committed ourselves to and bring that back to the everyday routine; that's where they have to be implemented, right?

I was thinking about this idea of the morning after or the day after with respect to an issue that has really torn at the fabric of the Jewish people this year. I cannot remember feeling more angst, more distress, and frankly more fear about the safety of the Jewish people or of Israel, or for that matter the unity of the Jewish people, than I have this year. The debate surrounding the deal with Iran has been gut-wrenching. This is not like a deal with any other country. This has felt more like a deal with the devil. A devil who burns our leaders in effigy, who chants death to America and Israel, who is the leading financier and sponsor of global terrorism, who reduced the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires to a heap of rubble, killing 85 people; a devil that denies the Holocaust and believes its existential purpose is to eradicate the state of Israel from the world map. The Ayatollah Khamenei sent us a very special Rosh Hashanah message last week: His New Year tweet was that in 25 years Israel will be gone, and that there will be "no moment of serenity for the Zionists" until then. Thank you very much Ayatollah for being crystal clear about your intentions. You know the Jews are the only ones the Ayatollah is honest with. Everyone else in the world is deceived, cheated, misled, and hoodwinked the about Iran's ambitions, its nuclear program, and its weapons cache. As I told Congressman John Delaney in a face to face meeting I had with him, the Jewish people learned in 1938 that when a brutal regime threatens to annihilate you, we must take them at their word. Now I know many of you believe that the deal with Iran is in fact the best available option for curtailing Iran's nuclear ambitions. I know many others have worked tirelessly to try to convince your elected representatives and others to block the deal...or at least demonstrate that it enjoys far less than bi-partisan support. But it has been particularly anguishing to see how this issue has so painfully split our community. U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, has been subject to death threats for supporting the president and this deal. A presidential candidate said the deal will march Jews to the crematory ovens once again. Americans who oppose the deal have been labeled warmongers or accused of having dual loyalty. Those who support it have been referred to as kapos, Jews who collaborated with the Nazis in World War II. One analyst said that the Jewish community is so divided and its language so vitriolic that we are on the verge of fratricide.

The question is, what happens on the morning after? You see, whether you support or oppose the deal, I know that none of us wants to see a rogue state like Iran with nuclear weapons. I know that we are all pro-Israel, and pro-America. So what do we do on the morning after the deal goes into effect? Do we act as if nothing really significant happened...kind of like Abraham in Soloveitchik's interpretation? Do we ignore the magnitude of this deal and its far reaching foreign policy implications, and just go back to business as usual, in the way that Abraham may have after the akeida? That cannot be our posture as individuals or as a Jewish community. Now it is time to pay especially close attention to how this deal unfolds. Now it is time to lobby our elected representatives to make sure that Israel has the bunker busting weapons and the aircraft to deliver them that would surely be a deterrent to Iranian belligerence. Now is the time to become watch-dogs, closely following whether our country and its partners are indeed holding Iran to the strict terms of the agreement. Now it is time to speak out against a proliferation of nuclear weapons across a very unstable Middle East. Now is when we must be actually aware of whether the infusion of billions of dollars into Iranian coffers will end up in the bank accounts of terrorists and other rogue regimes. There is no going back to life as usual or life as it was before this deal. And God forbid that we should be torn apart by hurling slurs and hateful language at our fellow Jews. If there is anything that the Jewish people have learned through history it is that we are much, much stronger when we are united than we are when we are divided and at each other's throats. That's just where the enemy wants us, and we must resist it with all our might.

Instead we must be as the mahzor says, *kulam k'agudah achat*, one unified confederation of heart, of mind, and of action. God-forbid that we relive the story of the American Jewish community in the 1930's; a community too timid, too self-absorbed, too disunited to stand up with confidence as citizens with a say in government policies. It's become commonplace to criticize President Roosevelt for not intervening or for being a closet anti-Semite, or to blame the State Department for its lack of sympathy to Jewish refugees trying to flee Nazi-infested Europe, but friends, part of the problem was that we, the Jewish community, lacked unity and organization. There were far too few Stephen S. Wises and Henry Morgenthau and Louis Brandeis's. But what we lacked then, we have made up for substantially now. The future of the Jewish people relies heavily on a strong, united, engaged American Jewish community.

You know, in the 19 short sentences that make up the story of the binding of Isaac, Abraham repeats the same word three different times in those 19 sentences. That word is Hineini. I am here. Hineini, he says when God summons him and tells him about the test. Hineini he says when Isaac calls out to him, and Hineini he says in the instant when he would have otherwise lowered the knife on his son's throat. Hineini means to be present, to be alert, to be aware, to be ready. I pray that tomorrow, September 16th, the 3rd of Elul you are able to say Hineini! I am awake, I am ready, I am here in this moment this new year, ready to become an even better version of myself than I was last year. I am ready to act on all the words I said, the prayers I sang, the hopes I whispered so that this Rosh Hashanah will not just pass like one day to another, but as a life transforming day to another! And I hope you also say, Hineini, I am attentive, I am watchful, I am vigilant, I am prepared to look out for the well-being of the Jewish people, the State of Israel our eternal homeland, and this great country as well.

There's no going back to the same old routine. Not in your own life, and not in the life of your people. Today is the day when every Jew must stand up and say in unison, Hineini!