

Abraham and the Middah of Trust
[A Sermon for Rosh Hashana Day II 5766/2005]
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One cannot read Genesis 22, the account of the Binding of Isaac, without being both fascinated and disturbed, fascinated at the power of the tersely told tale that has attracted so much commentary throughout the generations and disturbed at the core of that content, a divine call to a father to sacrifice his son. In past years, I have described my pragmatic council to would-be contemporary Abraham's, that they quickly seek professional help before heeding such calling voices; I have been eager to share some of the Jewish literature that begins with great discomfort with many facets of this sacred text and proceeds to read and reread with imagination and a profound desire to find in the text meaningful and positive value; and I have welcomed the opportunity to seek ways of reading against the text as does the Gerer Rebbe who deems Abraham's response a case of disappointing moral failure.

This morning, however, I am drawn to one of the qualities associated with a simple, straightforward reading, one of the qualities which commends this passage in the first place for reading on Rosh Hashanna. That is, the Binding of Isaac reads as a parable of faith or trust, if you will. It is tale in which God tests the degree to which Abraham will respond to a command in a trusting manner. Obviously, for such a test to carry any weight, the command would necessarily need to be onerous. A command to dig a hole in order to recover a pot of gold would hardly constitute a test of trust. However, a highly problematic insistence that the testee sacrifice something dear, no matter what one thinks of the ethics of the test in the first place, surely does constitute a valid test of trust.

I want to explore the soul quality, the middah of trust because, let's face it, it is basic to an authentic Jewish spirituality and because, I suspect, it is a trait that poses severe challenges to many of us. I do not exclude myself. I prefer to explore the trait of trust, *Bitachon*, rather than the closely related quality faith, *Emunah*, assuming the distinction found in some Mussar literature [according to Alan Morinis, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, p. 140: Faith is more of a global concept, involving a belief in God; trust is much more personal, and concerns relationship between God and oneself... in the words of the Chazon Ish: faith is theoretical while trust is practical.]

An old story: Clifford was leaning against the fence, enjoying a beautiful view from the top of the Grand Canyon, when the wooden posts suddenly ripped from their cement moorings. Seconds later, Clifford was plunging down into the abyss.

Halfway to the bottom his desperate arm-waving helped Clifford catch the branch of a scrubby tree that grew from the canyon wall. Grasping, grasping, he looked both up and down. No way could he climb that sheer cliff, even if he could swing his body toward the wall. But below yawns the chasm, unbroken by any other tree or holding place. To fall would be to die, horribly crushed to the rocks below. No one had seen him and he hung out of sight, knowing that the wind would scatter his weak voice no matter how loudly he shouted.

Desperate, Clifford cried out to the heavens: A God help me! Hearing his own trembling voice, he wailed again, Please, God, help me.

To Clifford=s amazement, he heard an immediate answer. All right, came the voice. The initial warmth Clifford felt turned to a chill wind gripping his body as the voice continued: Let go.

Looking down, Clifford saw the huge boulders waiting below, and knew again that if he let go he would surely die. “Let go?” he thought. But you don’t understand! I’m too far up,,,

Let go, the voice repeated.

Silence filled the canyon. Then, in a weak, terrified voice Clifford called out, Ais there anyone else up here?

Trusting, at its core, is a disposition of release, of letting go of the objects we desire and possess, of ambition, of ego, of control and the inclination to control. To aspire to a high degree of trust in God or in others is to counter the culture of scientific humanism, the can-do, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality that insists that all things are humanly possible.

A theological sidebar related to Hurricane Katrina: even on Day One of the Hurricane, before the extent of loss was known, great anger was directed at the failure of government officials, city, state, and national, to adequately prepare for a storm that many had warned was inevitable, failures to bolster the levees, failures to adequately fund and staff FEMA, failures to create efficient systems of coordination among national, state, and local agencies, failure to address a multiplicity of social issues associated with poverty in the two poorest of our nation=s states, even failure

to heed the warnings about global warming. While I am not denying justification to such anger, I would suggest that even had the citizenry been effectively assertive and even had the officials at all government levels been maximally wise, hurricanes would happen, and earthquakes, and tornadoes, and other disasters unleashed by forces of nature, or as, the insurance companies put it, Acts of God. Acts of God happen and while we humans may attempt to ready ourselves, they remind us that we are not in control as much as we might wish or as much as we often imagine we are.

A tourist from America once came to visit the Chafetz Chaim, one of the great 19th century sages of Eastern Europe. The tourist arrived at the single room that comprised the home of the famous rabbi armed with questions he had intended to pose, questions only few could be expected to answer. The tourist entered the room and looked around. He saw a table, a desk, a bookcase, a closet, a bed, and a chair.

His prepared questions flew out of his mind. Instead, he asked, Where are your possessions?

Where are **your** possessions? came the rabbi's reply.

What do you mean, where are my possessions? asked the tourist. I'm just a visitor here. So am I, said the Chafetz Chaim.

For me, and I suspect for many others, acquiring more fully the quality of trust looms as a very big challenge, if doing so means complete detachment from the things I enjoy or if it means releasing parts of myself, of paring away my ego. It is a challenge accepted only with grave reservations. Taken to an extreme, a posture of trust would yield passivity and a reliance on miracles rather than effort to get one through the day. However, Judaism opposes a reliance on miracles, but rather insists that one employ the intellect in solving dilemmas and that one adopt a posture of ethical activism with regard to the needs of the disadvantaged. Thus, trust must not swing us to a state of passivity or to one of disinterest in the world, God forbid.

Writes Alan Morinis, teacher of Mussar:

Bitachon is the ability to surrender to the reality of the moment. It is like a person who falls off a ship into the sea. If she struggles to stay afloat she will drown. If she relaxes into the sea, the sea will carry her....Trusting in God means knowing there are no mistakes.... No mistake doesn't mean there are no problems or challenges. Suffering is real and must be faced and challenges demand exertion. *Bitachon* does not deny the reality of what are

feeling, it simply says that you should recognize the largest truth in the circumstances, for which you are not wholly responsible.

....These *Yamim Noraim* Days of Awe present us with multiple images of Divine Sovereignty and human puniness. You, God, are the Shepherd while we are the sheep ... reminders of mortality ... emphasis on future generations ... the imperative of *teshuva*, our inward, repentant turning all point toward a reorientation of the scenery of our inmost selves, the place where we give up all masks, even the one we wear for ourselves alone... in that place of naked honesty where even ego stands aside we face our essential dependency on the Holy One and the unavoidable, necessary, and freeing willingness to give in to a trust that plants the seeds for great equanimity.

In the words of Apollinaire:
Come to edge!
No, we will fall.
Come to the edge.
No we will fall.
They came to the edge. He pushed them and they flew.

Or as we conclude most Jewish worship:
B=yado Afkeed Ruachi,
B=Eyt Ishan V=aira;
V=im Ruchi G=viyati,
Adonai Li V=Lo Ira.

I place my spirit in Your hands,
when I wake and when I sleep.
My body and my spirit are with You;
God is with me, I shall not fear.