

## Relating to the (introverted) God of Isaac - Rosh Hashanah Day Two - 5779

The story of the Akedah, the near-sacrifice of Isaac, is an interesting – one might even say, improbable – selection as the Torah portion for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah. The *sedra* portrays its protagonist, our forefather Abraham, in a remarkably negative light, as a near-child killer. What is more it raises serious questions about the nature of the tradition that would elevate a man with such demonic intentions to the status of supreme patriarch -- or would embrace the God who would demand (or seemingly demand) such horrific proof of faith and loyalty.

So, why was this portion selected as this day's reading? What is there of value that our Sages and the tradition itself assume we might imbibe through our exposure to it?

Unsurprisingly the Jewish canon offers no single unambiguous response to these questions, but there are a few widely circulated explanations that I can share with you:

- The Akedah is a testament to one man's faith in a season when we might be feeling our own faith to be inadequate.
- The Akedah is an assurance of the unbounded love that existed between God and Abraham, a relationship whose intensity we might aspire to.
- The Akedah, through Isaac's acquiescence to his father's plan, shows the kind of perfect loyalty that we are meant to feel towards the tradition and its God.

These are all fine explanations, explanations that work for many people – and have for generations. But they don't work for me, and perhaps not for you either. Mine is not a Judaism that is founded on – nor idealizes – a blind faith in God or in tradition. Mine is not a religion that calls upon me to be willing to sacrifice all that is dear to me or to victimize others in its name. Mine is not a religion in which devotion is demonstrated through pain.

So, let me share with you a different reading of the Akedah, a reading that has been emerging in my own mind over the years and came to the fore this year as I was contemplating this difficult text. This reading asks us to contemplate the Akedah as a study in different kinds of relationships, in different personality types as revealed in the ways that different relationships play out. In this sense, it uses the Akedah story as something of a Meyers-Briggs personality index – applied to God.

I believe the Tradition's intent in bringing the Akedah story before us this morning is to lead us to contemplate a profoundly troubling and complex set of questions: the question of our own relationship with God, and the question of the nature of the God with whom we are in relationship. It is the second of these questions that I will prioritize this morning.

Before I start, I am guessing that there may be some in this room who object to the claim that God has a "personality," after all, God isn't a person. God *isn't* a person, yet, as the Rambam asserts, we humans *need* to conceptualize God in human terms because it is only in an anthropomorphic ("human-like") framework that we stand a chance of capturing the incredible nuance of who or what God is. We are far more sophisticated in examining our relationships with other humans than we are any other types of interactions.

What is more, there is ample precedent in the tradition for talking about God as having different personalities or modalities of being which God selectively chooses to share with us (humans) at different points in human history. In Midrash Rabah, for example, we find a reference to God's seventy (70) different faces, that is to say the seventy forms of self-presentation that God can choose from.

And in our liturgy and philosophical works there is reference made to different Gods – not different Gods in the sense of a pantheon, but different “Gods” in the sense of trying to conjecture or even influence “which face God will show us today, in this moment?”

This, in fact, plays out as one of the central tensions in our High Holiday liturgy: the conflict between God as a parent (*Avinu*) and God as Sovereign (*Malkeinu*). We develop it explicitly in the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service in which we end each of the special sections with the pronouncement:

היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים,  
אם כבנים, אם כעבדים.  
אם כבנים-רחמנו כרחם אב על בנים,  
ואם כעבדים-עינינו לך תלויות  
עד שתחננו ותוציא כאור משפטנו, איום קדוש

*“Today the world is conceived. Today all Creation stands in judgement,  
whether as [God’s] children or [God’s] subjects.*

*If [we stand before You] as [Your] children, show us mercy, as a parent would to their child.  
If [we stand before You] as [Your] subjects, our fate depends on you being a merciful judge, O our  
awesome and holy One.”*

Also in our High Holiday liturgy, but not uniquely so, is the three part – or, in the egalitarian liturgy, seven-part – clause that opens the Amidah:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו אלהי אברהם אלהי יצחק ואלהי יעקב

*Blessed are You our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,  
[Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah] ...*

This sobriquet is more than just a way to cozy up to God. It is meant to be an acknowledgement of the very different relationship that God had with each of our patriarchs (and matriarchs).

Who, for example, is the God of Abraham – not just the God we see in today's Torah reading, but God as revealed throughout God's over-arching relationship with our first patriarch?

The God of Abraham is a solid, voluble, visible (in all but the most literal sense) presence.

God is Abraham's champion in a manner that mirrors Abraham's defense of God and monotheism. When Abraham gets into a bind – a misunderstanding with the Pharaoh of Egypt or the King of Gerar, a rivalry within his household, a crisis of self-worth – God is consistently there to help him out.

God not only helps Abraham. God talks to him and makes God's presence and God's concern known.

Think of the *brit bein habetarim*, that bizarre incident in which Abraham expresses concern over his legacy, the fact that he remains childless. No sooner has he expressed these concerns that God manifests and commands Abraham to sacrifice some livestock and lay their cleaved carcasses on the ground. Then God, manifesting as a wall of fire, processes through the offerings, consuming them in a burning flame, before reassuring Abraham that their covenant has not been forgotten and asking him to keep faith. What is more, not long after that incident, Abraham's first son, Ishmael is born.

God is equally attentive and responsive some time later when Abraham experiences a second crisis of faith. In this case, it is not Abraham's faith in God that is in question – after all, he now has two living sons to carry on his legacy – but rather his faith in himself.

Reading with Aviva Zornberg, I understand the entire Akedah incident to have stemmed from a need within Abraham's *own* psyche to feel sufficient in his relationship with God. Abraham needed to prove that he was holding back nothing from God and so conjures a voice in his mind's ear, that he perceives to be the voice of the Divine, asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

In response, God gives Abraham just enough time to demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is sincere in his intentions and then – before our patriarch can do anything truly regrettable – God sends a messenger to stay his hand. "Abraham, don't do it! Don't kill your son! I believe you. I know that you love me, and I love you. Take this ram as your sacrifice instead."

The God of Jacob, Abraham's grandson, is not so different from the entity that I just described. Jacob's God is, perhaps, a bit more "heady" than Abraham's God. Rather than making direct pronouncements, Jacob's God tends to engage him in debates or to hint at the direction that the heir to monotheism should take.

Nevertheless, Jacob's God is reassuringly *present*. God helps Jacob out of some of his most vexing binds. When Jacob vies with Laban to gain the resources the younger man will need to assert his independence, God bestows on him a magic wand that dictates that Jacob's flocks will be fecund, while Laban's sheep and goats, fed in the same pastures, fail to bear. When Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, are at each other's throats, God "remembers" Rachel and bestows on her a child, quieting the tension between the sisters.

Indeed, God frequently manifests to Jacob unbidden. Twice – once during his flight from his father's camp and again as he is returning – Jacob has intense encounters with God in a dream sequence that plays out in the middle of the desert. In one instance God presents as a posse of angels who ascend and descend a heavenly ladder, assuring Jacob that he will remain connected to God even when he travels beyond the confines of his father's camp.

In the second dream God's angelic messenger – since no human can view God directly – descends to wrestle with Jacob, even as Jacob himself is wrestling with his destiny. "You are up to this, Jacob," the

angel says to his injured co-combatant as the dawn breaks. You have what it takes to carry on your people's destiny, and with that he bestows on him a new name, Israel, meaning "God wrestler".

Isaac's experience of God is entirely different from that of both his father and his son.

In God's relationship with Isaac, God's dominant way of "being" is silence. God is a quiet, almost passive observer as the drama of the Akedah unfolds. God sees Abraham lay his plans and allows the father to lead his helpless son for three days towards the altar without intervening. Three days of *torture* for Isaac, who is obviously aware of what lays ahead, for he asks of his father as they walk, "And what of the lamb?" That is, "Are you really going to do this to me?"

It is only in the eleventh hour that God steps in to save Isaac by staying Abraham's hand and supplying the ram in his place.

And the suffering that Isaac incurs in this instance is not an isolated example. God allows Isaac to suffer in his childhood under Ishmael's bullying – or worse. God takes Sarah, Isaac's mother, from the boy just as the tortured soul is returning from his near-death on the mountain. God even allows Isaac's wife and son to deceive him in the transfer of the birthright to his younger son (Jacob) rather than the older son (Esau), whom Isaac prefers, because God recognizes that Jacob is the more worthy son.

After all this one could wonder if Isaac even *has* a relationship with God. But our texts and tradition are unwavering in asserting that he *has*. Indeed, Isaac's relationship with God is held up to be the purest of the patriarchs. And why? I believe it is because Isaac can identify and relate to a face of God that would be lost on either Isaac's father (Abraham) or his son (Jacob).

The God of Abraham and the God of Jacob are both extroverted images. They are faces of God that it is easy to be drawn to. Easy to rally behind.

This God is a big, gregarious presence who (literally) fills the room and sucks all the air out of it, voluble, active, aggressively involved in the wider world.

Abraham and Jacob's God is the kind of God – the kind of "guy" – that you could imagine running for public office and winning! He would be selected as captain of His varsity team, would serve as the inspirational head of His corporate board. He would be the charismatic general of His people's army. And He is.

But as we have learned by having "larger than life" overly decisive, action-oriented leaders in these kinds of positions, it is not always an unambiguous blessing to favor the extrovert.

As Susan Cain has pointed out in her 2012 best-seller *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, there are certain kinds of problems that tend to dog extroverts. Their urge to act, even before they think, can make them impulsive and cause them and those who follow them to lurch from pillar to post. Their need to talk can crowd out other voices and make it difficult to develop other ideas. Their need to be at the center pushes everyone else to the periphery, and the periphery is not the place most of us want to occupy in our most central relationships.

Isaac's God is different. Isaac's God is an introvert. Isaac's God is a thinker, content to observe and cogitate for long periods of time before acting. Isaac's God is a bit of a loner, keeping to himself for extended periods of time and withdrawing to a quiet, distant space after a period of intense interaction. Isaac's God is content to observe from the sidelines for extended periods of time before making His presence known and then when He does act, doing so minimally, thoughtfully, without drawing a lot of attention to Himself.

I am no different from most of you in my cultural lenses. I am as likely as the next person to gravitate towards a leader who is an extrovert. I would be as happy as, I am guessing, most of you would be to be in a relationship with a visible, voluble God who stepped in, palpably, whenever I found myself in crisis – whenever I found myself in doubt.

But my experience has been that this is not the God with whom I happen to be in relationship. The God whom I experience in life is more similar to Isaac's God – if anything, a bit further withdrawn.

So what can I learn from this idiosyncratic patriarch and his relationship to God?

First, a relationship with a more introverted God tends not to be "love at first sight". It is built over time. Isaac does not take the initiative in reaching out to God until *after* his marriage to Rebecca. The first instance in which we see him seeking God out as a source of succor and assistance is when his wife expresses pain over being barren and Isaac turns to his, then, long-time friend for help.

Second, a shy God is best approached in quiet spaces where there are few if any people around, not amidst crowds. I realize that this is an ironic claim to make at a HHD service. Nevertheless, our Sages tell us that the mainstay of Isaac's relationship with God is his daily forays out into the fields surrounding his camp, where he would presumably carry out his own unstructured conversations with the Divine – or perhaps just spend a bit of quiet time together. This practice is offered as the rationale for our now-obligatory *minchah* prayer service.

Third, a successful relationship with a more reticent God requires of us patience, patience and forbearance. It is unrealistic to expect God to jump in at every instance in which we experience doubt, frustration or pain with advice or with a solution. Isaac had to do a lot of problem solving himself and to endure a great deal of personal hardship. But that did not mean that God was not looking on and taking him into account. In the moments where it really mattered, God did step in, decisively, to tip the scales in Isaac's favor – in Isaac's favor in ways that sometimes even Isaac did not understand at the time.

The task of building a meaningful relationship with a more introverted God is, perhaps, more challenging than would be the task of relating to a God who is a more aggressively, self-evident presence. But such a relationship, though demanding, is not without its rewards. Remember, some of the most profound changes in human history have been effected by introverts.

So, let us embrace the face that God has chosen to turn towards us. Let us follow in the footsteps of our under-appreciated ancestor Isaac, who discovered a God with whom he could cherish quiet moments of intimacy, a God who invited him to speak, rather than drowning out his voice, a God who was – and is –

there in also during the extended and sometimes trying periods of silence – observing, listening, feeling, caring and, when called for, thoughtfully, acting.