

# Not Isaac, Not Anyone

## Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

The Akeda, the binding of Isaac, is one of the most terrifying and challenging stories in all of Torah. It is also one of the core narratives of Rosh Hashannah, read in most synagogues either the first or second day of the year. Let me remind you of the story:

From the book of Genesis 22

Take your son, the one you love Isaac...

We expect Abraham to argue...

He rises early, burdens Isaac with the wood...

They walk in silence...

“Aba, dad, I’m carrying the wood...”

They climb the mountain

The sacrifice is prepared...

The wood is laid out...

Isaac is bound to the rock alter – hence the name akeda – the binding

Abraham’s knife is raised, poised to slit his son’s throat when...

“Al tishlakh yadkha al hanahar...Don’t raise your hand against the boy!”

Abraham looks up and sees the ram caught in the thicket...

The ram is sacrificed instead of Isaac

Abraham is blessed: “...because you have done this and not withheld your son, I will bestow my blessings upon you and make your descendents as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sands of the sea...” This is a terrifying tale and I would skip it all together if it were not so relevant to our lives, especially today. I guess it is always relevant; that’s why we’ve been reading it on Rosh Hashannah every year for the past 2,000 years, give or take...

I can’t think of the Akeda without first thinking about Israel. Why? There’s the setting, har hamoriah, Mount Moriah which, according to Jewish tradition, is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That’s right; the near sacrifice of Isaac takes place at the same spot where the great Temple in Jerusalem was built!

Beside the physical setting of this “terror on the mountain”, there is the fact that over the years, Israeli’s have seen their own struggle for peace and security through the lens of this story as well. It is as if every Israeli son sent to do battle is in some way Isaac, and every parent, an Abraham or Sarah. God, God is the silent partner to the seemingly endless saga of pain and sacrifice.

The Akeda is such a powerful myth in Israel today that a whole genre of Modern Israeli poetry has developed around it. All the great Israeli poets have written on the subject, but tonight we only have time for one; a poem by Rachel, a renown poet of the early years of the state. Her poem is called “The Binding:”

The Binding:

And the boy climbs the mountain

On his shoulder a machine gun ready. –

But where is the lamb for a burnt offering, my son! asks the old  
Father who stays at home.

I am going to the temple, my father, and on my way Mine and thicket, and on my way  
The Angel my father.

Lay not thine hand upon the lad – he cries

Not now, not now

Not until the next war.

“Al tishlakh yadkha al hanahar...lay not thine hand against the boy!” That line is the climax of  
her poem, and the climax of the story in the Torah. It is also the universal cry of every parent  
who’s child is sent off to war, “

*Al tishlakh yadkha al hanahar...lay not thine hand against the boy!”*

In the Torah, Abraham does not ultimately sacrifice his child. In real life, not every Isaac comes  
home. And even when they do survive, when the knife is held back at the last minute, there is no  
guarantee that those who go to war and come home can ever truly come home again.

Isaac never does. If you read a little further on in the story, you’ll notice that while he and his  
father climb Mount Moriah together, Abraham returns alone! I guess they could not face each  
other after what had happened.

Isaac does not return with his father and, from that point on, he is a shadow of a man. We are  
told, for example, that he re-digs his father’s wells. What a stunning metaphor. The trauma of the  
terror on the mountain is so great that Isaac is unable to build a life of his own. Rather, he is  
caught in the shadow of his father’s actions, a shadow of a man. In fact, we hear very little from  
Isaac. He is mostly silent, he goes prematurely blind, when he does speak, it is the language of a  
weak and feeble man, easily tricked and manipulated by his family.

Thankfully, I have been spared war, and the horror of war. But I have spent enough time in Israel  
to get a glimpse of what war can do to the bnei adam, the plan, human beings that get thrust into  
the firestorm of military conflict.

During the first Infitada, the first Palestinian uprising, Laura and I lived in Jerusalem. We shared  
a *mirpeset*, a porch, with a young couple, Chen & Segal. They were in their late 20’s in school at  
Hebrew University. Chen was a tall, thin, gentle man, who happened to speak Arabic. His  
language skills came in handy, and he was often called for reserve duty serving in hot spots like  
Gaza and Hebron. I saw Chen go and return once while we were there.

I saw what Segal went through while he was away... she slept poorly, she cried a lot. By the  
time he returned, she had large dark circles under her eyes. I was shocked to see Chen after a  
month in Hebron. Chen left, healthy, quiet but happy. He returned gaunt, chain smoking, a  
shadow of the man he was.

So far we have focused on the Akeda as it is played out in Israeli society, but of course, this is  
not just an Israeli story. This is a universal human story being played out right now in our  
country as well. Israel is a small country and because of this, it is impossible not to feel the

affects of the many wars. Almost everyone serves in the army at some time in their life and every family is touched by the trauma of war, or terror, or both. America is the big wide open, a place where one can easily hide from almost everything, including the fact that we are at war, right now, even as I am talking to you, right now. Right now someone could be dying from a sniper's bullet, a road side bomb...right now.

We are at war. Almost every day someone's son, someone's Isaac, is killed in a myriad of different but equally effective ways and there is no end in sight. When will it end? What will be the ultimate price? Up until recently the war in Iraq was like the great white elephant in the room that no one was talking about. Now, thanks in large part to Cindy Sheehan, we are slowly starting to wake up to the fact that we are at war.

It is interesting to me that it takes the tears, indignation and determination of a bereaved mother to catch our attention. In the Akeda, the voice of Sarah, Isaac's mother, is silent. The Torah does not tell us her side of the story. The midrash however, does fill in some of the gaps. For example, we are told that Abraham left early in the morning to avoid Sarah and that when he did speak to her he lied about what he and Isaac were up to. Interesting... He lied... The truth would be too damning! Abraham in his zealotry, in his blind faith, perhaps in his insanity, would sacrifice the child. Not Sarah.

The midrash teaches that when Sarah heard what Abraham had done, she died of a broken heart.

The statistics of the war in Iraq are alarming but they are too impersonal. Instead, I want to share an op-ed letter from the New York Times called "Lost Fathers". It reflects, in some ways, Sarah's voice, Cindy Sheehan's voice and the voice of all those others Isaac's, who've never come home:

*As the daughter of a soldier killed in action, I'm worried sick about this generation of war-torn families. I read the growing casualty list from Iraq and think about the number of children who are being left fatherless — or motherless. I consider the fourth grader who stands alone at recess trying to recall her father's voice; the weeping bride who walks the aisle alone, wishing with every step that her father was there to escort her; and all those babies not yet born, their memories not yet formed.*

*I keep a photo of my father on my desk. In it, he's wearing combat boots, Army greens and a grin so sweet it makes my heart drip with sorrow....*

*I can remember what my father smelled like — sweat and sun-dried T-shirts — but I can no longer recall the timbre of his voice or the warmth of his embrace. Photos and memories are all I have left of him.*

*He went away in December 1965. "President Johnson has asked me to go to South Vietnam," he said.*

*"What are you going to do there?" I asked. "Help fight communism", he replied.*

*I retreated to my room in tears. I cried, simply because he was going away and I was afraid he would never come back. "I'll come back, I promise", Daddy said, wiping my tears as he sat on the edge of my bed.*

*Daddy kept his promise. He did come back: in a silver coffin, draped with a red-white-and- blue flag.*

*The sacrifices didn't stop when the war ended.*

*My parents fell in love as kids. They expected to grow old together, but only Mama has grown old. She eats her soup, beans, and cornbread alone and remembers with heartache the man who enticed her to laugh on sunny days.*

*I'm troubled by the nightmares that surely await this generation of battle-scarred children. I know they will grow up, longing for just one more embrace. And like me, they are doomed to spend their lifetimes asking – wasn't there any better way?*

Karen Pears-Zacharias' letter brings home the irreversible, multigenerational affect of war on the survivors. For most of us, the war in Israel or in Iraq is happening to someone else. It is their sacrifice, their Isaac, their future that is at risk, not ours. Perhaps if our lives were on the line we'd be more awake to what is at stake?

One of the most chilling things about the Akeda is the silence of Abraham. What happened to Abraham's voice? Where is the Abraham who, earlier in the story, was willing to argue with God over the fate of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, "Will you sweep the innocent along with the guilty...?" How can Abraham be so silent when God demands the innocent life of his own son? Where is Abraham's voice? Where is his voice as they are walking to the slaughter site? Every time I read this tale I want to scream: 'Speak! Say something!' In this story, the silence is deafening.

Where is our voice? Are we struck dumb like Abraham, lulled into complacency by our own distance from Iraq? Is Iraq too far away or are we too caught up in the good life here in Sonoma County to give a damn? How many Isaacs will have to be sacrificed before our voices will be heard?

Imagine, for a moment, that there was a draft, and it was your son or grandson, your nephew or friend who was about to be sent off to Iraq – would you be so silent, so passive, so acquiescent then?

I am not a pacifist, at least not yet. I recognize that there are times when war is necessary. Nevertheless, I stand in the long chain of Jewish tradition which sees war as the means of last resort, to be avoided except in self-defense. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether our actions in Iraq are justified. I will suggest however, when it comes to war here or anywhere, our silence is not justified. At every turn it should be our voice that raises the question: is this necessary? Is there no other way? And when the answer is yes, there is another way, let us not be silent, rather, let us say:

“Al tishlakh yadkha al hanahar...Don't raise your hand against the boy!”

Rosh Hashannah, the New Year is here. Unlike the secular culture where you party into the New Year, we take this time to do a heshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul. This is the time for reflection, introspection and reorientation. It is the time for teshuvah, a return to what we know is the right path.

As part of this process of teshuvah, of repentance and renewal, we blow the shofar. The shofar is our moral alarm clock. Its shrill sound is designed to wake us from our slumber, to arouse within each one of us the desire to do the right thing, to strive, yet again, to be the best people we can be.

This you probably know. What you may not is that the blowing of the shofar is also a remembrance of the Akeda. Remember, at the last minute a ram was found caught in a thicket and it was the ram, not Isaac, which was ultimately killed.

“Why do we sound the ram's horn,” the Talmud, asks? “Because the Holy One, blessed be God said, ‘Blow a ram's horn that I may remember unto you the binding of Isaac...and I shall account it to you as if you bound yourself.’”

We are bound together with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, the son that they nearly lost, the son that, in some ways, they did lose. We are bound by tradition and by circumstance. As much as things change, sadly, they stay the same.

But this is a New Year. Our tradition teaches that the doors of teshuvah, the doors of repentance, of renewal are always open. There is no point of no return. We can change, we can make a difference, we can find our true voice in the New Year.

As we enter the New Year, as we gather together to hear the piercing calls of the shofar, may we remember the Akeda, the near sacrifice of Isaac, the “terror on the mountain” and resolve to break the cycle, break the silence and shout with one voice – Al tishlakh yadkha al hanahar...lay not thine hand against the boy!” Not Isaac, not anyone, not now and not in the year that lies ahead.