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The Binding of Isaac: Restoring *Kavod* to our Family Relationships

Gut yontev.

The father of the Jewish people takes his defenseless son up a mountain and prepares him as a human sacrifice to show his obedience to God. In its own right, today's Torah reading, *Akeidat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, is a disturbing story. Also disturbing is the recent Grand Jury Report out of Pennsylvania, where 301 predator priests were named in a sex abuse report identifying 1,000 child victims. There is speculation of thousands of additional unreported instances of abuse. In both the modern Grand Jury report, which found "the main thing was not to help children but to avoid scandal," and our biblical story of Isaac bound atop Mount Moriah, there is a palpable lack of *kavod*, (honor and respect).

Why am I focusing on *kavod*? Our CBS Board of Directors has chosen to dedicate the Year 5779 to the Jewish value of *kavod* all our varied relationships.

Inspired by today's Torah reading from Genesis, and recent headlines, we will explore the application of *kavod* in our families, particularly between parents and children, although I am also interested in *kavod* between spouses and significant others – and for the younger set, boyfriends and girlfriends.

Having just summarized the *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac, in what clearly sounds like a story of child abuse, we have to ask why on earth was it chosen for our Torah reading on one of the most sacred days on our Jewish calendar?! WHY is this story so central to Judaism? This is such a pivotal story – there are people continually study this. *Akeidah* scholar Shalom Spiegel writes that the *Akeidah* “renews itself in every time of crisis when people are suffering from oppression. It is meant to fortify them, to give them courage in their trials as Abraham displayed in his.” I suppose that Spiegel is saying that if Abraham could survive HIS crisis, we can survive ours too.

In his book, *Fear and Trembling*, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard refers to Abraham as “the knight of faith” – who -- because of his extraordinary devotion, able to suspend the categories of the human ethical realm. His faith is a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God.”

In her article *The Legacy of Abraham*, reacting to Kierkegaard, Carol Delaney comments: “What becomes clear is that the love of God or duty comes before the love of people. In fact love of God is placed in opposition to love of kin rather the fulfillment of it.”

Philosopher Martin Buber warned us against transforming our loved ones into objects. He said we must aspire to turn our “I-it” relationships into “I-Thou” relationships.

Applying Buber to this story, Isaac is an “it.” He is the object Abraham is willing to sacrifice to remain in God’s good graces. When children become “its,” when they become objects, it is easier to hurt them. When human beings become its, there is no *kavod*. How can there be?

That is precisely why the predatory priest scandal is such a cautionary tale for each-and-every one of us. In our family relationships, we must begin by preserving *kavod* between our children and us.

Our Fifth Commandment of the Torah states: *kibayd et avicha v'et emecha* –“Honor your father and your mother.” I think we are conditioned from youth to focus on the respect children must show their parents. But what about the *kavod* parents must show their children?

The old notion that “children should be seen but not heard” is exactly that – an OLD notion. From planning family vacations to simpler decisions, like where the family should go for dinner, we should make space for our children’s input. And speaking of dinner – how many of our dinner tables are a place where true communication still happens? Can our children truly communicate what happened in school today? If a teacher or a student was abusive, have we done enough to create a safe environment with attentive and validating parents, where our children can tell us the full truth of what they have experienced.

In the *Akeidat Yitzhak* story, Abraham never tells Isaac what he intends to do. There is one scene in the story where Isaac, not completely unaware of the danger, subtly asks his father: “there is the wood, and there is the fire-starter, but where is the sacrifice?” To which Abraham answers, “God will see to the sacrifice.” And then the two men continue up the mountain in silence. The story ends with Abraham descending the mountain alone.

Abraham and Isaac never exchange another word in the Torah. The next time the Torah recounts Abraham and Isaac together is when Isaac buries Abraham. Clearly, to maintain their relationship, Abraham would have needed to say something to his son after placing him in such a perilous position.

Communication is one way of demonstrating *kavod*. During High Holy Days we try to give loved ones every opportunity to apologize for things they have done to hurt one another. In this story, there are no apologies. Just silence.

One can assume their relationship is damaged beyond repair.

[[Pause]]

I have my suspicion there are other very damaged relationships between parents and children in our own community. How can we possibly reconcile those terrible feelings with the commandment of honoring a parent or the tradition of saying Yizkor for someone who caused you grief while they were alive?

In our Yizkor book, we have included every year at Yom Kippur a reading titled “Yizkor Meditation In Memory of a Parent Who Was Hurtful,” by Robert Saks. Let me share an excerpt:

Dear God,

My emotions swirl as I say this prayer. The parent I remember was not kind to me. Their death left me with a legacy of unhealed wounds, of anger and of dismay that a parent could hurt a child as I was hurt.

I do not want to pretend to love, or to grieve what I do not feel, but I do want to do what is right as a Jew and as a child.

I can imagine Isaac saying that prayer as he looks back on that time when he was laid out on an alter looking at his half-crazed father who was moments away from lowering a knife across his neck.

Kavod is a two-way street. It is of course incumbent upon children to show respect for their parents. But parents also need to be deserving of *kavod*. Parents need to model the *kavod* they wish to receive by demonstrating it, both to their spouses AND to their children. It is said that children are sponges. From an early age they observe everything we do, and then they practice doing it themselves.

At its heart, the Binding of Isaac is a story of unbounding faith. But it doesn't only have to be only about one thing. Our biblical stories are like an onion. You can keep peeling it back and new surfaces are revealed – new understandings and new values appear. The Binding of Isaac is a *dialectic* – where two seemingly opposite ideas exist at once – in other words the story can embrace what we SHOULD do and what we should NOT do at the same time. *Akeidat Yitzhak* IS a story of faithful obedience, and it is a story of the absence of *kavod* between father and son, leading to a complete break in a fundamental family relationship.

The binding of Isaac is also a story of an absence of *kavod* between husband and wife. It was after all, Sarah, NOT Abraham, who bore a nine month pregnancy in her 90th year of life. We read about it in yesterday's Torah reading. Isaac was not simply an object Abraham could do with what he pleased.

In a relationship based on *kavod*, Abraham owed Sarah a conversation about what he intended to do with their son. Marriage therapists report that it is a lack of communication which is the number one reason why marriages fail. And after the Binding of Isaac, there is no doubt that Abraham and Sarah's marriage fails. *Akeidat Yitzhak* is literally the death blow in their relationship. I'll return to this idea of the "death blow" in a little while.

What is so shocking about this story is, that after all Sarah has suffered at the expense of following her husband's Jewish journey, in this their most critical hour as a couple, he undertakes this fateful decision to sacrifice their son, alone. Where is the *kavod* in that?

Next month, the Rabbi Jacob Kraft Adult Education Committee is teaming up with the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd to bring Rabbi Naomi Levy to Wilmington as our scholar-in-residence the weekend of October 26-28. Rabbi Levy comes to us on the heels of her recently-published book, *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul*. Perhaps with Abraham and Sarah in mind, Rabbi Levi writes:

(Here is some free counseling:)

“Over my many years of counseling couples, I’ve noticed that the most common cause of suffering and pain between partners has to do with people stubbornly needing to get their own way. When I speak to a couple dealing with issues of inflexibility I say to each of them: You can pick the restaurant you want to eat in every single night of the week. You can decorate your home any way you like. You can go to see any movie your heart desires. The only problem is: you’ll have to do it alone.

If you want to make your life with someone else you must find the inner resources to learn the sacred art of shrinking. You contract in order to grow. By letting someone else in, you become so much more than you were before. When you tune in to the right frequency you can hear what your beloved is trying to tell you and you can get yourself out of the way. You contract because love means each person must be recognized, seen and heard.”

The idea of “sacred shrinking” pre-dates the Abraham and Sarah story. The *Zohar*, the big book of Biblical mysticism, imagines that in the Beginning, God was everywhere, and there was no place for human beings.

It was all God, so everywhere there was perfection. Then God reluctantly shrunk, making room for both human beings and for imperfection. God's shrinking, the kabbalah calls it *tsimtsum*, was a compromise God was willing to make in order to allow human beings into His world.

Abraham may have thought he was right in his decision to sacrifice Isaac. But in his inability to shrink, to make room for Sarah in his decision-making process, Abraham ultimately sacrificed his relationship with Sarah. She dies, reportedly of a broken heart, while he is still atop Mount Moriah.

Aside from demonstrating love of and fidelity to God, Abraham also comes to teach us how vital communication and *kavod* is to make a relationship work. All things, especially hard things, must be discussed between couples, or the relationship cannot survive, or perhaps the relationship CAN survive, but it never reaches its full potential. There are plenty of hard things couples need to discuss: from how the couple balances the budget, to how the couple balances making time for work with making time for intimacy.

Earlier, I spoke of *Akeidat Yitzhak* being a death "death blow" to Abraham and Sarah. It is true. Abraham and Sarah's relationship does NOT survive this story.

The Rabbis note that immediately after *Akeidat Yitzhak*, the very next narrative is *Hayyei Sarah*, the recounting of the Death of Sarah. All the Midrashim connect Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac with the immediate death of Sarah. After experiencing so much together since they first began their journey in Ur, back in *parshat Lech Lecha*, now at the end, Abraham and Sarah are done. It's just so sad.

Rabbinic tradition holds that every sacred text read aloud must end happily. Rather than conclude with the image of Abraham and Sarah's marriage failing, , let us instead end with a blessing Rabbi Levy wrote for married couples:

If you are not married at this particular High Holy Days...perhaps the same prayer can be applied to a special friend, a child, or a parent with whom you still want a special relationship.

May the Creator bless you with a lifetime of laughter. May your passion grow stronger with each passing year. May your friendship evolve in depth and in strength. May the bonds of your nuclear family grow deeper and tighter. And may God bless you with a sacred peace that reflects the wholeness of two souls becoming One.

And let us say *Amen*

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