

D'var Torah

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The Sacrifice of Isaac. The story about the time Abraham follows God's orders and takes his son, Isaac, to be sacrificed. And, just before Abraham is about to slaughter his own son, an Angel calls to him and tells him not to do it, because now Abraham has proven himself to God. Then, miraculously, a ram appears captured and immediately available for said slaughter.

Cool. It's a good story: action, adventure, danger, and one small horned miracle to wrap it all up. If I were a movie producer, I'd be interested in producing this film. But the title is a misnomer. It's not the sacrifice of Isaac, it should be called the "test of Abraham" or "the Abraham experiment" if you want something edgier.

If this were a movie, Isaac's role would be what we, members of the screen actor's guild, call "a five and under." Meaning, Isaac has less than 5 lines in the whole movie, or in this case, Torah portion. Isaac's only lines are "my father" and "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?". That's it. And yet, were set up see this is as Isaac's story and his slaughter. It's not.

Essentially, to borrow from a common today term, Isaac is "othered" in this story. Othering is viewing or treating a person, or group of people as intrinsically different or alien to oneself. Othering is a pattern of exclusion and marginalization based on having an identity that is different from an established "norm". Isaac is being "othered" by being basically ignored, treated as a pawn, and never invited to partake in a conversation about his own life. His own father never clues him as to what is going on. Isaac is told what to do and only asks one question right before he's about to be slaughtered. And then, it can be interpreted that Abraham lied, answering "God will provide the lamb." We won't ever know what was in Abraham's head. Did he believe that God would jump in at the last second and provide a lamb? Was that a complete lie to stop Isaac's questioning? Was a tactic to silence Isaac? Was Abraham intentionally othering or micro aggressing or simply acting with self-preservation in mind?

I've had my own experiences with being "othered," as a Jew. Some similar to Isaac, some not. I'm confident many of you have had some of these experiences as well. Some of the othering has been kid stuff like when I had to explain, yes I'm Jewish no I didn't have horns, or always being the kid in elementary school invited to give a Hanukkah presentation at a December assembly. As you may have guessed, public speaking is my Jam, so that othering instance was always a fun one for me.

There were situations when I've felt potentially "othered". When I was in a place where I felt like being Jewish wasn't going to be warmly accepted or worse. So I chose to blend into whiteness. When asked "are you Italian or Greek?" and I didn't want to get into it or didn't feel safe to get into it, I would nod and smile. I'm not proud of those moments. That doesn't happen much these days. I'm much more confident now in being an other. But every time I chose to blend in, I knew that was a privilege and that many people don't have that option. Isaac did not have a choice to smile, nod, and move along.

There were fun times of being othered like explaining to my dear friend Chuck's distraught grandmother that while my family didn't celebrate Christmas, I assured her we celebrated Birthdays every year. Or the over-the-top hugs I get from people in December wishing me a Happy Hannukah like I just cured cancer while landing on the moon. HAPPY HANNUKAH!

Or one of my all-time favorites "otherings" was when I took my newly neutered dog, Menachem, to the park, and someone, who knew I was Jewish, she was not, noticed his stitches and asked, "oh, did you get that done because you're Jewish?" Moments like this actually get me to pause. What I really wanted to say was "Yes, I'm so Jewish I got my dog circumcised." But this was a random neighbor in the park in Washington Heights so I just smiled, shook my head and moved on.

I've gotten a few of them in my professional acting career too. I've heard a handful of times "your too Jewish to play that role" or a personal favorite, "you're not Jewish enough to play that role".

Othering still happens today – every once in a while I'll get a "oh you're Jewish? So you killed Jesus." This one is frustrating for me. I think because I've had to face this comment often. My guess is, it's not ill intentioned. I think the people who've said this to me are simply uncomfortable, for whatever reason and that's on them, that they're speaking to. Jew. They spew out something they heard or read, long ago for a lack of nothing better to say. But it gets old and tiring. Sometimes I explain that I wasn't anywhere near Jesus during the time of his death, but typically I'm more annoyed at the inane statement and move on. Again, the ability for me to move on and blend in when I want to, is a privilege.

I've had significant otherings too. The summer after I graduated from High School, I got accepted into a very prestigious young people's choir at the time called Fred Waring's US Chorus. This was a sort of homage chorus to Fred Waring who was a musician, tv personality, and the eponym of the Waring Blender.

The chorus was tough to get into – they accepted one girl and one boy from every state. I was the girl from Maryland. It was two weeks of rigorous rehearsal at Mr Waring's alma mater, Penn State. Everyone got a dorm room and a same gender roommate from another state. I got roomed with Kristin from Oklahoma.

On the first night there, as we were chit-chatting, getting into our freshly made dorm bed, Kristin asked if I wanted to pray with her. It was her nightly ritual. I knew in that moment that Kristin from Oklahoma wasn't asking to recite the Shema. I remember thinking I could say "sure" and go along with whatever she said and be done with it. I could be Isaac and lie there and take it. But I had just turned 18, I was going off into the big bad world and trying to define who I wanted to be. And being Jewish is a huge part of that.

But, before I said anything, Kristin says "let's say the lord's prayer" well, now I'm toast. I don't know the Lord's Prayer. Like not even enough to fake my way past the first few words. So I said "I'd love to pray with you, but I don't know the Lord's prayer, I'm Jewish"

Kristen said nothing. She quickly turned the lights off and went to bed. The next day, I return from rehearsal to find Kristen had moved out. She moved to another room. The staff moved a new girl into my room. Sarah Saltzman, from NY. Sarah was thrilled to room with another Jew, and it was something we giggled about for years as our paths crossed on the NYC audition circuit.

This experience stuck with me. I realized being Jewish can make you othered, disregarded, and not invited to conversation. I also have learned that having the confidence to speak up, speak out, educate, inform helps in the situations when I find myself othered. Whether it's the Hannukah assembly or explaining one more time that no, I cannot speak at your conference this year, no matter what you'd like to pay me, because you scheduled it on September 7th & 8th – yes, this annoyingly really just happened.

But I'm lucky. I'm confident, I had the privilege of a great education, I have the privilege of being white and can blend when I want it, I had the drive to become a professional actor since I was a kid, and then I started a company to help people become better communicators and speakers. So they don't find themselves othered.

But what about those who aren't so lucky or privileged or educated or confident? What about those who historically aren't invited to the conversation or get an opportunity to lead? What about those who don't have the luxury and ability to blend in when needed? What about those who are consistently othered because of how they look? What about the Isaac's of the world who become pawns and scapegoats and may not know how or may not be given the opportunity to speak up and confidently question and inform? What about Black youth?

I went to the Baltimore School for the Arts for high school, and although it was a Baltimore City public school, where I grew up, it was an audition-only school. You had to have strong potential and talent to go. I was so proud to get accepted for my freshman year as a voice major, I later became a theatre major, and was surrounded by tremendously talented kids from all walks of life.

I came from a privileged, mostly Jewish private school and found myself in school with just as many Black kids as white kids, and I always got a kick out of being the first Jewish person many of my friends had ever met. Anyway, Tyrell, a Black boy from a very different part of Baltimore I was from, and I became buddies. He was also a voice major, and he was fun to be around, had a super organized backpack, always dressed well and added grape jelly to his egg and cheese sandwiches.

One day we had a few hours off between the end of school and a choir concert, so we decided to walk around downtown Baltimore together instead of going all the way home and coming all the way back. We ended up at Galleria Mall which was in walking distance from school and just walked around, got a snack, and talked. We walked by one particular boutique type store and I told Tyrell I wanted to go in and look at something.

He said "you can go in, but I'm not welcome there". I was like "what? It's not the 1960s anyone can go anywhere. He said "no we can't". I knew what he meant. He meant people of color. He asked me to go in, look at what I wanted and come back, Which I did – nothing extraordinary happened when I was in the store. The women behind the counter looked up, kind of smiled and stated the obligatory "please let me know if I can help you with anything". It was a nothing burger.

Then Tyrell asked me to watch what happened when he went in. "Karen" behind the counter looked up and didn't half-smiled or greeted him. She walked out from behind the counter, stone-faced and followed him around the store, like uncomfortably close, until he left. I was shocked. Tyrell was being othered, clear as day, right in front of me only because of the color of his skin.

As we walked back to school, I imagined the story that "Karen" would have told her coworkers. A story of heroism and saving the store from peril because a young hoodlum dared to enter and look for opportunities of theft. In Karen's movie version, Tyrell was not even a five and under, he was an extra. It had no lines, no say. And if Tyrell was Isaac in this shopping debacle, was the next Black kid that walked in sacrificial lamb?

This theme has repeated itself for a long time for people of color. People of color are not invited into the conversation. They are often told what to do and when they finally have to confidence to ask a question, they are lied to and forced to continue to play their role.

As I mentioned, I run a communication skill training firm, Ovation. It's a little over 10 years old, and all the facilitators are professional actors. I get to employ my friends and keep them working in between their acting gigs. It's fun.

A year ago, I had a meeting scheduled with my friend and colleague, Jason Sanford. Intended to be a fun facetime chat to catch up and cook an egg in a basket, a-la "V for Vendetta" Jason was distraught and morose when I got on the call. He began the conversation by saying, "it's a hard day to be a Black man." It was May 25th, the day George Floyd was killed.

When I asked Jason, "what can I do?" and "what can Ovation do?" he said, "I'm so glad you asked". He shared with me the idea of teaching Ovation's Professional Presence training to Black youth. He believed that empowering them with solid communication and presentation skills could make a difference. Jason went on to share that doing what we do best, teaching the art of human interaction, can affect the change we want to see in the world and prepare these young men and women to be leaders. The idea of Be Ready, a non-profit educating Black Youth at no charge, was born.

We didn't need official data to understand that there were not many Black people holding leadership positions in the workforce, but we did the research anyway. According to the Center for Talent Innovation, only 3.2% of leadership roles at large U.S. companies are held by Black men; and only four CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are Black.

These sobering statistics made clear what our path should be in affecting the change we want to see in the world. We want to see more Black leaders at large companies, non-profits, and academic institutions.

In a hyper-competitive global job market, hiring decisions are often made on the margins. The fact that fear of public speaking cuts wages by 10% and inhibits promotion to management by 15% indicates that learning to deliver effective, confident presentations can help Black youth distinguish themselves from other potential applicants they would be competing with.

In a world that we hope is now destined to shift toward more inclusion, we believe that we are well-suited to help the next generation of Black professionals **be ready** for the new opportunities that await them in a changing world. Students will see professional presence modeled for them by Black trainers on the Ovation team and learn techniques to overcome stage fright, use storytelling to deliver engaging content that has the power to influence any audience, and above all to celebrate their individuality.

Though we hope that society moves swiftly to create more opportunities for the Black community and all marginalized people, we know that lasting social change does not happen on its own and that movement toward an equitable and just society can stall without the sustained energy of companies, organizations, and citizens alike. We are heartened by the commitment so many people like here at CBE and the core values Rabbi Mike spoke of yesterday. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world and embracing justice and righteousness for all communities. We understand that there will be setbacks and obstacles, and we are now committed to playing our part in the lifelong pursuit of a more inclusive world.

We have to be. We all have to be. We owe it to Jason Sanford, to Tyrell, to George Floyd and all those Isaac's who have been and will be Marginalized, used, scapegoated, and left behind. Yes, Jews have experienced too. It wasn't that long ago there were signs that stated "no Dogs or Jews Allowed" And yes, we may have more othering ahead of us, but there is a lot more work to be done for the Black Community. It is absolutely their time and I'm honored to be a small part of getting them to **Be Ready**. to tackle the world.