

The Akedah is the story of our ancestor Abraham's binding his beloved son, Isaac. Isaac might have been a sacrificial offering atop Mount Moriah. We return to this story again and again, Not only during this sacred season but also throughout the year. And When we do, we find the same result. Abraham's absolute unquestioning faith, Isaac's willing agreement and pure naivete, God's infinite mercy in sparing the boy's life. Our story is an example to the world that we should sacrifice for our children and not sacrifice our children. God's test of Abraham is mitigated by the fact that all parties, including the all of us, eventually know that there was never really any danger, even when the father raises his cutting blade.

The divine voice always arrives just in time, the ram that is to be offered instead of Isaac always finds itself ensnared in a thicket conveniently just in view.

The narrative arc is powerful. It inspires us to continually engage with age-old questions of faith and morality. These intellectual experiments are essentially devoid of any meaningful stakes. At the end of our Torah reading, Isaac will always be unbound and allowed to go forth to life and legacy. But how might our feelings have changed, If Abraham had indeed sacrificed his son? What if he had not had unwavering belief in divine mercy and providence? How might our feelings have changed if it had been that Isaac was not willing, but actively struggled against his father's hand? What if God had not only commanded Isaac's sacrifice, but seen it come to fruition without intervening? Would we still allow ourselves to be satisfied with the image of God we present on the High Holidays?

Who is responsible for bringing justice into the world?

Especially when evil abounds and God seems disinterested at

best, especially when the people we rely on can be just as susceptible to bloodlust and brutality as anyone is, especially when we ourselves feel powerless, who then is responsible for bringing justice into the world?

The idea of a bloody Akedah is not just modern, Midrashim as early as the 5th century CE depict Abraham willingly, sometimes even gleefully, slaughtering his own son. For at least a millennium, Jewish sages and biblical commentators have grappled with the possibility that Isaac was surely sacrificed. Deep readers of the text, are troubled by the fact that, though father and son ascend the mountain together, the Torah only records Abraham's return to its base. Perhaps, the original narrative of the Akedah is not the story as most of us know it. Everything is changed by two lines that biblical scholars believe were added later. Two lines introducing two characters who change the narrative. A Divine Voice that saves Isaac,

And a ram that is offered in his stead. These two lines make it possible for Isaac to go on and lead a long and happy life.

But once we reintroduce stakes to the Akedah narrative, when the outcome is no longer a foregone conclusion, the story is all the more potent.

If we are over-exposed to the anxiety of uncertainty we will eventually reach a plateau of fatigue, resignation, and ultimately grief. The High Holidays are our container for the everpresent anxieties of life. A time when we can allow ourselves the vulnerability necessary for honest accounting of that which we simply cannot bear indefinitely.

We call these days *Yamim Noraim*, often translated as “Days of Awe.” *Nora* also connotes fear and dread. These are also the days when we allow ourselves to sit in the world’s dust and ashes. These are the days we confront the frail mortality modern life asks us to suppress. We do so with liturgy like *unataneh*

*tokef*, “Who by fire, who by water,” enumerating the precariousness of our existence. We do so with the reading of the akeidah. We remind ourselves that the distance between faith and zealotry are mere degrees of separation. The binding of Isaac serves to remind us that we are one wrong move from cutting off our collective legacy.

So then, in this new year of 5784, who or what is bound on the mountain?

Whose responsibility is it to save us from the consequences of blades wielded by true believers those who act with assurance that their ends justify any means?

This year, it's not only Isaac I worry about, it is democracy bound on the altar of our city upon a hill. Not only in our national context, but also the whole world over. 10 years ago, according to the Varieties of Democracy project, democracy was at an all-time high. In the decade since, not only have the

number of democracies decreased, but in 2022, the number of countries with autocratic governments reached an all-time high. From Central America to South Asia, in the Middle East and Africa, democratic plantings are being undermined, root and branch. The blossoming spring of yesteryear has turned to fall and, if nothing is done, we must fear a long winter of discontent. We are witnessing democratic backsliding and trends toward authoritarianism Trends which we as Jews must be particularly vigilant about.

So, What can we do?

Shall we wait in perfect faith for a divine messenger, one who will save us from the blade that seeks to sever us from our heritage? Our siblings in Israel are calling out to us, demanding that we lend our voices in their struggle. What wisdom can we offer them, and the whole world, as we ourselves are embroiled in a fight for our national soul?

The Jewish answer is study.

The Talmud recounts a story, (kiddushin 40b) wherein our sages were sitting in an attic in Lod, In the land of Israel, on the heels of their own national crisis. The question was asked of them, “What is greater, study or action?” Rabbi Tarfon immediately answered, “Action is greater.” But Rabbi Akiva said to him, “Study is greater, for study leads to action.”

Therefore, now, when the world seems most in need of action, it is incumbent upon us to engage in study. Study for the sake of informed action. Rabbi Tarfon also acknowledged our human limitation in the course of action as well as the power of study.

He taught, “It is not upon [us] to complete the work, But neither are we free to desist from it. Study much Torah and you will be greatly rewarded.”

Therefore, in the new year, precisely at the moment when we most acutely feel the drama of democracy bound on the

mountain before us; at this crucial moment when we know our future might be sacrificed or spared by 5785 now is the time to devote ourselves to study.

That's why next month, we join the inaugural cohort piloting a curriculum called The American Scripture project. 12

synagogues across the denominational spectrum, from sea to shining sea of these United States, will use this precious and precarious time to foster habits of text study, ritual, reflection, and dialogue all in the context of spiritual community. We do this to revitalize democracy and allow our story to continue. We know from the continuation of the book of Genesis, that when Isaac is allowed to descend the mountain, he goes on to bring abundance to the land. The very place, the inflection point of trauma, is where the cornerstone of the Holy Temple will be laid.



In this moment, in this place, we can make the akeidah a universal story of hope. The hopeful story we craft together, through fullness of self and presence to the other, is our answer to the chaos and uncertainty of our time. By placing ourselves at the intersection of religion and democracy, we will cultivate a deeper sense of meaning in both. When our religious expression is informed by the realities of our political moment, our ancient tradition is renewed as in days of old. When our politics are infused with religious values and voices, we inject the antidote to the toxicity of polarization. As Jews, as citizens, we can unbind democracy.

The choice is ours. Will we build the altar upon which our children will be sacrificed to the false god of benevolent autocracy? Or will we sacrifice for the sake of democracy and the generations to come? With the same sacred tools of thoughtful engagement and intentional dialogue which we use to

build this community, we revitalize our democracy and rededicate our sacred space.

In the vision of the Prophets of Israel, (Isaiah 56:7) we can make Temple Beth-El a house of prayer and belonging for all people.

Because, in the words of an American prophet, our democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Let 5784 be the year when all this nations people, and the people of every nation, know the goodness and sweetness of the fruits of democracy. Let this be the year when we build a world from love.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah