

SUMMER SERMON SERIES  
The Akedah – Blind Belief or Moral Decision?  
July 31, 2015

Shabbat shalom!

For several years now I've been offering a Summer Sermon Series – one was on great unknown heroes of Jewish history, another on the great ideas of Judaism; last year we covered some intriguing works from that vast, mostly unknown body of literature called the “Pseudepigrapha,” from the late Second Temple period.

This year's series explores some puzzling biblical episodes, and tries to understand how they might apply in modern life. We saw that Adam and Eve's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge teaches that Free Will is a core value of Judaism – and we drew the analogy that the kind of rigid thinking displayed by religious fundamentalists and political demagogues does not reflect the Jewish way of looking at issues. We looked at the Tower of Babel story, which (I suggested) teaches that it is precisely our diversity – both in Judaism and in humanity – that is our greatest strength. The Flood Story was a great example of an anti-hero, as a large part of Jewish tradition denigrates Noah for not standing up to God or speaking up on behalf of his fellow human beings.

And now we come to one of the most famous and troubling stories of all, the Akedah – the binding of Isaac. Since we read the story of Isaac's near sacrifice at the hands of his father each year on Rosh Hashanah, some of you could well have heard it fifty or more times. To rephrase an old Jewish saying, “May you live to hear it a hundred and twenty times!”

Our tradition regards Abraham as a great hero – and, of course, the first one to hear God's call to go forth to a new land and be blessed as the patriarch of a great people. Jewish tradition takes the story as an example of the heights to which we can rise in expressing the ultimate faith in God. Abraham is tested to his limits – the charge to sacrifice his son – and passes the test.

But there are problems – problems already raised by our rabbis and philosophers in ages past: If God knows everything, why did God have to test Abraham? If human sacrifice was so repugnant to God, why even pretend to ask for it? And knowing of the suffering that Abraham would have to experience – not

to mention Isaac's own terror – is this the way to treat a loyal and beloved friend? Most important, to my mind, is this: Did Abraham himself have the right to offer a life not his own? Our tradition regards life as so holy that it is virtually an end in itself. Is it *ever* moral to use life as a means toward another end?

The Midrash asks the same question, but places the question in the mouth of Satan – the Devil – who says, “God would not do such an evil thing to a man, to command him, ‘Go and slaughter your son.’”

Let's put this in today's terms. A man declares that he has heard a divine voice. The voice tells him something shocking –he hears and feels himself to be absolutely commanded to slay his son. He knows not why, or to what purpose, but this is GOD talking...to him!...and who is he to argue with a direct command from God? Would we let him go through with it? And if he did, wouldn't we consider him to be a murderer, and probably insane, rather than praise him for his faith? The answer is obvious, because that is precisely how we react to any cultic murder or ritual slaying or act of mayhem committed by someone who purports to be acting on instructions from the divine.

So how can we go on praising Abraham when we really don't believe that this kind of behavior is moral? As liberal Jews, shouldn't we be raising questions when a story – even a sacred story from the core of our tradition – just doesn't square with our own inner sense of right and wrong?

The problem, I think, begins for us precisely with the point which traditionally has called forth our highest praise – Abraham's unquestioning faith. Abraham doesn't question – unlike Sodom and Gemorrah, where he bargains with God on behalf of the righteous who might live there. He doesn't consult, even with his wife. The story is quite specific: God commands, and there goes Abraham, at the break of day, saddling up his animal and taking everything he needs to do the deed.

This kind of behavior on behalf of religion is dangerous business...and frightening. It is frightening because it is so common in our own day, and increasingly so. The Jonestown massacres or Eichmann on the witness stand intoning that he was only following orders might seem like ancient history, but our world today seems to be filled with millions upon millions of increasingly well organized fundamentalists and cultists who unquestioningly follow any orders they believe to be the will of God. Every one of our Abrahamic faiths has them – Jews, Moslems and Christians – for whom rational thought, scientific evidence and

human conscience fall before their skewered acceptance of God's will as interpreted by whomever assumes the power to serve as God's intermediary.

And yet a powerful stream of our own tradition seems to contradict the values expressed in the Akedah story, and indeed is filled with warnings against listening to voices that urge us to commit acts which are against the teachings of the Torah, *even if these voices claim to be prophetic*. Just to take one example: Saadia Gaon, Judaism's first true philosopher who wrote in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, taught, "The reason for our belief in Moses and the prophets lies not in the wonders and miracles only, but in the fact that they admonished us in the first place to do what was right; if a prophet says, 'God commands you to commit adultery and to steal,' we shall *not* ask God for a sign [that is, to prove that he is not a false prophet], because he brings us a message which neither reason nor tradition can sanction."

I like that approach. It's rational. It highlights the problem posed by the story of Isaac in a unique and clear way: Does a voice, merely because it is perceived to be divine, suspend or override what we generally accept to be the rules of decency and morality? Not just our own common sense, but our understanding of Judaism and Jewish morality? The answer? A resounding "NO."

Abraham brings us two models: With Isaac, Abraham's faith is blind. With Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham doesn't just sit back and accept the impending injustice of having the righteous destroyed along with the wicked; his spirit rebels and he challenges God with words that still ring in our ears, "Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" In other words, even God is expected to abide by the moral compass of justice and right behavior.

Two approaches to religion: one is absolute blind faith, the other based on reason and logic and questioning. I believe that while Judaism teaches a covenantal relationship with God, we have not hesitated to point our finger at God and call God to account.

So much of religion today has become fundamentalist, mystical, irrational. Anti-rational. So many Jews, Moslems and Christians, each in their own way, are "born again" evangelical believers, who follow their charismatic leaders without having any real understanding of what they stand for. It's understandable, I suppose, when the complexity of life leads some to want easy answers without having to think too much. But I firmly believe that this is *not* the kind of religion that will ultimately prevail. Personally, I am intrigued with Jewish mysticism, and

am very open to a more spiritual, experiential relationship with God, but I still expect – whatever else I seek from my Judaism – a faith that is in line with truth and logic and moral integrity. Far from praising Abraham, a good case can be made that Abraham is an idolater, whose action later tradition has been trying, more or less successfully, to justify ever since.

What is at stake here is not just a matter of belief, but how we live our lives. Abraham is captive to his own passivity. He doesn't act; it is God who acts; Abraham merely responds. The challenge only resolves itself when God acts, with the words "Do not touch the boy!"

We are not helpless pawns in the hands of the gods. We can change ourselves, and we can change society. Our ability to use reason must be viewed as one of our most precious divine gifts. It gives us assurance that we have a role in our own destiny. And this, after all, is one of Judaism's finest teachings: that we can become better people tomorrow; that we can make the world a better place, and that the power to do so lies in our own hands.