



**Rosh Hashonah Sermon 5765 (2004)
Abraham and the Binding of Isaac:
Was It Ultimate Faith or Ultimate
Failure?**

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I want to begin by saying that it is a real privilege to be here; to share my first high holidays with you. I feel that God has blessed me beyond anything I really deserve. And you all are very much a part of my abundant blessings.

We’ve just read in the Torah the story of the Binding of Isaac and I hope to explore 2 questions. First, is this a story of Ultimate Faith or Ultimate Failure? That’s the 1st question. And second: Why do we read the Binding of Isaac on Rosh HaShanah? That’s the 2nd question I want to consider.

I’m curious, however, before I share my thoughts, what you all think. So, if I may ask, all of you who believe that this is a story of Ultimate Faith – please raise your hand..... And now, all who believe this is a story of Ultimate Failure – please raise your hand

In order to address the central question -- ‘is this a story of Ultimate Faith or Ultimate Failure?’ -- requires that we ask a more primary question: What is faith? Beyond our words or declarations, what does it look like or sound like? What does it mean to truly hear the voice of the God? How do we know which voice, which message, is authentically God’s?

In our lives, we’re flooded with screaming voices. Work. Fitness. Youth and physical beauty and the larger culture of sex and material abundance. And all of these voices compete to deliver the primary message of our lives, to stand above the rest. They seek to define the prevailing values and activities that we choose.

And I submit that it wasn’t so different for Abraham. For the Torah passage we just read, reports that Abraham also heard different and competing divine messages.

At the outset, in verse 2, this is what Abraham heard: “take your child up as a sacrifice.” That’s what he heard at the beginning.

And at the end of this passage, in verse 12, Abraham heard the opposite message. “Do not send your hand against your son. Don’t harm your child in any way . . .”

And they weren’t just different Divine messages. According to the Torah, they



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literally were different Divine voices. The First Voice -- “Take your son up for a sacrifice” -- the Torah attributes that voice to Elohim. The Second Voice -- “don’t harm your child in any way” -- the Torah attributes that voice to the angel of the Eternal.

There’s no disputing that these are unique and different divine voices, and we’ve got to assume that this is not an oversight or typo within the Torah. Rather, I believe that this is a conscious choice by the Torah, or her various authors. According to our sacred text, Abraham first hears the voice of Elohim, often translated as God; and later, at the end of this story, he hears the voice of the Angel of the Eternal (YHVH).

2500 years ago, the Torah understood the intrinsic difficulty and challenge of hearing the authentic voice of God. The Torah affirms for us that this is a timeless challenge.

And the voice of God that ultimately prevailed within Abraham is the voice that says: Life is sacred; for ultimately, Abraham chose not to sacrifice his child. In the end, the Divine voice that Abraham hears most clearly, is the voice that proclaims the sanctity of human life. Ultimate faith in God: to say, “I Believe in God” – for Abraham – means standing up for the sanctity of life. It means that every act of nurturing a life is an act of Faith in God -- wherever it might occur. And every act that diminishes, degrades or demeans life, reveals an absence of Faith in God.

I recognize that this might seem like an untraditional view of the Isaac story. But, I want you to consider that its not as untraditional as you might think. I don’t believe that this interpretation blazes a brand new Jewish trail.

I want us to consider the comments of our most famous commentator on the Torah, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki of 11th Century France. Rashi, is the name you might recognize. For Rashi, God did not deliver a fierce, abusive command to Abraham, to slaughter his son. That’s simply not what transpired between God and Abraham. It was never God’s desire that Abraham would sacrifice his child. Rather, according to Rashi, what God had in mind for Abraham was something profoundly different from the typical understanding of this story.



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Rashi challenges us to read this sacred text ever so closely. To make this text sacred, says Rashi, is to read it with loving care. And to give the Torah loving care is to explore her, in all of her subtleties. So, I want to share with you several of Rashi’s comments.

First, God’s communication with Abraham begins with 3 Hebrew words: “/Kach” “Na” “binkha” /- /kach/ means take, /bincha /means your son. “Take your son.” But what about this little teeny word /na/. It often goes unnoticed and untranslated. Rashi says, however, that this word /na/ is significant. He says: “It denotes a sincere request.”

This is not an angry, demanding or intimidating moment for God. God is not delivering a fire & brimstone command to Abraham. Quite the contrary, according to Rashi. God is saying “please” to Abraham. Imagine that – God begins this whole thing with: “Please”.

Second, God says: /haaley’hu/, TAKE HIM UP. That’s what those Hebrew words mean. According to Rashi, we need to understand the literal meaning of the text: God does not say: “slaughter or kill your son”. Slaughter and kill are two Hebrew words entirely different from what we find in this Torah passage. Rather, quite literally, God says, “take your son up.”

In other words, in Rashi’s opinion, it’s a mistake to think that God wanted or instructed Abraham to slaughter his son. If that’s what we hear or interpret, we’ve not read this text closely enough. Again, imagine that – the most important commentator in Jewish history says that God never instructed Abraham to slaughter his son.

Third, Abraham, in the middle of his journey says to his servants: “You all stay here and Isaac and I will return to you shortly.” /Nashuva/ – we will return. With this word, /nashuva/, /Abraham is not simply appeasing or misleading his son or servants. For Rashi, Abraham prophecies in the middle of their journey, that he and Isaac would return. Abraham believed that both he and Isaac would come down the mountain alive, that Isaac would not die on that mountain.

Finally, according to Rashi, at the very end of our passage, God says directly to



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Abraham: “I did not tell you ‘slaughter him’ -- but rather bring him up to the mountain. And now that you’ve brought him up – take him down again.” Let me explain why this is such an incredible statement.

At the very beginning of the story, the Torah says: “God tested Abraham.” And most of us have always assumed that the test was to see if Abraham had the courage to kill his son. Courage establishes faith, in that line of thinking. But, we now must consider that God had in mind the opposite kind of test. God’s real test of Abraham was whether Abraham had the courage NOT to kill his son. That was the real test facing Abraham!

But, ‘why?’ you might be thinking, would God need to offer such a test? We know that one of fundamental goals of the Torah was to eliminate pagan practices. And one of those practices, the Torah believes, was child-sacrifice. The tradition clearly teaches that Avraham grew up in a culture in which child sacrifice was one of the ways that people worshipped their gods.

Can we understand it? Not really! But there’s probably much about our world that people won’t ever understand, 1000’s of years from now. Ultimately, it makes no sense that the God of Israel, would select Abraham as his representative, simply because Abraham was willing to practice the long-standing pagan ritual of sacrificing his child.

Thus, God’s real test was whether Abraham truly internalized the message, that the One God, the God of Israel, is a God of life? To be a person of this new faith, a follower of Abraham, is to be one who understands deeply the sanctity of human life. So, this Rosh HaShanah Torah passage reveals, that for Abraham, Ultimate Faith manifests itself when we declare and we protect the sanctity of life. And any voice that undermines or diminishes the sanctity of life, is not an authentic voice of faith.

So, we now have Meir’s answer to the first question: Was it Ultimate Faith or Ultimate Failure? By choosing in the end not to sacrifice Isaac, this story is about Abraham’s Ultimate Faith in God!

But, this is not the end of our journey. If this were such a great achievement by



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Abraham, he shouldn't have suffered so much afterwards. For you may not realize it, but after this experience, Abraham never again spoke with Isaac, he never spoke again with Sarah, and he never again hears from or speaks with God. So whatever Act of Faith Abraham performed, there is a question begging to be asked. Why, after revealing his Ultimate Faith, did Abraham suffer so greatly?

My answer is the following: This is not only a story about Ultimate Faith. This is also a story about Ultimate Failure. Why Ultimate Failure? Because Abraham did not understand how to sanctify life. He internalized the ultimate sanctity of life, the infinite value of life, but he never really figured out how to sanctify life, in a daily or regular way. And this might well be why we read this text at this moment on this day.

Abraham was a rebel, a man of revolutionary ideas and transcendent moments. He was not, however, a man who understood the blessing or challenge of nurturing sacred relationship. Lets look at Abraham's instincts, during 3 separate moments in this Binding of Isaac story.

First, the text tells us that Abraham heard God's request: "Take up your son." Without saying a word to Sarah, he woke up early the next morning and left with Isaac. No conversation, no notice, not even a word did Abraham share with his wife. How could he possibly set out to pursue God's will without sharing a hint of this with his life partner?

Second, the Torah tells us in the middle of the narrative, that "Abraham and Isaac walked for 3 days". What transpired during their journey together? What did they talk about? What ideas and questions, dreams and fears did they share with each other?

Apparently, Abraham barely spoke to Isaac during this entire journey. The Torah reports that they had virtually no conversation, no joy, no laughter, no sharing of ideas or experiences. No matter how faithful a man he was, Abraham must have been filled with emotion. Abraham had to be overflowing with fear; Fear that this God of his really did want him to kill his son; Fear that his son might not survive the ordeal; Fear that the emotional scars and the pain caused would be unforgivable; Fear, because he just simply didn't understand. On the outside, an



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enormously accomplished, world-famous man; on the inside, a man who simply didn't understand, what the God of the Universe expected of him, or, what he, Abraham, expected of himself . . .

In my view – to sanctify our lives requires that we share our lives with our beloved others -- our spouse, our children, our dearest family, friends and confidants.

David Wolpe, a rabbi in LA, has written about the central importance of conversation. "Somehow experience is not full until we can frame it in language. A love unspoken is incomplete."

And here's the third and last moment I want to highlight about Abraham's journey. Although the Torah emphasized that Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain together, it does not tell us that they came down the mountain together. In fact, the Torah never mentions Isaac's return down the mountain and so some commentators believe that Isaac did not come down with Abraham, but that they came down separately.

My view is that the trip down was probably like the trip up. They likely traveled together, physically together. But, in the opinion of the Torah, their physical togetherness was simply not worth recording for posterity. It was as if they were alone. They might as well have returned separately.

And so I ask: How often do we put ourselves in the same place as our children, or any of our precious loved ones, but we nevertheless are essentially apart?! So often, in the brief hours we have with our children, we're distracted. Its not for a lack of love. There's nothing, absolutely nothing, more precious to us than our children. But so often, everything but that beloved other takes priority.

And this leads me to my final thought. Somehow, it's as if we're not even the ones deciding how we spend our time. Something else seems to have taken control over our lives. Everything we try to do seems to have a positive and higher purpose. But at the same time, our higher purpose seems to be challenged by all that we do.

I think we're all, a little bit like Abraham. Like Abraham, we seek to take our children up the mountain: to instill in them a deep appreciation for our abundant



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blessings; to make palpable, God’s presence in our world and in our lives; to cultivate a love and awe for the mystery of creation. We seek to help our children develop an abiding sense of purpose, a purpose beyond the self. In short, we seek to connect our children with the only kind of timelessness known to man—community and God.

But our great challenge is to realize that the mountain of God is really not _out there; up there_ – in fact, the mountain of God is right here. Its in our homes. This holy mountain is found in the time that we spend with our beloved others. It’s in the ideas and the questions, the fears and the laughs, the nightmares and the dreams that we share with one another.

I want to conclude with one suggestion -- that might seem like a non-sequitor. But I promise that its not. Make Shabbat a part of your life. Whether Shabbat happens on Sunday, Tuesday or Saturday is not so much the point. But Shabbat is where we share sacred, holy time – our passions and our fears, our laughter and our tears, that is the goal of Shabbat. Quiet Reading, fun that we don’t have during our week, contemplative space for Prayer and Learning – that is the place of Shabbat. Eating and sleeping, conversation and silence, passion and love – that is the essence of Shabbat.

Shabbat can be the ultimate expression of our Faith in God. Why? Because it affirms the sanctity of our lives, and it ensures our freedom, to create lives defined by sacred moments.

Shana tova u’tikatevu – May we have a sweet and healthy year and may we write ourselves into the Book of Life.