

Rosh HaShanah Morning

September 21, 2017 – 1 Tishre 5778

On this Rosh HaShanah morning our tradition places before us the story of Abraham, as he is called by God to take his son, his favored son, Isaac, to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering. Abraham is a man of faith; he hears God's command and is prepared to sacrifice his son... Or is he? Holding the knife in his hand to slay his son, he hears the Angel of the Lord who "stays his hand."

How could Abraham agree to such a command? He raised his voice to God in protest to the potential destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah; how could he not protest the sacrifice of his son Isaac? How could God make such an immoral demand on Abraham? And then the angel of the Lord tells him to "stay his hand"... Which voice is Abraham supposed to listen to?

It is a disturbing story – and we return to it time after time; maybe this time we will find a kernel of something that we can hold on to.

Throughout the ages, Jewish philosophers struggled with this story because it raised the challenge of theodicy, God's sense of justice. How could it be that Abraham is commanded to do something not only cruel in itself, but contrary to the repudiation of human sacrifice, the bedrock of our ethics?

The ancient Greek philosopher, Philo, argues that Abraham's sacrifice was not governed by motives of custom, honor, or fear, but solely by love of God.

According to Maimonides, in the 12th century, the words “God tested Abraham” do not mean that God put him through a test, but that God made the example of Abraham to serve as a test case of the extreme limits of the love and fear of God.

According to Nachmanides, in the 13th century, this passage struggles with reconciling belief in God’s foreknowledge and human free will. God knew how it would turn out, but Abraham did not; and Abraham is rewarded not only for his potential willingness to obey, but for actually complying.

In the twentieth century, Milton Steinberg in his *Anatomy of Faith* wrote: “While it was a merit in Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his only son to his God, it was God’s nature and merit that God would not accept an immoral tribute. And it was God’s purpose, among other things, to establish that Truth.”

Rabbi Harold Schulweis asks “Is faith the triumph of obedience over conscience?” and reminds us that Abraham hears and responds with “Hineini” to two voices... and two contradictory commands. The first Hineini is in response to Elohim’s command to offer up Abraham’s son as a burnt offering. The voice is from Elohim, the Master Ruler, the sole name of God mentioned in the first ten verses of Chapter 22. Then another Divine Voice is heard: “Then an Angel of the Lord/*Malach Adonai* called to him [Abraham] from heaven.” The voice of Adonai counters the command of the voice of Elohim, saying: “Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him.” [Gen. 22:11-12]

To which voice should Abraham listen? God is One, yes, but even the rabbis ask rhetorically: “Whom does one obey, the voice of the Master or the voice of the servant, God or the angel?” Clearly one follows the Master’s voice. Yet...

Yet Abraham hears and responds to the Divine Echo, the voice of the angelic servant of Adonai, and in doing so he *de facto* disobeys the initial command to sacrifice Isaac. And in response to this decision, Adonai’s blessing of Abraham is

reinforced: “I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and sands on the seashore...”

What is it that impels Abraham to disobey God’s command? Conscience. The same kind of conscience that inspires Abraham to confront God in response to the potential destruction of Sodom, when he says: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” Abraham’s response here should not surprise us. His conscience, symbolized by the term “*Malach Adonai*/Angel of the Lord” does not violate God’s Sovereignty.

Rabbi Schulweis teaches us that God’s one voice resonates with multiple echoes. The voice of God is heard according to the strength of every person. In the instance of the Akeda story, the Torah celebrates the strength of moral sensibility.

What is conscience? It has very often been dismissed as capricious, relativistic, and arbitrary. But the word conscience, derived from the Latin: *con-scientia*, is a gift informed by wisdom and cultivated by the collective instances of moral sensitivity reflected by our Prophetic and Rabbinic traditions.

Moral conscience is reinforced over religious behavior by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook as he taught [in Orot HaKodesh 3:11] that “It is forbidden for religious behavior to compromise a person’s natural moral sensitivity...” The rabbis of the Talmud teach us “To judge that which you see with your own eyes.” [Bava Batra 43a]

As the ram appears to Abraham after he lowers his hand, Abraham names the place *Behar Adonai Yireh* – “On the mountain of the Lord, there is vision.” Abraham’s eyes were opened.

And what about our eyes?

Elie Weisel taught us:

One of the Just Men came to Sodom, determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets protesting against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening; he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise kept silent, as if there were no Just Man in their midst. One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate teacher, approached him with these words: "Poor stranger, you shout, you scream, don't you see that it is hopeless?" "Yes, I see," answered the Just Man. "Then why do you go on?" "I'll tell you why. In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me."

Rabbi Ron Symons teaches that this timeless message is even more timely today. We are living in very challenging times. Protesters, advocates and politicians are trying to spin our moral compasses – our moral conscience – in such a way so that we have little sense of which way to step. They might be trying, but we know in which direction we should march... Our moral direction is the direction of "love your neighbor as yourself" and "do not stand idle while your neighbor bleeds." Our fathers and mothers marched in this direction and so must we, so that our children will in their day, and create a world where hate, bigotry, racism and discrimination have no place in society, no matter the voice speaking to them nor the unspoken words of those in power.

As Abraham was moved by his moral conscience, so we too must be moved by ours. As Abraham answered *Hineini*, so we too are called upon to answer *Hineini*. It must not be said too quickly or too glibly. It is the response of the heart and the

mind to a voice whose dictates must be carefully turned, questioned, and examined. It should not come from blind obedience.

Our test is not whether we believe or obey, but what we believe and what we will not believe – what we obey and what we will not obey. What we will stand for... and what we will not stand for.

Like Abraham, may our sense of moral conscience outweigh blind obedience. Indeed, may our eyes be open, and as a result, may our lives be filled with blessing.