

A Dramatic reading and interpretation of the Akeidah, The Binding of Isaac, Genesis 22

Written by Rabbi Andrea London and Elliot Leffler
Performed at Beth Emet Synagogue, Evanston, IL
Rosh Hashanah morning 2013/5774

First Torah reader is called up.

Rabbi London (at Cantor podium): The reading for today is from Leviticus 23, the first of two times that Rosh Hashanah is mentioned in the Torah. As Mark Caro is about to read, Leviticus tells us that “the Eternal spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest – a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.”¹

Elliot (from the congregation): Rabbi, I don’t think this is what we’re reading. I’ve got Gates of Repentance open right here. It says here that we’re reading Genesis 22.

Rabbi London: Genesis 22? Why Genesis 22? Genesis 22 doesn’t say anything about Rosh Hashanah.

Elliot: Why? I don’t know why. You’re the Rabbi. What you’re saying makes a lot of sense – I get it, shofar, blasts, new year – but it’s not what Mark has prepared.

Rabbi London: Really? The binding of Isaac? Human sacrifice? That’s not an uplifting message for the new year. (sigh). Okay, if that’s what’s in the book. I always like to go by the book.

(FIRST READER READS FIRST ALIYAH. BLESSER, READER, BLESSER.
GENESIS 22:1-6. THEY SIT.)

Rabbi London (narrator): And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him,

God: “Abraham,”

Rabbi London: And he replied,

Abraham: “*Hineyni*—Here I am.”

Rabbi London: The first question that readers of this text often ask is: After which things? What happened that triggered this? In the previous chapter, Abraham banished Sarah’s maidservant Hagar, and her son Ishmael because Sarah was jealous and concerned that Ishmael would usurp her son Isaac. Abraham was greatly distressed, but God said to him, “Listen to Sarah, and just do it.” And he did. And maybe he shouldn’t

¹ Leviticus 23:23-24.

have. Or maybe he shouldn't have done it in the way that he did. Maybe Abraham doesn't know how to handle his personal life. He goes from one diplomatic success to another, but he doesn't have the same inherent skill in managing his family.

God: Please take your son.

Abraham: But I have two sons. Which one do you mean?

God: “your only one, “

Abraham: They are both only ones. One from one mother, one from another

God: “whom you love”

Abraham: But I love both of them

God: Very well then, take Isaac² and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you.

Abraham (soliloquy): This is too much to ask. I'm supposed to offer Isaac—the son of my old age, the son of my beloved wife—to God? What about the promise that God made to me that through Isaac I would become a great nation? I've already banished one son, Ishmael because of Sarah's concern that he would upstage Isaac. Now Isaac? This is too much to ask.

Abraham (to God): God?

God: Yes Abraham?

(pause)

Abraham: Nothing.

Rabbi London: So Abraham woke up early in the morning and he saddled his donkey.

We've read this before. Just last chapter, *v'yashkem Avraham baboker* - Abraham woke up early³ - to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham has a tendency of waking up early to fulfill painful commandments. He doesn't struggle with God, he doesn't talk to the people he's hurting, he just bites the bullet, wakes up early, and does it. He just does what he's told.

The text continues: He took his two servants with him and Isaac, his son; he split the wood for the offering, and got ready to set out for the place about which God had spoken to him.

² Rashi, Genesis 22:2

³ Genesis 21:14

Abraham (soliloquy): I can't let Sarah know what I'm doing. It would kill her to know what I'm about to do. I'll get up early so she doesn't know we are leaving.

Sarah: I don't have a good feeling about this. Abraham seems edgy. He is obsessing over his boots. I don't understand it. Abraham, what are you doing?

Abraham: I'm – I have to – God told me to – I'm just polishing my boots.

Sarah: But why? You never polish your boots unless you're going somewhere.

Abraham: Sarah, I need to talk to you. Do you want to sit down?

Sarah: Sure, Abraham, what's wrong?

Abraham: Never mind. I can't talk to you about this.

(Soliloquy:) I can't talk with this about her. She – she won't understand what I've heard from God. She'll think I'm crazy. Maybe I am crazy. But I can't admit that to her. I'd like to be able to talk it through, but – I have to be strong, I have to go it alone. She's going to lose a son, that's bad enough. I can't leave her with a husband who is uncertain and weak.

Abraham: Isaac, let's go.

(Isaac stands. Abraham and Isaac walk from the center of the room towards the back.)

Rabbi London: And the two walked together. They walked together in silence. (Abraham and Isaac turn towards the front and separate physically.)

(pause as they walk towards the back of the sanctuary)

On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and perceived the place from afar. And Abraham said to his servants,

Abraham: “Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while we go over there; we will worship and we will return to you.”

(Soliloquy) Worship, how is sacrificing children, worship? Do I really believe this? I'll be called a murderer. I will lose my son. What choice do I have? I'm so uncertain as to what to do. I left Haran where I had a good life and I've had so much torment since then. Sarah was almost raped several times,⁴ I've had to endure famine in this land that God sent me to, Sarah was infertile for so many years, I had to expel my eldest son...heartache and loss. Then this child came along and it was amazing—too good to be

⁴ When Abraham passed her off as his sister to Pharaoh in Egypt, Genesis 12:14-20, and then to Avimelech, King of Gerar, Genesis 20:2.

true, I guess. I didn't deserve him. Who am I anyway? Following some crazy God I can't put on a shelf. Serves me right.

Rabbi London: And Abraham took the wood for the offering, and placed it on Isaac, his son. He took in his hand the fire and the knife, and the two of them went together.

“Just keep going,” Abraham thinks...

Isaac (soliloquy): Why do I have to carry this wood? Why are the servants staying here? I don't usually get much time with dad alone and he tells me we're on a special journey, that I'm old enough to get to know God and that God has asked us to do a special ritual. Wood, fire, knife... where's the animal for the sacrifice, I wonder?

BREAK.

(NEXT READER IS CALLED UP TO THE TORAH. BLESSING, READING, BLESSING.)

Rabbi London:

Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “Father—“

Abraham (soliloquy): Father, Abba, the name I've wanted someone to call me for so long. I love this boy, my son.

“Here I am, my son.”

Isaac: “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?”

Abraham: Isaac, there's something I haven't told you.

Isaac: What haven't you told me?

Abraham: Isaac – I don't know how to tell you this.

Isaac: What dad? You can tell me anything? Can't you?

Abraham (soliloquy): I should tell him. I'm the father, after all, that's my job. Be direct, be strong. Don't prevaricate, don't show weakness. There's nothing more shameful for a man than to show weakness.

Isaac?

Isaac: Yes dad?

Abraham: “God will show us the lamb for the offering, my son.”

Rabbi London: And the two of them went together.

They arrived at the place of which God had spoken to him; Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood; he bound Isaac, his son, and he placed him on the altar atop the wood.

(Abraham and Isaac do this.)

Rabbi London: Abraham stretched out his hand, and he took the knife to slaughter his son.

(Piano plays Shlomo Carlebach's, "Return Again." Abraham collapses.)

Rabbi London: "And an angel of God called to him from heaven and said,

Angel of God: "Abraham, Abraham."

Abraham: "Here I am."

Angel of God: (puts his hand on Abraham and sings "Return Again.")

Angel unbinds Isaac.

Rabbi London hands Abraham the shofar.

Abraham places the shofar on the altar.

Abraham and Isaac exit the bima.

During musical interlude, **Rabbi London** says:

Abraham lifted his eyes: he could now see a ram just after it was caught by its horns in a thicket. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.

THIRD TORAH READER. BLESSING, READING, BLESSING.

(Abraham and Isaac enter from behind the bima, and very slowly, they walk off the bima, towards the back of the sanctuary. Sarah stands at the back of the room in a white robe. Abraham walks towards her; Isaac follows, several paces behind, as Rabbi London speaks the following text.)

Isaac and Abraham leave this place, Mount Moriah, and traditionally, we are left with the question of whether Abraham passed or failed this test.

You could argue that he passed. At the conclusion of the story, we read that an angel of God says, “because you did this thing, and did not withhold your son, your only one, I will bless you greatly, and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore”

But the picture is more complicated. According to the midrash,⁵ Sarah is so appalled by Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice their son that she dies on the spot, and Abraham leaves Mount Moriah to go bury her. And Abraham and Isaac never speak to one another again.

(Abraham turns toward Isaac, who looks away.)

So if he passes the test, he is rewarded with the loss of his wife and the loss of a relationship with his son. It’s certainly not the kind of life that we pray for on Rosh Hashanah.

Our shofar comes from the ram, who is perhaps the real hero of the story, according to the poet Yehuda Amichai.⁶ We blow the shofar in three ways – *tekiah*, the long blast, *shevarim*, the three shorter blasts, and *truah*, the sequence of nine broken blasts. The Talmud teaches that the *t’ruah* represents our tears,⁷ our willingness to take emotional risks with each other and with God. And through these tears we move God from the seat of *din* (judgment) to the throne of *rachamim* (compassion).⁸ This vulnerability doesn’t come naturally for Abraham. But perhaps we can learn from Abraham’s shortcomings to embrace our vulnerability, and to evoke God’s compassion, better than Abraham did. Instead of trying to determine whether or not Abraham passed or failed God’s test at the Akeidah, we can see that Abraham responded to God in an adequate, but limited way.

The story in Genesis 22 is about a man, but women are also afraid to be vulnerable. Both men and women experience shame which psychological researcher, Brene Brown, defines as our fear of disconnection because of our perceived inadequacies. But shame manifests itself differently in men and women. Men are afraid of appearing weak while women are fearful of seeming less than perfect. Shame is nurtured by secrecy, silence and our harsh judgments of ourselves.⁹

So we’re left with the question: can we meet our challenges with more courage, more connection, and more compassion than Abraham? Abraham met this challenge, like all of his challenges, with determination and personal resolve, with respect for and compliance with authority. But he wasn’t able to be open, to take emotional risks with those closest with him, to ask questions and to develop creative solutions to his life’s

⁵ Midrash Tanhuma. Rashi quotes this Midrash in his commentary on Genesis 23:2.

⁶ “The Real Hero,” Yehuda Amichai, 1982.

⁷ Talmud Rosh Hashanah 33b and 34a.

⁸ Leviticus Rabbah 29:4.

⁹ “Listening to Shame,” a TED talk by Brene Brown, March 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html. “The Power of Vulnerability,” a TED talk by Brene Brown, June 2010, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html

challenges. He wasn't able to have a wholehearted relationship with God, or with his family.

Like Abraham, we too can get stuck in that place of constriction in our lives because of our fear of exposing ourselves, but the shofar symbolically offers us a path from a place of narrowness to a wider, more open place. It's a twisted, convoluted path, not a straight line, but this is the path we walk on the High Holidays. It calls us to strive to be more open, more vulnerable, with those around us, and by so doing, to invite *rachamim*—compassion—both from God, and from within ourselves. The antidote for shame is empathy.

The High Holidays are a time for honest introspection which can be challenging and frustrating for us. It can lead us down the path of growth or on the dead end of beating ourselves up. Brene Brown has found in her research that people who live wholeheartedly—those who have the courage to tell the story of who they really are, are compassionate to themselves and others, and have deep relationships because they've dared to be authentic—have a greater capacity for becoming who they want to be.

As we take up the shofar in the next part of the service, let us embark on the journey that Abraham might have taken – the path from constriction to greater openness, the path from isolation to connection, the path from *din*—strict judgment—to *rachamim*—compassion for ourselves and others – the path from limited to wholehearted living.