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Hearing the Voice of God in the Sacrifice of Isaac

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 29:9 – 30:20

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 61:10 – 63:9

Every year, during the Rosh Ha-Shanah services, we confront one of the Torah's most terrifying texts. What are we to make of the Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac, in which the father of our people is called to murder his son as an act of religious obedience? What are we to make of a test in which killing a beloved child constitutes success and refusing entails ultimate ontological failure? What are we to do with such a terrible story?

Our hearts go out to Abraham. As we read the command to sacrifice Isaac, we hope against hope that the test is a mistake. God can't really want this. We look to Abraham to refuse, to say "No, in a test of loyalty, God, I choose my son." But Abraham says nothing. Quietly, with terror and blood lurking in the background, he packs his bags, stacks the wood, stores the implement that he is going to use to slice his son to death and then instructs his son to accompany him. And Isaac, a grown man, goes along with the father who intends to

kill him.

The Akedah is a terrifying story, yet each Rosh Ha-Shanah we read it in public. Each year we are forced to grapple with this chronicle, seeking some way to discern God's compassionate voice over the clamor and the din of its horror. So let's attend to God's voice in the story itself. While it is clear that Abraham is tested and Isaac is to be the sacrifice, we might learn something useful by revisiting God's role in the drama. Let's focus on one particular question: precisely who does the testing? Who is it that summons Abraham to murder his son?

The Torah tells us, "Vayehi Elohim Nisah Et Avraham, Elohim put Abraham to the test." Conventionally translated as "God," the Hebrew word "Elohim" technically means "the gods" (one "el", many "elohim.") This insight, offered by Michael Lerner in his book *Jewish Renewal*, opens up a way to understand why Abraham — usually so willing to argue for a just cause — so readily acquiesces to this obscene test. Such a focus might sensitize us to how the God of Israel acts to shatter complacency and to offer hope. When Abraham hears "ha elohim", the gods, he hears the conventional powers of his age. And he hears the force of convention commanding him to sacrifice his son to prove his loyalty, to prove that he belongs.

Abraham hears a compelling voice, and he is far from the last mortal to accommodate such an imposition. We all feel compelled to acquiesce to deeds that make us uneasy. Our lives and our civilization require us to willingly submit to the voices of compulsion, the internalized authorities that tell us, "Just go along and do it, everybody else does." Haven't we all felt that pressure in our lives, the entire weight of family and culture and religion pushing us toward practices we would otherwise not want to perpetrate, making us act in ways that we would ideally want to resist? We perpetuate this "objective" coercion in both little and big ways: when arguing with children about what they have to wear, we insist they must not don an offending garment because that's how people dress when they go to... Haven't we all heard ourselves stop a child from doing something he or she wants to with the line "little girls don't do that" or "little boys don't play with that, it's for girls." And so the voice uses our voices to sound objective, as though built into the nature of the cosmos, beyond dispute or hope. It starts pushing us from our earliest childhood, telling us, "But you have to do it this way, this is how it's always been done. This is how everybody does it."

As we grow, that same voice continues to command us, telling us what is worthy of recognition and what is not. The voice tells us that excelling in literature is for nerds but excelling in athletics is the key to popularity. The voice tells us that knitting and sewing is mere craft while painting and sculpting constitutes high art. It tells us that there is one right way to develop, that there are skills that make parents' smile, and other skills that don't. Some strengths make teachers like you, and other strengths don't. And so we are pushed and shaped and forced, throughout our childhood, throughout our schooling, to become something different than what we are inside. Instead of being nurtured so we can blossom, we are sculpted to accord to someone else's vision. The forces that make us deny our own inner gifts don't stop with childhood. The pursuit of our own well-being, financial security, and professional prestige makes us do all kinds of things that we would otherwise not do. A small inner voice may even occasionally acknowledge that our acquiescence is ridiculous and yet we do it because, well, everybody does it, and that's the way the world works, and it's always been done that way. And we begin to feel that the voice is the objective voice of reality— compelling, imposing, and commanding. And we go along, because the voice seems too big to resist.

Our father Abraham lived in a time when some people showed their devotion to the gods by murdering their children. Archaeologists have excavated the mass sacrificial graves of scores of infants in Carthage, in Phoenicia, in other places, in which some ancients showed their devotion to their gods by sacrificing what was most precious to them, their children. Don't think they did it joyously or easily; this sacrifice was meant to hurt. How else would the gods know how much the rich and powerful loved them if they didn't give them what they most cherished?

Abraham grows up in a world in which human sacrifice is what the gods often get. That is the way the world has always worked, that is the way people do things. So Abraham isn't surprised when ha elohim says to him, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Morah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." Abraham must have rationalized, "I'm a spiritual leader, I need to do what everyone expects of me. This call from God is no different from the call that other leaders get. My mission is so important that it's worth some personal sacrifice. I need to do the responsible thing." And so he does, although he has the decency, at least, not to speak. For three days he walks in silence, because in the face of that commanding voice there is nothing reasonable to say in response. Three days later his beautiful son is strapped to the altar, Abraham picks up the knife in conformity to what he and his society perceive to be the commanding voice, the voice of God.

And that's the moment when Judaism erupts into the world. Because at that point, it is no longer ha Elohim who speaks to Abraham, it is suddenly, redemptively, Adonai. "The voice of Adonai shatters the rock." That voice also shatters complacency, habit, and social convention. It is the thundering voice of the God who will be revealed to Moses and to the Jewish people at Sinai. It is the God who insists that all people are made in the divine image. It is the God who mandates loving our neighbor as ourselves and commands us to care for the weak, the hungry, the widowed, and the orphaned. It is the Compassionate One who is revealed in glory. The God of Israel offers new possibility, new hope: things can be done differently. And they must.

The Angel of Adonai says, "Abraham, Abraham." And Abraham says, "Here I am." Then the God of Israel commands, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him." That is the shattering voice of the God of Israel. We serve a God who abhors human suffering.

Our God doesn't care whether it always was done a certain way. Our God isn't impressed simply because everybody else does it. Our God doesn't recognize that injustice, mendacity, or selfishness is necessary to get ahead. Our God insists that we can do better, that we must become better. The God of Israel fosters dissatisfaction with the complacency of the world as it is: "those who love Adonai hate evil." Our God offers a vision of what the world ought to be: a world in which parents don't hurt their children, in which people can trust each other at the deepest level, a world in which the pursuit of peace and the pursuit of justice is our highest ideal and the crowning service of God. That is the world that we are commanded to establish: "and none shall hurt or destroy on all My holy mountain."

The story of the Akedah is the story of rejecting the voice of accommodation, though many mistake it for the voice of God. Too often in our world, we hear that voice in the idolatry of youth, looks, money, sex, self-interest, and power. These are the same false gods before whom humanity has always groveled and for whom we have always been so willing to sacrifice our children and our decency.

Then as now, the God of Israel, the God who spoke to Abraham and Sarah, the God who was revealed to Isaac and Rebecca, the God who was shown at the top of Mount Sinai, and who gave us the Ten Commandments, Adonai, despises those idolatries. Then as now our God calls out, and says, "My children, stop, don't harm the child." When we hear that sacred call, we too can pass Abraham's test.

Shanah Tovah!

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