

God put Abraham to the test. God said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.” And God said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” So, early the next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.

Wait, what did that last sentence say?

Did it really say that Abraham awoke EARLY the next morning?

Waking early for something reminds me of how kids have trouble sleeping the night before a trip to Disneyworld, and they just can't wait for the new day to start. When we want to *avoid* doing something the next day, we often, in a lovely passive aggressive fashion, tend to sleep late and put it off.

But, no, Abraham woke up early on the day upon which he was to set off on a journey that would culminate in the sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac.

Isaac, borne by his wife, Sarah, whom God had given to them when they were both about 100 years old.

Now, wait, what was the next part of that shocking sentence?

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Abraham saddled the donkey himself? He apparently had servants who could have done it for him. Why wasn't he paralyzed by the weight of what he was about to do? How did he have the strength or motivation to prepare for the trip on his own?

We tend to see Abraham's act as the ultimate expression of faith. Here is the first Jew, ready to do whatever God asked, even to kill his baby boy. HOWEVER, Judaism would not ever, EVER condone such an act. This leads me to ask, was there something else at play here?

The wise sage Woody Allen, like virtually all Jews before him, was quite frustrated by the story of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. He wrote a short piece about what HE thinks is really going on here. It is called "The Sacrifice of Isaac."

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...And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, "I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on." Isaac trembled and said, "So, what did you say? I mean, when He brought this whole thing up?"

"What am I going to say?" Abraham said. "I'm standing there at two AM in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?"

"Well, did He say why He wants me sacrificed?" Isaac asked his father.

But Abraham said, “The faithful do not question. Now let’s go because I have a heavy day tomorrow.”

And Sarah who heard Abraham’s plan grew vexed and said, “How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes, for the Lord hateth practical jokes and whosoever shall pull one shall be delivered into the hands of his enemies whether they can pay the delivery charge or not.” And Abraham answered, “Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well-modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that.”

And Sarah said, “And thou art willing to carry out this senseless act?” But Abraham told her, “Frankly, yes, for to question the Lord’s word is one the worst things a person can do, particularly with the economy in the state it’s in.”

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham’s hand and said, “How could thou doest such a thing?”

And Abraham said, “But thou said – “

“Never mind what I said,” the Lord spake. “Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?” And Abraham grew ashamed. “Er – not really, no....”

“I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it.”

And Abraham fell to his knees. “See, I never know when you’re kidding.”

And the Lord thundered, “No sense of humor. I can’t believe it.”

“But doth this not prove that I love Thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?”

And the Lord said, “It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.”<sup>1</sup>

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So, was Abraham just following this asinine order because it sounded authoritative? Let’s take a moment and put ourselves in Abraham’s shoes. He had just begun to learn of God’s power, and had just seen some of God’s miracles, particularly in the birth of Isaac.

Abraham had just signed on to this thing called monotheism.

One day, God springs this demand on Abraham, and the text tells us that God was testing Abraham. But, my friends, perhaps the real question is this: is it also possible that Abraham was testing God? I would like to take a look at this text from both angles.

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<sup>1</sup> Novak, William and Moshe Waldoks, eds. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: HarperPerrenial, 1981. p. 220.

Was God testing Abraham's faith? Or perhaps, as Woody Allen seems to suggest, might God have been testing Abraham as a human being? Maybe if Abraham had gone through with it, God would have grown disappointed, as Abraham would have thus failed the test.

The God that I believe in would never expect a father to sacrifice his son at his own hand.

I would prefer to think that, had Abraham begun to harm his son, then God would have turned away, told Abraham, "Thanks, but no thanks" – that Abraham had failed such an enormous, ethical test, and therefore God would have sought out someone else to start our religion.

Conversely, we can take a look at this test from Abraham's point of view. And, let's give him a bit more intelligence in this matter than we normally do.

I believe that Abraham wanted to see just how far God would take this sacrifice thing. Abraham could not subscribe to a system of belief that randomly gave children to a barren mother, then demanded that they be taken away by the father's hand. I picture Abraham smirking through the story, thinking to himself, "Are you kidding me, God?

I am not actually going to lay a hand on my child!"

So, Abraham woke early, and saddled his donkey, because he was not AT ALL afraid of losing his child. He knew that he would raise the knife, and hold it there as long as he had to, waiting for God to tell him to stop. And God did.

At that moment, Abraham paused, hand held high, with no intention of slaughtering his son. In that pause, both parties, God and Abraham, passed the test. God saw that Abraham was

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dedicated to God and to Judaism, but that Abraham was not going to blindly follow such a horrendous request. Abraham, at that moment, showed the future generations of Jews that we can indeed challenge God, and quarrel with God. It strengthens our connection to the Divine because it assures us that we can argue, and get angry, and then seek resolution, when we have issues with God.

Abraham paused, hand in the air, he waited, and was pleased to hear the angel of God calling out to him, “Abraham, Abraham!” God thus passed Abraham’s test.

Abraham could now sign on, with full faith, to this new religious system, knowing that God would be there for him, to protect him, his children, and his children’s children.

Here we are, thousands of years later, sitting at Rosh Hashanah morning services at Temple B'nai Torah. Abraham set up a paradigm through which, even today, we interact with God. His story, and this particular interpretation, encourages us to ponder how EACH ONE OF US interacts with God. What kind of relationship do YOU personally have with the Divine?

I’d like to tell you a little about my theology, as a way of getting to know me, by telling you a bit about the philosophy of Martin Buber.

(Explain I-It and I-Thou relationships)

These relationships with others function in the same way that our relationship with God functions. God is the ultimate YOU, called the “Eternal Thou.”

We all get in fights or disagreements with those we love. And, particularly during these High Holidays, we reflect on our past conflicts and look for ways to reconcile. We come to accept arguments or tension with our loved ones as part of the total package of caring for someone, because we are in a mutual, three-dimensional relationship with them. We hope that they accept our flaws, and we aim to accept theirs.

Why don't we look at our relationship with God in the same way? This mutuality allows us to accept God in all of God's deeds. We are created in God's image, and we are constantly evolving and learning. Isn't it possible that God learns along with us? Alan Dershowitz, in his book entitled *The Genesis of Justice*, writes that, especially back in the book of Genesis, God was learning as much about God's creations as we were learning about God. This continues to this very day.

For me, it all comes back to Tevye. I picture Tevye, arms raised up toward God, talking as if they were best friends, even family: "Oh, Heavenly Father, why do these things happen to me? Is it so hard to bless me like you bless others?" It's the kind of deep relationship that takes all sorts of ups and downs. It is alright to question, and even to argue with God. What's most important here? Keep the conversation going. Keep the phone lines open. Try not to see God as an IT, as something far away, distant. Make God into the ultimate relationship, through which you reach all other relationships in your life.

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This New Year, 5770, when we are thinking about bettering ourselves, repairing broken relationships, and repenting for our past deeds, we also therefore think about our connection with God.

There is a Chasidic question – who is closer to God? One who has never sinned or one who has sinned, but now repents? It is the repentant sinner who gets closer to God than the one who never sinned. Why? Because the cord of connection between her and God has broken. But, then, it must also be repaired. How do we repair a torn rope?

We retie it, thus bringing God and the sinner closer than before.

Know that you can close your eyes, and God is right there. You can open them, and God is still with you. Open the lines of communication, and the rest will fall into place. Be prepared to quarrel with God – that shows the deepest connection. Be prepared to sometimes keep a sense of humor about things. Be prepared to learn to accept your flaws, because God will. And the relationship will be filled with holiness, for it is written, “You shall be holy for I, Adonai, am holy.”

As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, “Entrances to holiness are everywhere. The possibility of ascent is all the time. Even at unlikely times and through unlikely places.

There is no place on earth without God.”

Amen.