

Akedah – Three Models for Interaction

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife, and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here is the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” And the two of them walked on together.”

Each year, on Rosh Hashanah, we return to this most harrowing of stories – the binding of Isaac. Two years ago, we looked at the text through Abraham’s eyes, wondering if he was, perhaps, testing God as much as God was presumably testing him. Last year, we looked at who the other heroes in the story might be, including Sarah and the Ram. If, as the rabbis suggest, there are seventy faces to the Torah, then we’ve got at least 68 more years of sermons in this short passage alone!

As I’m sure you know, the Binding of Isaac, called the *Akedah* in Hebrew, is one of the truly human stories found in the Torah: full of drama, fear, faith, suspense, and despair. As we read, we identify with the horrifying quest that Abraham is sent upon – a father who has waited until old age to have a child with his wife, Sarah. A father who must now sacrifice his precious son due to his unquestioning faith in God. At the same time, we also identify with young Isaac, an outwardly quiet participant, or even a pawn, in a test between his father and God.

I have always been intrigued by, and have wanted to learn more about, silent Isaac. He sometimes seems to have been forgotten by commentators and rabbis studying the text. The sages rarely discuss the emotional or psychological effect of the binding upon Isaac and his wellbeing. In Isaac’s questioning of his father, which I shared with you a few moments ago, do we hear a hint of his growing suspicion? “Where’s the sheep for the burnt offering?” Did Isaac know what was about to take place on Mount Moriah? Did he have full faith in his father, as much faith as Abraham had in God?

One Midrash tells us that Isaac was in fact 37 years old at the time of the binding. This age is found by looking at the next story in the Torah. The portion immediately following the Akedah includes Sarah’s death at the age of 127, and some Rabbis took this to mean that she died as a result of the near-sacrifice. Since she was 90 years old when she had Isaac, this would place Isaac’s age theoretically at 37. Keeping this theory in mind has very different implications for how we view Isaac. “At a certain point,” the Midrash maintains, “he had to understand, had to realize that the man walking next to him was acting out a role other than that of father. By becoming afraid, he became human and a child once more.” One commentary also insinuates that father and son walked hand in hand because Abraham wished to prevent Isaac from taking flight, for Isaac was visibly afraid.

If Isaac was 37 years old, we must also entertain the notion that he was a willing participant in the proposed sacrifice. Along these lines, Elie Wiesel writes, in his book *Messengers of God*, "Isaac reentered reality and grasped the magnitude and horror of what was to come: 'Father, what will you do, Mother and you, afterward?' 'The One who has consoled us until now,' answered Abraham, 'will continue to console us.' 'Father,' Isaac went on after a silence, 'I am afraid, afraid of being afraid. You must bind me securely.'"

Here, Elie Wiesel posits that Isaac was aware of his coming fate, and he wanted to ensure that his death would be an acceptable, *kosher* sacrifice to God. One interpretation of the text, in an attempt to explain Isaac's later blindness, suggests that the angels wept when they saw Abraham, the father, about to kill his son. The angels' tears fell into Isaac's eyes, blinding him, so that he would not see the horrific image of his father wielding a knife above his head.

Well, fortunately, the story ends much more favorably. We know that Isaac is not sacrificed due to a last minute intervention by one of God's messengers. Yet, after the ram is sacrificed in Isaac's place, the narrative continues, "*Vayashav Avraham el nearav.*" And Abraham returned to his servants. Where was Isaac? Why was he not also mentioned? Did he not come down off the mountain? Did this experience, in the end, divide father and son in a lasting way? Or, as Elie Wiesel suggests, was Isaac, unlike Abraham, never again to be the same? That the real Isaac would forever remain up there, on the altar?

The Torah tells us very little about Isaac as an adult. Nearly everything we read about him concerns him as the son of Abraham or as the father of Jacob. His whole story can be broken into six pieces: the binding of Isaac, the marriage of Isaac, the re-digging of his father's wells, the encounter with King Abimelech, and the blessing of his two sons, Jacob and Esau.

Isaac is obviously important to Judaism merely because he was Abraham's son. Yet, putting that aside, we want to know more about him. What was his identity? What was his role? Why is he one of our significant historical figures? Everything he did seemed to be an echo of something already accomplished by his father. He was passive; things only seem to happen TO him. History is full of overbearing fathers who leave no room for their children to prove themselves. Thus, Isaac did the only thing left for him to do: he carried on. Isaac had the role often left to the second generation: he merely had to perpetuate the innovations. Thus, as Adin Steinsaltz, a modern text scholar, puts it, "The capacity to persist is no less important than the power to begin."

Isaac therefore had a unique and equally important role to that of Abraham and Jacob. He had to maintain that which has been newly created. He was the generation who had to fix and stabilize the revolution of his father's time. In this way, Isaac helped to establish Abraham forever in our tradition. Isaac's conservative nature was a necessary complement to Abraham's

pioneering of the faith. Isaac is not just making a mere contribution, but through his actions alone is Abraham's legacy able to live on.

A few chapters later, during Isaac's adulthood, we learn that Isaac took it upon himself to dig again the wells that were dug in the days of his father. Rashi, a medieval Jewish commentator, points out that these were, in fact, the exact same wells that Abraham had dug in his day. The wells are very symbolic of the juxtaposition between Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, the very first Jew, was charged with creating everything from scratch. Abraham dug new wells and busied himself with created a brand new religion. Slowly, over time, the wells began to fill with dirt. It then became Isaac's task to go back and dig the wells again, to release the waters within and let them flow as they will. Additionally, just as Abraham created geopolitical relations with the Philistines, Isaac renewed these compromises in his time. Thus, Isaac is the symbol not of revolution nor breaking of habits, but of the power and strength involved in conserving and maintaining. He constantly demonstrated this tendency towards stability and consistency.

Isaac's role is further exemplified in his interactions with his sons, Jacob and Esau. We read that Isaac preferred Esau, who is obviously the very opposite of Isaac. Esau is pure action: a hunter, a man of the outdoors, constantly mobile. Esau represented so much of what Isaac wanted to be, but, because of his destiny, could not ever allow himself to be.

Isaac wanted his blessing to go to this strong son, who could apparently take the next generation to higher levels of renovation and a stronger sense of foundation. We know that Jacob was meant to succeed Isaac, but it's possible that Isaac believed that Jacob was too much like himself: passive, speculative, introspective. The next generation would be a time to innovate, and perhaps Isaac was concerned that a passive son would endanger the future that he was trying to ensure.

However, Isaac is proven wrong when Jacob attempts to deceive him and poses as Esau. You may remember that Jacob covers himself in fur and pretends to be Esau in front of his elderly, blind father. This very initiative shown by Jacob is proof that he is not like his inactive father. It is here that we find the essence of Jacob: he who will fight fiercely to gain only those ends he considers important. When he dressed up as Esau, he was not dressing himself up as another, he was instead showing his father his dual nature. Jacob was thus a perfect combination of Abraham and Isaac: a keeper of tradition who was also an innovator.

Isaac was actually much more integral to the foundation of Judaism than is often let on. Adin Steinsaltz writes, "In order to fulfill his role successfully, Isaac had to repress any urge for assertion or self-expression. He was not allowed to be anything else, either different or entirely new. His destiny was to be the one who carried on." And without him, we would not have Judaism as we know it today.

Thus, we realize that Isaac is best understood within the framework of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Each man was quite distinctive in terms of his role and purpose. Perhaps this is

why, in the Amidah prayer, we bless "*Elohai Avraham, Elohai Yitzhak, V'Lohei Ya'akov,*" the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and not *Elohei Avraham, Yitzhak, v'Ya'akov...*" which would translate as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

With which patriarch do you most identify? As students of Torah, we can utilize the models set up by our patriarchs to understand different ways of interacting with the world. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are, I would like to suggest, "proactive," "conservative," and "reactive" models of relations. Abraham forges a new path for all to follow, in a proactive, anticipatory manner. Isaac maintains a conservative approach to all that surrounds him. Jacob takes what he is given and reacts accordingly, creating anew where necessary. We all can learn a lot from these three characters. Which would we like to be? Is there a way to be all three?

I believe, ideally, we shall struggle to learn when to be like Abraham and build, when to be like Isaac and hold our ground, and when to be like Jacob, reevaluating and changing throughout time.

Perhaps we can make a promise to ourselves to be each type of person when appropriate. Each of us has our very own set of customs and our very own way of doing things. I pray that, with the guidance of *Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzhak, and Elohei Ya'akov,* may we succeed in this new year in finding a balance between consistency and innovation, leisure and action, stability and creation. Amen.