

## Our Akedah

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This morning, as we do every year on Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac. Abraham is commanded by God to offer his son, his beloved Isaac, as a sacrifice. And, until God steps in at the very last second, it seems that Abraham was willing to do so.

We're left with so many questions. How could any father be willing to sacrifice his own flesh and blood for God? What kind of a God would demand this? How can we ever look to either of them again, given this moment? They're enormous, and enormously important questions. But, we spend so much time discussing and arguing about them that it's easy to miss the fact that there's another character here, besides God and Abraham: Isaac. Rather than talk about, say, Abraham's morality, I'd like to think about Isaac for a bit.

On the surface, Isaac seems to be a nearly totally passive participant in the story. He's quite credulous — when he notices that his father doesn't have an animal to offer, he asks about it, but doesn't push when his father offers only the vaguest of reassurances. He simply walks alongside his father. At the end of the tale, he isn't even mentioned at all. This boy, who was very nearly sacrificed at the edge of his father's blade, is barely even noticeable in the story.

Our sages of old were aware of this near silence about Isaac. They try to fill in some of the gaps. They wonder if the Akedah might have been a result of something Isaac said — if maybe it was really a test of him, not Abraham. Some traditions actually have him as a 37-year-old man, not a young boy, at the time of the story, implying he might of been a more active participant than we normally think. But, those stories are the exception; for the most part, Isaac isn't a big part of the Akedah legend.

That certainly fits the larger pattern, when it comes to Isaac. He is, by far, the least talked about of the patriarchs, and, at least on the surface, deservedly so. He doesn't do very much. He marries the woman who was picked out for him by his father's servant. When some local ruffians harass him over his wells, he simply wanders off to some other place to try to dig a new well. Actually, they weren't new at all — the Torah tells us that he spent his life re-digging the same wells which his father dug. That right there is a pretty fabulous poetic encapsulation of a mediocre life — wandering around, avoiding the bullies while just redoing what your father did before you. Isaac's life is so prosaic that the rabbis of old try to give him credit when the Torah says that he went walking in the fields in the afternoon. He was inventing *mincha* — the afternoon prayer service — the sages say. That's right — Isaac did so little that the rabbis have to latch onto his afternoon stroll to create a story of his meager greatness.

It's all the more striking when you compare Isaac to his father, Abraham. Abraham was, in just about every sense of the word, a Great Man. He was the first Jew, which makes him the first monotheist in history. He is the spiritual ancestor of every Jew, Muslim and Christian in the world. An incredibly wealthy man, he was also a mighty warrior and, it seems, a pretty shrewd politician, as well. But his son, Isaac? The best thing we can say about him, I guess, is that he didn't break the chain. I actually gave a sermon about that once — using Isaac as an example of how sometimes, just being a bridge between generations can be enough. Simply taking what your parents gave you, and passing it on to your kids, might be sufficient, at least for some of us.

That's what Isaac can teach us, it seems. The benefits of benign mediocrity.

Unless.

Unless you look at Isaac the way that Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson does. Artson realizes that Isaac might have greatness, after all. But, it's a quieter kind of greatness, one that we have to look for, but one that we'd be very wise to pay attention to. Artson notices that Isaac seems to care about things. He loves his wife. He may not have picked her — his father's servant did that, after all — but he did love her we are told and, more strikingly, we're told that she loved him, too. Believe it or not, this is only one of two times in the entire Bible that a husband and wife are described as loving each other.

Isaac also values peace. What many describe as a kind of wimpiness, and a willingness to be pushed around, can easily be seen instead as unwillingness to fight, unless absolutely necessary. We might consider it brave and manly to fight back over a well of water. Wells were, after all, incredibly valuable. But, in the end, a valuable thing is still just a thing. Maybe Isaac didn't care so much about the things onto which others place such emphasis.

And, Isaac also valued his home, and his homeland. Unlike his father and son, Isaac never leaves the land of Israel, and never strays far from home. And that walk in the field? Spending time enjoying a beloved home doesn't sound so bad. And, if he actually *was* praying, as the Rabbis suggest? Well, a little time to pay attention to the spiritual side of life isn't the worst thing either, is it?

In the end, we may not have a picture of a man about whom great movies can be made — this still isn't very exciting stuff. But, we begin to see a man who had a strong set of values. A man who knew what he cared about. Who knew what was important in life. Isaac wasn't a man who couldn't live up to the greatness of his father, Abraham. Isaac was a man who saw how his father lived, and what it brought him, and decided to live a different life. A life of peace, and a life with a loving family. Not bad.

“No person ever said, on his or her deathbed, that they only wish they had spent more time at the office.” It’s a cliché, but one in which many of us believe, myself included. The achievements which usually describe the life of a so-called Great Man or Great Woman, are not the same things that we claim are the most important in life, are they? Or, as our sages said, “Who is rich? Someone who is happy with what they have.” Isaac was very, very rich.

We’re still left with one question, though. How did Isaac come to such a different value system than his father? What made Isaac decide to not pursue a life of pursuit? Artson has an answer for that, too, and it’s an important one. Isaac learned it under the knife. Isaac learned it on the altar. Isaac learned it at the Akedah. He learned it when he faced his own death.

We all know that we’re going to die. But knowing that, as a kind of abstract, intellectual fact, is very different from *really* knowing it. From being brought, face-to-face, with the stark reality of our own impending death. Facing death — truly facing death — changes a person, deeply. It can, potentially, permanently change our worldview, and our priorities. It’s what happened to Isaac, but it can happen to us, too.

We hear about it all the time, actually. Someone has a serious health scare, or maybe walks away from a terrifying accident, and finds themselves with a new outlook on life. Realizing that we may not have as much life left to live as we thought can make us seriously reconsider how we are spending the time that we have left. And that is precisely why we read this story, today. Because today, and during this entire period of the *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, we are supposed to face our own deaths, in the hope that we might think more seriously about how we live.

Think about the prayer *Unataneh Tokef* – the prayer in which we invoke the Book of Life, and pray that we be inscribed in it for another year. The prayer in which we imagine a God who is deciding, at this very moment, who will die by fire, and who by water. Who by hunger, and who by thirst. That prayer is not meant to be taken literally — God is not some Jewish version of Santa Claus, making lists of the naughty and the nice. That prayer is our Akedah. Our near death experience. That prayer is a reminder that, standing here right now, we really don’t know how many of us are going to make it through this year. Scary as it is to say, we simply do not know who here might die this year in a car accident, and who will succumb to disease. And, not only don’t we know it, we have almost no control over it. The world is an uncertain, frightening place, and we have no choice but to live in it. And to pray that we make it through. But, sooner or later, each of us will succumb. And, it truly might be sooner, rather than later. You honestly might not be here the next time we gather to read Isaac’s story. I might not either.

We have to believe that. We have to do more than understand it as an intellectual proposition. We have to believe, in our deepest souls, that we really might die, and soon. We have to believe it so deeply that it terrifies us. That it leaves us shaken, and

near tears. Because only then can we fully ask and answer two fundamental questions.

If I knew, knew with absolute certainty, that this was my last year on earth, what would I do differently? And, the second question: why am I not doing it already?

Isaac faced his death, and he was terrified, and he was transformed by the experience. He never lived the same way, again. Now, it's our turn. This, today, these High Holy Days—this is our Akedah. The High Holy Days are our once a year opportunity to face our own deaths, so that we can force ourselves to truly look at our lives. And, if we don't like what we see, to find the motivation, to find the urgency, to change.

It's so easy for all of us to get caught up in the day-to-day drive forward. To keep moving, to keep striving towards the places we think we want to go, and for the things we think we want to have. And, to get so caught up in that ceaseless drive that we forget to take a moment, step back, and ask if we even like where we're going. To ask if I like how I'm spending the precious few days of my life? To ask the questions which Isaac asked himself.

If we don't ever face our own death, if we don't admit our own terrible frailty, then we'll allow ourselves to continue to undervalue our life. I'll take more time next year. I'll see them more when I get that promotion. I'll relax when this project is over. I've got plenty of time. Do I? Do any of us? The High Holy Days remind us that, because death is always nearby, life is so terribly precious. A single moment wasted is a tragedy.

Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik taught that the entirety of the High Holy Days was contained in the amen that we say after the shecheyanu on Kol Nidrei. The prayer when we thank God for sustaining us, so that we can reach this day. Every year, every day of every year, is a gift. Our most precious gift.

We'll be here for Kol Nidrei in 10 days. 10 days until we get to that "amen." 10 days to think about our lives, and to start thinking about how we can better use them. About how we can fill them with that which will truly make us rich. 10 days to fear dying, so that we can start truly living.

May we, like Isaac before us, be inscribed in the book of life.