

Shana Tova. Rabbi Miriam, Cantor Lisa, Rabbi Sammy, and to this vibrant, vital community - thank you for trusting me with this honor.

My whole adult life, the story of the Akeda, the binding of Isaac, which many Jews traditionally read on the second day of Rosh Hashana and which we are reading today, has left me feeling sick and alienated. From my vantage point, God's gruesome command for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of Abraham's love reveals to me a fearful, mistrustful, and unwell God. God's demand for proof of Abraham's devotion, ostensibly in order to fulfill the promises God has already made, feels to me emotionally and spiritually bankrupt - or at least a sign of grave mental illness. And, on a personal level, this dynamic hits very close to home. I am a survivor of a father who suffered at the hands of his birth family and died by suicide, making impossible requests of me and my mom before his death. And so the story of the Akeda reminds me of brutal cycles of intergenerational violence and the restorative justice which we so badly need and in which I hope to conscientiously play a part. But aside from this, I've been asking myself what is the purpose of the Akeda on this reflective, nourishing, holy day? On this Yom Hadin, I crave guidance and inspiration for the sacred labor of reconciliation and repair. Where is that in the Akeda?

Well after all of that tsuris...it turns out it's in the very first verse of what we'll be reading today. Sort of...the first inklings of it.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:  
Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him,  
“Abraham.” He answered, “Here I am.”

Rashi interprets Abraham's “hineni” as “an expression of meekness and readiness,” an obedient, even eager answer of the pious, and until my

most recent grappling with the text, that's basically how I'd always heard it too. Knowing what comes next, I wrote off Abraham as blindly deferential, so unquestioning as to be willing to do conscious harm to other people – even his loved ones - if that's what God asked. But in preparing for this drash, the dramaturg in me must've eaten her Wheaties, because suddenly I remembered to be curious about the context. “Some time afterward” - some time after what?

The Akeda, Genesis chapter 22, is the conclusion of Parashat Vayera, a chapter in which God and Abraham unearth one another's limitations. God reveals to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son, Isaac, whose descendants will become a great and populous nation. On the heels of this news, Abraham boldly tries to stimulate God's sense of justice, imploring God not to wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the innocent people who surely live there. God acquiesces to Abraham's appeal...only to annihilate the cities anyway. And Abraham witnesses God's unscrupulous reversal. Soon after, Isaac is born, and Sarah presses Abraham to cast out his firstborn son, Ishmael and Ishmael's mom Hagar, leaving Isaac to be Abraham's sole heir. Abraham doesn't object in language, but the Torah tells us “the matter distressed Abraham greatly.” At this distress - a sign of potential dissent - God steps in, telling Abraham to do as Sarah says, reassuring Abraham that God will make a great nation of Ishmael too. And Abraham does the unthinkable: he rips his family apart.

Holding this context close, I began to reconsider Abraham's “hineni.” Maybe “here I am” isn't a cry of devout faith; maybe it's a plea for God to see him. Abraham must believe or hope that God is fundamentally fair and moral; how else could this defender of Sodom and Gomorrah and grieving father to Ishmael stick around? When God calls his name,

Abraham, perhaps sensing a test at hand, reminds God – maybe instinctively - to witness him and everything that’s already happened between them. Not “I’m here to do your bidding,” but “here I am – me, who you already know.” In Ramban’s analysis of this verse, he notes that God only tests the righteous and never the wicked, asserting that God’s tests aim to make the righteous more upright. I wonder, though, if Abraham is the one who is trying to make God more upright. Hineni. Remember who I am. Remember who you are.

But Abraham’s ‘hineni,’ does not awaken God to his already expressed devotion, and Abraham acts as though he will go through with God’s command, though, significantly he keeps the goal of the trip a secret from Isaac and the two servants he brings with them. Days later, when Abraham sees the place God intended for this act, he tells his servants “You stay here... The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.” *We*. Some rabbis interpret this to mean that Abraham uses the plural because he plans to come back with Isaac’s bones. Rashi digests this moment differently, stating that Abraham is prophesying here that both he and Isaac will return. I would like to go even further and suggest that Abraham has God’s number. Abraham sees that God is terrified and insecure, but God has already promised to make Abraham a great nation through Isaac and Isaac’s descendants; God has already pushed Abraham to cast out his only other son, Ishmael. Abraham is praying that God will not make him go through with this sacrifice. He keeps humoring God with this test, trying to shield his son along the way, and giving God every opportunity to end this horror show so that he and Isaac can come down the mountain together.

Walking alone with Abraham, Isaac cries “Avi - my father” and Abraham answers “hineni, bni - here I am, my son.” He lifts up the same

word he used with God before. He could have said, “yes,” or responded in any other way, but knowing that God is watching his every move he underlines this word. He’s replying to Isaac, but he’s using the opportunity to nudge God - I am still here. Isn’t that enough proof? And in answer to Isaac’s question about where the heck this sheep is for this impending offering, Abraham replies, “It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son.” In my current reading, I am hearing Abraham here speaking again to God through his answer to Isaac. Abraham is pleading with God to send a sheep - a real sheep - for this offering. It’s not too late, God, for you to find uprightness again. The damage has not been done yet.

In the next section we see Abraham setting up the altar for the sacrifice, and the writers of the story give us every little detail. It’s as if we’re moving in slow motion - or as if Abraham is, trying to buy God time to do the right thing. He lays out the wood, he binds Isaac, he lays him on the altar, on top of the wood, and then וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשֵׁחַט אֶת-בְּנוֹ - he sends out his hand and he picks up the knife. Finally, a messenger from God calls out “Abraham, Abraham.” And Abraham replies “Hineni.” I’m still here. At long last, now God has the proof God needs, and puts an end to the madness.

Of course I wish Abraham had refused to do God’s bidding from the start. Maybe then he could have saved Isaac the unimaginable trauma of this event and prevented the rupture that happens between them following the Akeda. But, tragically for their family, something about Abraham’s relationship with God prevents him from that type of resistance. But also, I believe that with this reading we can see in Abraham deliberate, compassionate, t’shuva. Recognizing God’s frightened test as the unwinnable game - and illness - that it is, but

trusting in God's moral core, Abraham buys God time to return to Godself. And along the way, Abraham repeatedly patiently reminds God that his very presence is all the proof he could ever really give of his love. What if we all sought each others' intrinsic goodness so deeply? How gentle would we be with another then?

And perhaps the most significant lesson - as it relates to t'shuvah - is Abraham's vulnerable generosity. Because when he says "here I am, witness me," he is also offering himself up as a witness. If I let you see me in my fullness, maybe I can also try to see you in yours. And what path do we have towards restorative justice, healing of intergenerational wounds, and forgiveness if not through seeing one another?

Acknowledging each others' here-ness; the entire universe each one of us is carrying inside our beautiful fragile frames. It won't be enough. But it could be the first step. And beginnings are important.

Shana Tova. Happy new year.

-Amy Shoshana Blumberg

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