

Rabbi Dennis J. Eisner
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5772
The Trial of Abraham – Pass or Fail?

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.”

And Isaac trembled and said, “So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole sacrifice thing up?”

“What am I going to say?” Abraham said. “I’m standing there at two AM. I’m 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 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 of 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 spoke. “Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?” “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 I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?” Says Abraham

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.”¹

Leave it to Woody Allen to reduce one of our most important Torah stories into a self deprecating shtick. And while Woody’s interpretation is somewhat humorous, even he couldn’t escape the harshness of the predicament that Abraham and Isaac found themselves.

¹ WOODY ALLEN ON ABRAHAM AND ISAAC, “The Sacrifice of Isaac”

In the story of the binding of Isaac, *the Akedah*, we read how Abraham set up to follow God's command. In this cosmic test of faith, Abraham is asked to offer up his only son the one whom he loves as a burnt offering. Abraham is classically viewed as the lonely man of faith. Quite an example of faith isn't he? God calls out to him in the 22nd chapter of Genesis and three verses later he's off to sacrifice Isaac. Forgive me if I'm disheartened rather than impressed.

I have always believed that one of my main responsibilities as a rabbi is to inspire the congregation by demonstrating the many gifts and joys of Judaism so that you will be drawn closer to our tradition, to the synagogue, and to Jewish life but, I don't see how telling you a story about a man willing to kill his own son in the name of faith is going to win you over to the cause.

I imagine that many people might tend toward ignoring this story as an immature version of religion or faith. Many may argue that civilization has developed beyond this way of thinking or simply suggest that it didn't really happen so therefore irrelevant. Many could simply exclaim, it's just a story to teach that we *shouldn't* sacrifice our children; it has nothing to do with faith in God.

Well, personally, whether I believe that this event actually happened or not, I do believe that the Torah has been given to us to teach us truths about God and Judaism and humanity's role in the world. I believe that tomorrow morning's Torah reading is crying out for our attention, especially in this day and age.

It is true that we have a strong tradition of lauding Abraham's actions as acts of great faith and conviction we must strive towards. And I am sure that I could dig up some old sermon where I made this point. But to be brutally honest with you, at this time in my life and at this time in our history, I feel this explanation of the *Akedah* is troubling at best.

Sadly we know of too many acts of murder done in the name of faith and I believe we ought to reject their moral calculation out of hand; we ought to be resolute and say that while this may have been part of our ancient relationship with God it is not consistent with our modern Jewish approach to life, to faith, to service of God.

So rather than look at the *Akedah* from the traditional single point of view, I have chosen to follow the teaching of noted biblical scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky who exclaims in her approach to the *Akedah* how the story can be read simultaneously in two opposite directions. She teaches that the text is so dense, so revealing and yet mysterious, so vague and yet so dramatic that it sits open to multiple positions.²

One can simply read Abraham as a man of faith, a man that believes that the impossible is possible, that God will save him and save Isaac enabling Abraham to take up the knife believing that the test is in his willingness to do the act, not in his performance of the act. It is a "colossal game of 'chicken' and God blinked first." Abraham wins.

In contrast, any student of Bible should also remember the other Abraham that had the heroic chutzpah to argue with God for the lives of strangers of Sodom and Gomorrah. But when it came to his own son, not a peep!

² Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, "Akedah: The View from the Bible" in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*

Using this alternative approach to reading our story we must ask what's going on here? Why doesn't Abraham argue with God? Why was he neutral to the injustice of sacrificing his only son?

We read in (Gen 22:12) the following – and I quote:

“Indeed I know that you fear God but **(now)** you have not held back your son, your only son, from me.”

Frymer-Kensky asserts: “This crucially ambiguous sentence leads to two utterly different conclusions; one, *that binding Isaac for sacrifice is a mark of Abraham's special virtue and fidelity*; and the other, *that binding Isaac was a failure of Abraham, who was after all only human and who missed his opportunity to rise in defense of an injustice.*”

With this closer reading we can see that the story supports either position. While at the same time, we must acknowledge that the *Akedah* does not resolve the question of submission/moral agency. Verse 12 also allows the more traditional interpretation. Part of the impact of this story then lies in the fact that it makes us aware of our own values as we read it. It makes us aware that at times like this we cannot remain neutral.”³

As many of you know, last November I lead a group of congregants on an unforgettable trip to Central Europe. On our trip we visited Warsaw, Krakow, Budapest, and Prague and came face to face with our heartbreaking past. We saw first hand the results of indifference. We touched the scars created by a world that remained neutral in a time steeped with injustice. We wept at the mass graves of our people who had no voice. And we promised once again to never forget. We promised never to be neutral in the defense of our people and against injustice.

You also know that as often as I am able to, I lead a congregational trip to Israel as well as encourage as many of our teens to travel to Israel each summer with our confirmation class. Now try to imagine the juxtaposition of being in Central Europe with its dark history and being in Israel tanned by the sun of the Negev, speaking Hebrew, eating pomelos on a kibbutz, visiting the Old City, splashing in the Mediterranean Sea, as well as standing at the boarder with Lebanon as Ketusha rockets are aimed at us, visiting a school where the students make regular visits to bomb shelters, or watching a father place Shabbat candles at a bus stop where his daughter lost her life due to a terrorists explosion.

It is in these moments of dissonant emotions that it becomes ever clearer to me that we have approached a significant crossroad in our Jewish lives. It is in these moments that I am clearly aware of the injustice of the world's view of Israel and my responsibility not to remain neutral in her defense. While the United Nations, CNN, The San Francisco Chronicle, New York Times, The Goldstone Report etc, etc, etc, pretend to offer fair and balanced positions on Israel, it doesn't take much, however, to see that all too often this is not the case.

Therefore I believe we cannot remain neutral while the reporting of these events in America and throughout the world exclaim that there is a moral equivalency in clear acts of terrorism to the building of a security barrier that protects Israeli citizens from having their bus stop blown up. We cannot remain neutral as we see the evils of Islamic and Jewish fundamentalism grow along with the turmoil in the Middle East. We cannot remain neutral in the aftermath of last week's

³ (pp.134-5, Frymer-Kensky)

inflammatory address to the UN by Mahmoud Abbas who blatantly denied Israel's right to exist, refused to negotiate face to face with Israel's government on the issue of peace and secure borders and brazenly went against the urging of President Obama as he pressured the United Nations and the Security Council to vote unilaterally to declare a Palestinian State. And we most certainly cannot remain neutral as Iran's President Ahmadinejad refutes the facts of the Holocaust and we cannot sit silently as the very real and extremely troubling threat to Israel's existence is caused by Ahmadinejad's regime's persistence in the development of nuclear weapons that could wipe Israel and many of her neighbors off the map with one bomb!

Now please hear me loud and clear!

I would be completely remiss if I didn't state emphatically and acknowledge that Israel is not perfect and that our support for her should not be blind to the realities and complexities of the situation in the same way Abraham was blinded by his faith in the *Akedah*.

So this means that no matter how difficult it may be, we cannot be neutral when Israel is committing acts that we deem unjust. This means that we, the Jewish people, must not be neutral even when it means having to support Israel when she has to make difficult and painful compromises that no other country in history has ever been asked to make. It means we cannot be neutral about supporting a two state solution – while at the same time endorse that this solution can only take place under face to face negotiations and not by a unilateral decree from the UN. We cannot be neutral about the need to settle the issue of the Palestinian people that plagues the region and adds fuel to the Arab spring. Lastly we cannot be neutral on the issue of continued building in the West Bank. And while we need to speak out against this practice we cannot be neutral on the issue of fairly negotiated borders, Israel's security, and her right to exist.

I know that there may be some of you who are thinking that this is simply another pro Israel sermon given by a pro Israel rabbi. I want to be clear that this is not a flag waving advertisement for my upcoming trip to Israel. And I am not asking that you support Israel without reflective and educated thought. Honestly I don't think that this is possible and I wish it was that simple.

What I am expressing tonight is my most passionate plea that we, as American Jews, better understand and get more deeply involved in Israel because for the first time in my life I am truly concerned about her future. And if we don't do something about it now - if we don't engage in a relationship with Israel – we may not have an Israel to defend.

Do you know that right here in the Bay Area the Jewish Community Relations Committee – the JCRC – has identified 104 organizations, that are either anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic or both, that explicitly exist in order to gain local and worldwide support for the claim that Israel doesn't have a right to exist. Do you know that the Bay Area is the epicenter in the world for the BDS movement which stands for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions? Did you know that these organizations want the world to believe that there is a moral equivalency with Israel's right to exist and protect herself to acts of terrorism or the shrieking sound of thousands of bombs flying into Israeli homes from Gaza. Do you know that these anti-Israel / Anti-Semitic organizations in the Bay Area outweigh those which support the State of Israel 4-1?⁴

How can we remain neutral?

⁴ Bay Area Jewish Community Relations Committee

I will let you know a little secret. This year was the latest I have ever finished writing my Rosh Hashanah sermon. Do you want to know why? Because this issue of Israel's security and her future is a moving target.

The fact is over the past six weeks and up until 3:00 pm yesterday I have been participating in face to face meetings and conference calls with everybody from the leaders of AIPAC, JCRC, JCF (both local and throughout the US), CCAR, URJ, and just last Thursday morning together with 900 rabbis from all walks of Jewish life I participated in a conference call with president Barak Obama who clearly reiterated what the majority of us believe and understand to be true – and that is in these tumultuous times, the only *place where parties to a conflict can resolve problems and achieve peace is in face-to-face negotiations*. He reiterated that partners in conflict must commit to becoming real partners in peace. Emphatically, President Obama stated that the Palestinian Authority must join Israel at the negotiating table and clear the way for the overdue peace process.

But he also warned in his address to the UN last week: “A lasting peace, for nations and for individuals, depends on a sense of justice and opportunity, of dignity and freedom. It depends on struggle and sacrifice, on compromise, and on a sense of common humanity.” And this was directed to all of us.

But unfortunately Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, immediately ignored this wise council and unilaterally circumvented bilateral negotiations over the strong objections of the Obama administration and both houses of Congress. Now we face the problem that if this results in a UN vote, the Palestinian political leaders might get the symbolic recognition they seek. However, they will have antagonized their necessary partner in peace and potentially imperil international aid, while failing to improve life for their people.

I will say it again: we cannot remain neutral because ultimately we must have a negotiated agreement and this is the only way to resolve the conflict and move toward a *sustainable* solution — two healthy democratic nations living side by side.⁵ And I want to be on record with the Reform Movement, and the United States Government in supporting a Palestinian State. However, I also want it to be on record as stating that we believe that a Palestinian State can only result from a negotiated agreement between the people directly involved – not the United States Government, not in the United Nations, and not through the agenda of a pro Israel lobby, but rather between duly elected Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

With this said I wouldn't dare tell you not to belong to any particular Israel advocacy organization. If you want to belong to ZOA or J-Street, Americans for Peace Now or the David Project, Stand With Us or Brit Tzedek, then by all means do so. These organizations serve a valuable purpose in the discourse in this country and in our congregation about our values and priorities.

However, and I want to be very, very clear – that this is not a plea to support any one political view over another. But what I will say and what I passionately believe is that whatever else you support politically, you should support the one bipartisan organization dedicated to the policies that the government of Israel is itself committed to - and that is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC.

⁵ Sharon Lipton, The Detroit News

Over the next weeks and months, not only will Israel be going through her own struggle to respond to the Arab turmoil in the region and the potential fallout from a UN vote, but the reality is each of us may also be struggling with understanding this complicated issue. So we need to educate ourselves on history and politics of the Middle East and Israel. We need to let our president, senators, congressmen, representatives and political candidates know of our opinions. We need to become informed advocates for Israel and for her security and we need to become compassionate advocates for a two state solution. We need to become passionate about our support for Israel and Israelis as well as Palestinians so that we can live side by side in peace and security.

One of the best ways you can start to do this is for you to join me this coming March 4-6 in Washington, DC at the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) Policy Conference. There are flyers and sign up sheets available for you as you leave tonight. Now if you can't join me in DC then I would implore you to educate yourself by getting involved with AIPAC locally. I am more than happy to speak with any of you on this matter.

As well as educating yourselves and getting involved with AIPAC, there is another way to support Israel physically, financially, spiritually and emotionally and that is to visit our homeland. When you make the pilgrimage to Israel you will walk in the footsteps of our ancestors, and at the same time you will walk along side our brothers and sisters developing an invaluable appreciation for the important role Israel and Israelis play in our lives today and in the future of the Jewish people.

One last way to make a difference and not be neutral is to join our Civic and Interfaith Outreach Committee right here at PTBE. This committee has set the standard in our region for outreach to our Muslim, Christian neighbors and has proven time and time again that Jewish people can never have too many friends. These friendships are proof that we can coexist as long as there are true partners who desire to live together in peace.

I want to end by expressing the challenge that I believe lay before us this Erev Rosh Hashanah and that is that above everything else, *it means each one of us must be better informed.* The most important thing we can all do is to engage in this conversation that will have profound implications for the future of Israel, the Palestinian people and the Middle East in general. None of us can afford to remain neutral or silent on this issue - this conversation needs each one of our voices.⁶

Yes the Abraham narrative, our narrative, is difficult and complicated but it must teach us that ours cannot be a tradition based on blind faith or neutrality. The same can be said about the Israel narrative. It is also difficult and even though it is a bastion of light in a murky place, our tradition teaches us that we cannot be blinded by this light but rather we must use this brightness to help us act out our faith. It means standing up for justice. It means accepting the challenge to fight against those who want to delegitimize or unilaterally make decisions intent on destroying our right to a secure and prosperous home land. It means that we cannot remain neutral in our belief that the Palestinian people deserve a state of their own – as long as this is accompanied by a guarantee that our borders will be safe and secure. And most importantly, if we are to have any future we cannot remain neutral in our desire to live peacefully amongst ourselves and amongst our neighbors no matter how hard this may be to achieve.

⁶ <http://nfty.rjblog.org/2011/09/22/the-un-vote-on-a-palestinian-state/>

As our president said in his address to the UN Last week:

“Peace is hard, but we know that it is possible. So, together, let us be resolved to see that it is defined by our hopes and not by our fears. Together, let us make peace, but a peace, most importantly, that will last”

Amen v’amen and L’shana Tovah.