

The Akeda is the focus of today's Torah reading. On the face of it, this story is about Abraham following God's command no matter what. But as we learned in Hebrew School, it is also about the transition from a society that allows human sacrifice to one that does not. In my day it went something like, "Aren't we Jews great? We don't perform human sacrifice." And of course, with pride I agreed with that sentiment even though I hadn't seen too many examples of human sacrifice amongst the non-Jews in Skokie.

But this story is not just about transition. It is also about transcendence and substitution. It is a story about the proper way to approach God and the proper way to expiate our sins. And that is why this story, and the shofar from the ram ultimately sacrificed in it, is linked with Rosh Hashanah, the time that begins our most intense self-reflection of the year.

I think that the best way to understand the Akeda is to explore the story from the perspectives of the various actors – Abraham, Isaac, and even Jacob who heard the story from the participants, and finally the people to whom the story is told, the recipients of the Torah on Sinai, we the Jewish people.

I want to approach this chronologically so we will start with Abraham. And to understand this story from Abraham's perspective, I am going to say something a bit controversial – so treat everything that I say from here on out as a combination of my own personal midrash and pop psychology triggered through readings of various scholarly but not necessarily normative Jewish sources.

Here we go. Abraham was a pagan. After all, our father was a wandering Aramean. At least he was born that way. And pagans raised him. So we know that sometime during his life he was transitioning from being a pagan to being the first monotheist.

What did Abraham's pagan culture look like? Human and child sacrifice was a common denominator in pagan societies throughout the ancient world in diverse

areas that had no cross-cultural communication. I find it fascinating that something so abhorrent to us existed almost uniformly around the world. There are documented human sacrifices in China, the Middle East, and the Americas. That this behavior exists throughout human societies says something very basic about human nature. And what is most unique about the human condition compared to other species? It is the knowledge of our own mortality and our consequent fear of death. Sacrifice allows one to overcome that fear by becoming like the gods, by becoming a ruler over life and death.

So Abraham at the time of the Akeda, although no longer theologically a pagan, was still culturally a pagan. After all, his parents, grandparents, siblings, and cousins were all pagans. Is it so easy for him to escape his upbringing? He believes in one God, he understands the underlying tenants of ethical monotheism, but he cannot overcome his own deep-seated psychological needs so easily. When God tells him to sacrifice his son, he does not debate its merits. They are self-evidently clear to him. He understands the need for human sacrifice as he learned this lesson on his father's knee. Although we may think that Abraham failed this test, God did not expect anything more from Abraham than obedience. Abraham was rewarded for doing the best that he could, just as Noah was a righteous man in his generation. The reward bestowed upon Abraham at Mount Moriah was God's promise of an uncountable number of descendants through whom all the inhabitants of the earth would be blessed.

But his reward was limited. After all, we are not known as B'nai Avraham. By rejecting the sacrifice, God also rejected the desire to become like a god as a proper human motivation.

Now let's move on to the other human actor in this story, Isaac. The first thing that we need to understand about Isaac is that he was a willing participant in his own sacrifice. The text and normative Jewish tradition are pretty clear on that. Isaac was an adult who willingly carried the sacrificial wood on his back; he asked where the

sacrifice was, a question that indicated that he understood that something was fishy; he received an ambiguous answer to that question (God will provide for a sacrifice. My son! Is that a comma or a period?); and then, after all this, he let his elderly father bind his hands and feet. Isaac knew.

So why did he cooperate? First, he cooperated out of a sense of duty, both to his father and God. And furthermore, he understood his father's motivation. After all, Isaac had four pagan grandparents and a pagan half-brother. He knew what this meant to his father.

But I think that there was a greater driver of Isaac's cooperation – his own guilt. Isaac allows himself to become a guilt offering. Our tradition implicitly recognizes Isaac's guilt through the concept of the "merit of Isaac." We ask God to absolve us of our sins, our guilt, because of what Isaac went through at the Akeda. But this only makes sense if Isaac himself was acting out of a sense of guilt.

So why was Isaac feeling guilty? There is no evidence in the text that he did anything wrong. So now here comes my pop psychology explanation as to how we can understand that guilt. According to Freud, one of the prime movers of subconscious guilt is the Oedipus Complex, the desire to have relations with your mother and a murderous anger towards your father.

Furthermore as elucidated in Freud's essay Moses and Monotheism, in childhood we learn the concept of renunciation, denying ourselves certain desires, and this derives from parental and more importantly paternal authority. Our father tells us what is good, and so allowed, and what is bad, and so prohibited. Freud states that religious renunciation stems from this childhood renunciation. We transfer that parental authority to the religious sphere. At this point, we look to God as our father figure controlling us through reward and punishment.

So now God as the father figure becomes the nexus of our Oedipal guilt. We are subconsciously angry with God. But we cannot express this anger. After all He's God. Repressed this anger becomes self-directed guilt. This anger turned inward is what allowed Isaac to willingly sacrifice himself, to basically commit suicide. Isaac attempts to expiate his own sins through self-sacrifice, but in rejecting human sacrifice God is also rejecting self-sacrifice as a means of redemption.

Do you know the Jewish version of the Oedipus Complex? Instead of son kills father then marries mother, it is mother kills father then marries son. Which reminds me of a story I once heard. Mrs. Abrams was telling Mrs. Goldberg that her son called her to tell her that his psychologist said that the reason he was so neurotic was because of his Oedipus Complex. At which point Mrs. Goldberg said, "Oedipus shmedipus as long as he loves his mother."

Now on to Jacob. Jacob grew up knowing the lessons of the Akeda. He knows that fealty to God and expiation of sins does not require human sacrifice.

And then Jacob dreams about the Akeda. In parsha vayeitze, Jacob is travelling from Beer Sheva to Charan. He stops along the way to sleep. When Jacob awakens from this dream, he realizes that he unwittingly slept at hamakom, the same spot where his grandfather almost killed his father. And how does he know that it was the same spot? It is because the same blessing that God gave to Abraham at Mount Moriah is repeated to Jacob at the end of his dream.

And what does he dream about? He dreams about a ladder. And in this dream there are angels on the ladder. But the angels are not just coming down from heaven to earth. They are going from earth to heaven. The ladder that connects heaven to earth represents the transition in God's expectations that occurs from the beginning to the end of the Akeda. These angels travelling in both directions represent Jacob's understanding that we are in a dialogue with God, that his grandfather and father's

expression of faith at Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount, Hamkom, was just a prelude.

Abraham and Isaac's prelude of faith was bolstered by Jacob's intellectual understanding of our relationship with God - that there was a need to move beyond primitive, subconscious human motivations. This is further reinforced 14 years later when Jacob encounters an angel who does not want to let him pass. Jacob resists that angel. Unlike Abraham and Isaac, he struggles against the will of God. In a sense, he is struggling against the fear of death and the Oedipal guilt that we, as God's creation, are born with.

As a result, he is rewarded with a new name, Yisrael, he who strives with God. And he is given a reward greater than the initial blessing to Abraham, all of his descendants are known by his name. They are all known as B'nai Yisrael.

Jacob, three generations removed, is able to transcend his pagan ancestry. And that is the message of the Akeda to us, transcendence.

The first thing that we need to transcend is our indecent behavior as a result of our unconscious fear of death. Fear of death drove the ancients to overcome this fear by ruling over life and death. They strove to become godlike. They did this through human sacrifice, but they also did this through brutal slavery, through gladiatorial battles staged for the entertainment of the crowd and the glory of the gods, and through the degradation of women by making them temple prostitutes. The lesson to Abraham and us from the Akeda is clear. We are no longer to act as pagans do. Hashem will not abide by, and we cannot engage in religious rituals that serve to make us like a god. Mastery of another human being is not acceptable.

The second thing that we need to transcend is our Freudian guilt. We see in many pagan cultures, the need to assuage guilt through corporeal punishments - cutting, scarring, and self-flagellation. Human sacrifice for the one being sacrificed is just

another example of the extremes that human's will go to in order to calm their psychic demons. The lesson to Isaac and us is that we do not need to beat ourselves up in order to expiate our sins.

But God does realize that we have these primordial, subconscious needs based on the human condition so he provides us with relief through substitution. Abraham becomes a master over life and death and Isaac expiates his sins by substituting the sacrifice of a ram for a human being. Later, this first sacrifice at Hamakom was institutionalized, **on the exact same spot**, as the Temple service for Yom Kippur. And we continue this substitution, even today, by reenacting that Temple service on musaf Yom Kippur. And God provides us with another form of substitution through a **limited** self-sacrifice that we engage in on Yom Kippur. We don't eat or drink and we do not engage in other forms of physical gratification.

But we don't just have Freudian guilt. We have what Martin Buber refers to in his essay *Guilt and Guilt Feelings* as existential guilt - a guilt that inures to us from committing a true wrong. And so our tradition provides us with a means to deal with that guilt and expiate our true sins - tefillah, tzedukah, and t'shuva, . We pray for forgiveness, we give charity, and we perform t'shuva through confession and a personal redress of any wrongs done.

But perhaps the most important lesson from the Akeda occurs when Abraham names the site where the binding of Isaac occurred. This name provides us with insight into the nature of God, and how God calls on us to transcend our innate views. He calls it adoni yirei. As translated by Shalom Spiegel in his book *The Last Trial*, God will see or alternatively God will be seen.

The name that Abraham gives to this sight is a prophecy. It is a prophecy of a dialogue that will occur for his grandson Jacob and for us. This prophecy applies to Jacob through his dream of the ladder and his encounter with the angel, and it applies to us through the shofar service.

When we blow the shofar, we are calling to God so that God will see so that God will remember what occurred at Hamakom. And what does he remember? He remembers that when he demanded that Abraham sacrifice Isaac he did it as elohim, the God of justice; but when he stopped the sacrifice, he did so as yhv'h, the God of mercy. When we blow the shofar, we are asking God to make the same transition for us. We acknowledge that our sins may not be worthy of forgiveness except to the extent that He is willing to make that transition from justice to mercy.

And the shofar blasts are not just a call to God. They are a call to us to get serious with the business of expiating our sins. This shofar service forms a direct link between the horn of the ram sacrificed in substitution for Isaac, and the ram's horn that we blow beginning with Elul and ending with neilah yom kippur. Starting in Elul we blow the shofar to remind us that it is time to do teshuva. Yesterday and today that reminder reaches a crescendo, and after Ne'ela the gates of heaven close with a shofar blast. These shofar blasts are telling us adonai yirei, how we will see God. We will see God through the lesson from Isaac. We will see Him as a God that does not require our self-destruction. We expiate our sins through prescribed methods that provide us with relief without destroying ourselves both literally and figuratively. This prescription serves as a salve for both our Freudian and existential guilt.

Next we will begin the shofar service. This shofar service fulfills Abraham's prophecy of a dialogue between us and Hashem. My hope and prayer for all of us is that adoni yirei. - that Abraham's prophecy will come true and that through the shofar service we will be able to connect with a merciful God. Leshana tova tikatevu v'techatemu. May we all be written and inscribed for a good year.