

Reflections on the Binding of Isaac
Harvard Hillel, Rosh Hashona, 2006
Marshall Ganz
(9/23/06)

Good morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect with you this Rosh Hashanah on perhaps the most challenging Torah story: the binding of Isaac. It challenges us because it is morally provocative, because it seems to teach unconditional obedience as a virtue (something many of us have a hard time with), and because its significance at the beginning of the Days of Awe, a time of reflection, forgiveness, and renewal, is unclear.

I want to ask you to consider four questions:

Who is the central character of the story: Abraham or Isaac?

What is the central choice he is called upon to make?

Which is key relationship: between God and Abraham, between Abraham and Isaac, between God and Isaac, or among all three of them.

And, fourth, is the key lesson really about obedience, or is it about something else? Is it about faith, perhaps, and courage, and renewal?

So at what point does this story occur in the broader narrative arc of which it forms a part?

It occurs at the peak moment in the relationship of God and Abraham. It occurs just after conditions necessary for fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham are finally in place: the improbable birth of a son, Isaac, to a 90 year old Sarah; clarification of the line of inheritance with the exile of Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar; and a treaty with Abimelech, the Philistine, that assures peace.

So all, it would seem, is finally to be well.

But it isn't.

It is at this very moment that God chooses to "put Abraham to a test." But what does Abraham have left to prove? He has been in direct relationship with God for over half his life. He has passed test after test (the Rabbis say 9). And God long ago covenanted with him to make his descendents not only numerous, but bearers of the mission of making God known in the world, to be a blessing to the nations. So why test Abraham at this point, the end of his life, when it is hard to imagine there is anything about him that God does not know.

*God then says to him, "Abraham" and he answered, here I am."
(Hineni). And He said, "Take your son, your **avored** one, Isaac, whom
you **love**, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt*

offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you. So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.

What now?

Speaking the same words with which he called Abraham to go forth from his father's house so many years before - *lech lehah* - God now calls him forth again, but this time taking the son that has finally been born to him and upon whom fulfillment of the covenant rests - so he can murder him?!?

We know Abraham is not afraid to question God. In Chapter 18 he argues with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, bargaining with him about how many good people it will take to avert destruction. So why not argue for the life of his son, Isaac, not only his beloved, but in many ways his all. Why doesn't he resist. Don't we want him to? Wouldn't we?

And so the journey begins - Abraham knows what he has been called to do, but Isaac does not. He must have thought he was off on a kind of father and son outing - just him, his father, a couple of "the guys", - up to a mountain, making a sacrifice, coming home, no doubt, to a good meal.

But when they get within sight of Mount Moriah, the place that God has chosen, his father tells the servants: "stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

Is he lying to them, perhaps our first reaction? Does he not want them around to protect Isaac? Or is he simply reporting that which he believes will be so? We do not know, but we do know that Isaac begins to have his doubts.

"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, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "here are the firestone and wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together."

These are the only words we hear Isaac speak . . . "where's the sheep . . ."

Is Abraham lying to him now? Or is he reporting to him what his faith tells him will be so?

Now we reach the moment of truth:

Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son."

Wait a moment!

Isaac is no five year old. At least in his teens, he carried the wood for the sacrifice on his back. But there's no suggestion that Abraham forced him to be bound. Old as he was, how could he? So if it happens it is because he, Isaac, decided to let it happen. But why? Why does he seem to cooperate in his own death? Why would he do that? Is it out of respect for his father? Is it to honor his father's faith? Where does he get the courage? Is he the one being "tested"?

Then the break in the story:

"Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: Abraham, Abraham! And he answered, "here I am". And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from me."

God allows Abraham suddenly to "see" a ram in the bushes, fulfilling His promise to "provide" the sacrifice and bring truth to Abraham's words to his servants and to his son. Abraham sacrifices the ram. And Abraham names the spot, Adonai-yireh, the Lord will see.

But what exactly has been seen?

The Angel continues, repeating, *"Because you have done this and have **not withheld** your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendents as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the sea shore. . all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendents, because you have obeyed My command."*

So what has just happened here?

The faithful Abraham proves yet again to be faithful? A covenant that God has made with him at least twice before is made again? A blessing already given is given again?

How did Abraham and Isaac feel?

Abraham, his hand on the blade, about to lift it, about to strike - suddenly reprieved. What relief. Was it relief that he would not have to kill his son? Did he ever really think that he would have to?

So what about Isaac?

A walk in the country had turned into a journey into fear, into the unknown, into death. Noticing there was no sheep, he questions and is told, God will provide. But, then, they get to the clearing and - oh, oh - there's still no sheep. How does Abraham explain this? Does he repeat, "God will provide"? Why does Isaac believe him? And how about the actually binding? Does Abraham ask his son to hold still so he can get a rope around him? How does he explain that? And as Abraham's hand reaches for the fatal blade, why doesn't he roll off the altar?

Is this what his relationship with his father had come to? To trust not only in his father, but also in his father's relationship with God, to the death?

Isaac had heard all about this relationship, no doubt, but only in the words, stories, and promises of this father and mother. He had seen none of this. So his willingness to go forward also rested only on his relationship with his father. Yet somehow, this must have been enough, enough to enable him to face his fears, find his faith, and to act with the courage he was called upon to show placing his life in his father's hands.

So when the angel repeats to Abraham, "you have not withheld your son, your favored one", what he means is that Abraham did not use his relationship with his son to protect him from choices he had to make - but, rather, to encourage him to face his fear, to find his faith, to act with courage - because only in this way could Isaac himself come to experience God's power, mercy and love.

In other words, although Abraham's relationship with his son would be enough to assure the biological continuity of his line, it was only if Isaac could begin a relationship with God, through experience of God's redemption, that moral continuity could be assured, resting not upon words, but upon what he had lived, what he had come to know in his own heart.

So it was a trial, but for both father and son. But it was not the kind of trial through which you prove yourself worthy, but a trial through which you grow your worthiness. For Abraham, the trial was one of restraint, of allowing his son to face fear, find faith, and act with courage to experience God's redemption. And, at the same time, learning to face his fear, find his faith, and act with courage - this was Isaac's trial as well. Now, and only now, could Abraham pass from the scene, assured that not only his DNA, but also his mission would be passed on.

And here we are, at the beginning of a new year, a new school year, a year in which we too may be tried. As we enter these Days of Awe, let us reflect on the gifts of our tradition, our community, our parents

- not to hide behind them, but rather to draw upon them to strengthen our hearts - to face the fears we must face, find the faith we must find, and act with the courage with which we must act to come to know God in ways that can enable to fulfill the mission to which we have been called - to be a blessing not only to ourselves, not only to our children, but to the nations.