

The binding of Isaac: this disturbing story has generated mountains of commentary from the beginning of the rabbinic age through today. There's a whole website called The Akedah Project,<sup>i</sup> with more than 30 videos coming at the story from different angles, from artists, scholars, and political analysts. The story raises so many questions: Why does God want to test Abraham? Does God not know the extent of Abraham's commitment to him? What *is* the test? At what point is it over? Does Abraham pass the test, or fail it? How old is Isaac in this story? What did Isaac know, and when did he know it?

The medieval French rabbi Rashi, considered by many Jews to be the greatest Biblical commentator of all time, suggested that Abraham radically misunderstood God's command. He explains (on Genesis 22:2), perhaps God was saying, "*When I said to you 'Take your son'... I did not say to you, sh'chateihu, 'slaughter him,' but only ha'aleihu, 'bring him up.' Now that you have brought him up, introduce him to Me, and then take him back down.*" Instead of wanting Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God really only wanted him to spend some spiritual "quality time" with his son. Had Abraham only paid close attention, he might have spared himself, Isaac, and Sarah a significant amount of stress and pain.<sup>ii</sup>

A modern Christian commentator suggests that Abraham only *thought* he heard God tell him to sacrifice his son because he lived in a time when that's what gods wanted, and that any time you hear a divine command to do something awful, you should know it's not a divine command.<sup>iii</sup> The real God wouldn't ask for things like that. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, saw Abraham's compliance as a radical suspension of ethical obligation in the face of God's inexplicable will. Kierkegaard says that either Abraham is no better than a murderer, and there are no grounds for admiring him; or moral duties do *not* constitute the highest claim on the

human being. God can command things that surpass human logic. Clearly this is one of those texts whose truth emerges as you wrestle with it, and if your insights into it don't change at times, you're not trying hard enough!

I'm most drawn to literary analyses, so I'm interested in the way the story is told. The background is a background of promises from God, not yet fulfilled. God told Abraham to leave Ur and he did, and to go to a land that God would show him, and he did. God told him he would be the father of a great nation, but once both Hagar and Sarah had sons by Abraham, Sarah insisted on banishing Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, thus depriving Abraham of half of his progeny. Promises from God, not yet fulfilled.

"After these things"—and we don't know exactly what "things" the narrator means—God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am," which in Hebrew has a connotation of commitment—I am committing myself to something even before I know what it is. God's command is excruciating: "Take your son," then "your *only* son Isaac," then "whom you love." Lots of emphasis on how weighty this command is for Abraham. But off they go with some servants, and what with the servants and the cutting of wood, you have to wonder at what point Isaac got the feeling that something hinky was going on. Again, the rabbis wrestled with this, and some of them thought Isaac was an adult by this time and knew what was up, and went willingly because he was honored for God to see him as worthy of sacrifice. But the text doesn't tell us that so we don't know. When the mountain is in view, Abraham tells the servants to stay and wait while he and Isaac worship, and then they'll get back to them. Is he lying? Or—and I find this compelling—is Abraham just saying as much as he knows? God has promised him and promised him, and as far as he knows, those promises

are good. Maybe there's still a way for both Abraham and Isaac to come back down off that mountain. One thing at a time.

Isaac says to him, "Father!" And Abraham says again, "Here I am," implying this powerful commitment, a firm commitment even though he's not sure what he's committing to. Abraham is radically committed to God and to his son, and how do you resolve that? He's just walking along, holding that tension, step by step. "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son," which again may be the extent of what he knows. Does he avoid saying, "You're the burnt offering" because he's afraid of Isaac's reaction? Or does he avoid saying it because he still hopes that God will pull a rabbit out of his hat? He says just what he knows, and no more.

So they get to the place that God had shown them, and Abraham builds an altar, lays the wood for the fire, binds Isaac and lays him on the altar, and raises his knife to kill his son. And the angel of the Lord calls to him, Abraham, and for a third time, Abraham says, "Here I am." "I don't know what's coming, but I'm here for it." "Do not lay your hand on the boy," says the angel, and Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket that he can use as a sacrifice. So did Abraham "pass" the test? Or did God intervene before he could fail it? Was Abraham about to bring down the knife? Or was he holding it up, giving himself a moment to change his mind? Did God really want Abraham to be willing to kill his son? Did God not know how committed Abraham was to him?

We've talked about how readily people in the Hebrew Bible argue with God. It's kind of expected. And often God changes God's mind when they argue. In this story, Abraham didn't

make a peep . . . but maybe God is changing anyway, because of being in a covenant relationship with Abraham rather than being just sort of a god of all things in general. Earlier God had been perfectly willing to sweep away every living thing on the earth except Noah's family, but now God's made a covenant with Abraham—"I will make of you a great nation"—and has committed God's self to this person and his progeny. Abraham and Isaac aren't just names on a clipboard to God; they're special, particular individuals, with whom God is in covenant. And God can't let Abraham sacrifice his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loves. God's sovereignty—God's power over all—in this moment yields to God's blessing.

Pat talked last week about how paradox generates revelation—that in the tension between two contradictory things, there is truth. Here we have God's sovereignty, which is absolute, contradicted by God's covenantal love. Something breaks open in this story as I read it—such that God's very nature is changed by being in covenant with human beings. Or God becomes more fully God by allowing the covenant to coexist with sovereignty. The takeaway for Abraham is that God keeps promises. "I will make of you a great nation," for sure; Abraham is the original patriarch of Israel, and thus of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The takeaway for us is also that God keeps promises. We walk forward one step at a time and, if we are fully awake, we walk forward in both terror and hope. We're never sure we're right—or we shouldn't be—and our best evaluations of any situation just demonstrate how much we don't know. But God has made a covenant with us, and we have faces that God knows. At the end of the day, that covenant means that God's graciousness must prevail.

God of promise,  
You stayed the hand of Abraham and fulfilled the promise you made to him, that he would

become a great nation. We are counting on you keeping your promises to us. Help us trust the covenant despite our inability to see ahead. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.jewishlive.org/isaac>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/akeidah-abraham-failed-gods-test-god-loved-him-anyway>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://clevertitlehere.blogspot.com/2013/09/the-word-of-lord-sermon-for-september.html?m=0>