

**Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013**  
**Akedah as Compromise**  
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It's been said that peace tests our humanity even more than war; that to love and respect is a greater challenge for most of us than to hate and oppose. It's an interesting proposition to contemplate today, not only because it's Rosh Hashanah and we're supposed to be reflecting on our challenges and relationships, but because our Torah reading today presents us our annual High Holy Day confrontation with a test that has confounded and disturbed us for millennia.

Much ink has been spilled trying to understand the test of Akedat Yitzchak, the Binding of Isaac. I'm going to spill some more now, and suggest that we find meaning in it by reading it as a test of relationship, a test of love.

What does the expression "spilling ink" really mean? Describing efforts to share controversial ideas as "spilling ink" suggests the author needs to clean up the mess he/she causes as a result. It's true: some sermons and commentaries on this story create theological havoc. My intention is to clean up the chaos the story unleashes, but I recognize that sometimes to clean up you have to be prepared to get messy, just as sometimes to love you have to be prepared to lose.

The test of the Akedah is almost always understood as a test of Abraham, after all the story opens with "*Veha'elohim nisah et Avraham/God tested Abraham.*" Almost always the traditional commentaries point to his unwavering response to the divine call to sacrifice Isaac as Abraham having passed God's test of faith with flying colors, leaving us a model of perfect loyalty to emulate in our own relationships with God.

I have never found that reading of the story to be of any spiritual value. Like so many, I shudder at the idea of a capricious God who would make that kind of demand in the first place. And I cannot fathom sacrificing my child's life for my own

beliefs, though a few of mine might say I'm already guilty of doing that by serving so much kale, flax and chia at home.

I prefer to teach this story not as a model of what to do in response to such a call from God, but precisely what *not* to do. Maybe the test wasn't whether Abraham would fulfill the command but whether he would *refuse* to fulfill it, seeing the radical and tragic impact it would have on everyone else in his life, on Isaac of course, but also on Sarah. Even the 9<sup>th</sup> century Midrash Tanchuma linked the death of Sarah to her hearing about the near-sacrifice of her son. While it requires some poetic license, this reading suggests Abraham in fact *failed* the test of the Akedah miserably.

Some say that it's not Abraham who was tested, but rather it was God who was tested. In one sense, scholars like Toronto's own Rabbi Michael Brown say that Abraham went along with it to test God: to see if God would actually allow for something so barbaric and meaningless to happen.

In another, the test is understood as God actually testing Godself. The late Rabbi David Hartman, whose recent loss is still felt so poignantly around the world, suggested reading the story as God struggling with having ceded power to Abraham when entering into a covenant with him. Acknowledging the anthropomorphism of his reading, likening God to a parent who wrestles with their role in their own family as their children become more independent, Rabbi Hartman explained the Akedah as God trying to aggressively test divine authority by imposing this extreme demand on Abraham. In the end, when God commands Abraham to yield and not sacrifice Isaac, we see God's growing acceptance of the sharing of power between humans and the divine in unfolding creation and making history together.

It never fails. Just when I think I've exhausted all possible interpretations of the Akedah, another one appears and throws me back into our endless quest to unpack

this narrative. For me this year it's the idea that in truth the one who was tested by the Akedah wasn't Abraham or God; it was Isaac.

The mystical text of the Zohar comments as follows: *"...the opening verse should have read, 'and God tested Isaac' for Isaac was already 37 years old and his father was no longer accountable for him. If Isaac had said, 'I refuse', his father would not have been punished."*

While there's no explicit mention of Isaac's age at the time of the Akedah, there is a tradition, based on Sarah's age, that he was 37. The Zohar points out that Isaac was independent enough to have refused to go along with Abraham's plans and God could not have held it against Abraham, seeing as he was no longer liable for his son's actions. When our children reach the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah we also recite a blessing, *"Baruch sheptarani me'onsho shelazeh/Blessed is the One who has released me from the punishment -- meaning the responsibility for the actions -- of this one."*

All Isaac had to do was say no. But he didn't. He knowingly went along with his father's plan for binding him on the altar and for that the Kabbalah crowns Isaac the hero of the Akedah story. According to the Zohar the angels wept as Isaac was bound in awe of his greatness.

The Talmud reinforces Isaac's awareness of what he was doing when it explains in Massechet Rosh HaShanah: *"Why does one blow a shofar taken from a ram? The Holy One of Blessing said, 'Blow a ram's horn before Me so that I recall in your favor the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham, and count it to you as though you had bound yourselves before me.'"*

In other words, we, Abraham's descendants, get credit not for behaving like Abraham and showing perfect faith, but for behaving like Isaac; as if we too had *willingly* bound ourselves. Note how the Talmud even refers to this whole story not as the Trial of Abraham but as the Binding of Isaac. The only way any of this would

make sense is if Isaac knew what he was doing and voluntarily submitted to the whole ordeal.

Now why would Isaac have done something like that? What test exactly was Isaac facing?

Rabbi Brad Artson, in his book on the Akedah called Passing Life's Tests, suggests Isaac faced and passed the test of sacrificing for the sake of those we love, specifically children for their parents. He places Isaac's actions in the context of how as youngsters we sacrifice some of our need for attention so our parents can tend to our siblings, how as teenagers we limit some of our freedom out of respect for our parents concerns for our safety, and how as adults we give up precious time to care for needy parents who may be ill, lonely or incapable of managing their own affairs.

But as important a lesson as that may be, suggesting that Isaac was prepared to lose his life for his father's beliefs is a bit extreme.

There's another context in which to view Isaac's willingness to be bound, and that's the context of compromise, compromise for the sake of peace. It requires no more poetic license than any of the other interpretations we've seen before, and offers valuable emotional and spiritual wisdom as we rethink our responsibilities to one another on this day of Rosh Hashanah.

If Isaac could have easily refused to cooperate, with no consequences for Abraham, but chose instead to comply, he must have realized what was going on; that the scene into which he had been called was a significant but **symbolic** event in the relationship between Abraham and God, a dramatization of the depth of Abraham's conviction and perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, of God's desire to put an end to barbaric child sacrifice prevalent in the Ancient Near East.

Isaac saw the wood for the altar but no animal to sacrifice and inquired of his father: “*Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?*” He knew it wasn’t going to be him. Even when the text describes Abraham laying him on the altar, there’s no struggle, no resistance. Because Isaac knew he wasn’t going to die.

Not yet having his own connection to his father’s God and sensing his father’s unyielding devotion, Isaac’s willingness to play his part must have come with some trepidation, even if he knew his life wasn’t in danger. But that he was willing to participate, to sublimate his fears and perhaps even his own spiritual needs to become a character in his father’s narrative, a player in his father’s mission to change the world, teaches the importance of collaboration, which does *not* mean surrender or self-sacrifice. That would be martyrdom. And while we remember humbly the untold number of Jews who’ve died as martyrs, we have never promoted or prized that kind of sacrifice. The essence of the Torah that animates each of her stories and mitzvot is that of Brit/Covenant, partnership – between humans, between us and the Source of Life, and between us and the earth. Partnership should never demand the sacrifice of either partner, but it ought to inspire cooperation. For this reason Isaac becomes the hero of our story, and leaves us with a profound lesson for these Days of Awe: the centrality of compromise in all our relationships, human and divine.

These High Holy Days are our season of evaluation, of teshuvah, of return to our most noble ideals and values that give us hope, that inspire and motivate us.

***Who are you?*** Prayer after prayer, melody after melody, shofar blast after shofar blast, we’re asked: ***Who are you? What lies at the core of your being? What are your goals for yourself as a person; your aspirations as a Jew?***

From the depths of our prayers and our intentions, we rise before the universe and present ourselves in the fullness of all we believe we can be.

But is that what's really asked of us on this Yom HaDin, this Day of Judgment?

What defines most honestly who we are: the state we're in at any given moment or the dreams that galvanize us to the next? In answering the call do we share who we are today or who we're working to become tomorrow?

Teshuvah, repentance, is that paradoxical process which asks us to simultaneously strive to be more of whom it is we are capable of being, and to accept who it is we are; to realistically evaluate what it is we are able to change and to more mindfully embrace what we cannot. As many lives have been damaged by living beyond their reach as those damaged by living below their potential. So how do we define the essence of who we are – by the possibilities embedded within us or by the realities that define, and sometimes limit, us?

Avishai Margalit is a philosopher with appointments both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Princeton. His most recent book, On Compromise and Rotten Compromises, is a work of political philosophy that analyzes some of the dramatic trade-offs that have shaped politics and history, and their integrity or lack thereof.

I came upon the following line early in his text, and it struck me deeply:

**“We should be judged more by our compromises than by our ideals. Ideals tell us who we would like to be; compromises tell us who we are.”**

As children we're taught that compromise is a basic tool we'll need in life. Give a little and get a little, we're told. Meet in the middle. Cooperate. We teach kids that if two or more people each get a little bit of what they want, everyone can be happy. Battling over what game to play? What restaurant to go to? What music to listen to in the car? Find a way to enable everyone to have at least *some* of their wishes fulfilled and all can be at least somewhat happy.

We encourage and expect friends, siblings, parents and children to stretch themselves to accommodate one another and help each other realize dreams and aspirations which may become limited as a result of the compromise but will at least come true in part. Educators and mental health professionals of all kinds list learning to compromise as key to our ability to get along with others and have healthy, fulfilling relationships.

As we grow older the compromises between us take on higher stakes: What colleges can I apply to? Can I accept a promotion if it means moving to another city? Should our home be kosher? How should we spend and invest our savings?

But something else happens as we grow older, too. We begin to clarify our values and beliefs, to discover what matters most to us and how to stand up for ourselves. We develop goals, priorities and commitments not all of which are subject to negotiation. We begin to see that compromise is not always virtuous, that sometimes compromising is a huge mistake. Indeed, one of the most critical lessons we learn as we grow older, sometimes rather painfully, is to distinguish between what in our lives is negotiable, and what really isn't.

What Margalit suggests, what the Zohar teaches about Isaac and the Akedah, and what is so provocative to consider on these Days of Awe is that we exude more dignity, more righteousness, more integrity, not for our principles and convictions, but for our compromises and concessions.

What is so counter-intuitive is the suggestion that rather than focusing on reaching for the proverbial stars, we might better use our time exploring how to invest as much holiness and kavanah/intention into the facts on the ground. Rather than following our dreams, we might be better off consciously embracing our realities.

How do we do this?

Accepting that no one can have it all, that no one can live entirely according to their every belief and goal is the first compromise we must make with *ourselves* before we can negotiate with anyone else. Believing it *is* possible to have it all is what fuels the notion that all compromise ever amounts to is, surrender.

Accepting ourselves as less than what we might be capable of being, as having less than what we might be worthy of, is the first step towards a healthy relationship with anyone else. Accepting *others* as less than what they are capable of being or as getting less than what they may be worthy of, is the second, for compromise limits not only us but the other, too.

Margalit points out that compromising with spouses, children, siblings, colleagues, even enemies, takes place even before we negotiate with them. Simply acknowledging the other as a partner for negotiation validates them as worthy of our cooperation and lends credibility to their points of view. Willingness to compromise, not the compromise itself, makes space for empathy, an ingredient without which none of our relationships could thrive.

And more, he suggests that compromise is most effective when we consider the other not as an enemy but rather our rival, competing with us for access to the same, limited resources. In the political sphere those resources might be land, oil, water or power. In the personal realm we compete for time, attention, love, money, opportunity, validation and more. But that competition doesn't have to make us opponents; it can make us, more productively, rivals.

If we accept that those with whom we conflict are not necessarily expressing totally opposite needs but actually the same needs as ours, albeit in different forms, we might be moved to respond and compromise with greater respect and understanding.



And when each side gives up a part of their dreams for the sake of a shared resolution, acknowledging the others' concession as being as valuable, as precious, as our own changes the whole relationship, holding out the hope for lasting cooperation.

Compromise challenges us to rethink the way battle lines are drawn when conflict arises, as it invariably does and will. Insisting, as so many of us do, that love is a zero-sum game wherein only one of us can win as the other capitulates, comes with an exorbitant cost. Coming to the conversation about the future of Judaism with limited definitions of what an authentic Jewish life looks like, similarly breaks the bank on Jewish unity. Promoting one single path to peace predicated on one single vision of Jewish sovereignty, leaves us politically and morally impoverished and in an abiding state of war.

There is no single image of a successful career, no single portrait of a stable family. There is no single picture of health and fitness, and no single path to happiness. There is no single model of justice and no single vision of peace. Not in any pure, Platonic sense, but also not in our own experience of human development.

Compromise doesn't ask us to permanently relinquish our ideals, but to rethink how we could apply them to the contours of the landscapes on which we live each day. Margalit asks us to distill the essence of our hopes and dreams to see if we can imagine them coming to realization in modified and even limited forms.

To insist on only one image of our ideals is to make of them not ideals, but idols. Worshipping idols, Avodah Zarah, is Judaism's way of describing the stultifying of personal, emotional and spiritual growth – the ultimate betrayal of the gift of life we've been given. For idols are precisely things that don't change, and if there's anything we know for certain about life it's that change is ever-present. Being willing to work within its demands and to rethink what life can look like, being open to the constantly evolving ways in which we can seek and find fulfillment, is vital to

being, and staying, alive. That goes for human beings, communities, religions, societies, and nations.

In the realm of faith and spirituality, we are used to thinking in terms of ideals. Our texts and traditions provide models of how to behave, how to think, how to make choices. Imperfect as some of our examples may be, such as when Sarah banishes Hagar, Jacob robs his brother Esav of the birthright or Moses tries to evade God's call, the message is that there are ideals of character and purpose for which we ought to strive.

When it comes to things that we think of as holy, we often reject compromise because we assume that compromising over the holy means compromising the holy itself. We objectify the holy and identify sacredness with the forms it takes and not the message or narrative it's meant to inspire; namely, what we actually make of and do with the holy.

No such example is more contested and confounding than the story of the Binding of Isaac. For so many readers it hardens the notion of the non-negotiable. If Abraham's negotiating over the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah was about justice, his silence here is too often thought to be about his unshakeable devotion to God. But Isaac provides us another lesson, that of compromise, of blending our ideals with that of another.

In a fascinating chapter, Margalit explains how the focus on purity within so many religious traditions is often not so much about putting things in their right places but about the fear of mixing. Think of the Torah's prohibitions against Kilayim and Shaatnez, mixing seeds in our fields and fibers in our clothing. We resist diluting our beliefs, goals and ways of doing things with those of others because we fear spiritual and existential pollution. Pollution creates fogginess, a lack of clarity; it forces us to relinquish certainty – a frightening prospect for many.

Compromise involves the willingness to transcend the impulse to segregate for the sake of being right, and invites us to mingle with the other, to mix categories. Compromise is part and parcel of our messy world in which there is no space of our own that is totally devoid of others, unless we seclude ourselves from them – emotionally or ideologically -- as do extremists of all kinds. Compromise is the art of being muddled; the courage to live in the chaos. As organized, neat and efficient as we like to be, we could all work on being messier.

Our reading of the Akedah with Isaac as the hero shows him passing the test of compromise for the sake of peace. Setting aside for the moment the impulse to carve out his own unique path to God or to reject his father's, Isaac willingly travels the one Abraham has set for himself. In doing so, he recognizes his beliefs are not the only ones that matter. He sees in his father not an enemy but a rival, each trying to forge their own connections to God, which come in many and varied forms. He understands that cooperation is not surrender. Perhaps he even feels the depth of his father's pain for putting him in this situation.

Curiously, at the end of the story, Abraham returns alone. He and Isaac seem to have parted ways. In fact, we have no record in the Torah of them ever speaking again. While I've always read that as a tragic outcome of the Akedah – the estrangement of father and son as a result of the emotional violence of the story – I'm trying to see it in another light.

Perhaps Isaac has taken his leave now to formulate his own relationship to God. Soon he'll become the next patriarch of the covenant and to do so he must develop his own beliefs and practices. As we read in our Amidah prayer, the prayer the Rabbis tell us Isaac himself prayed when we encounter him a few chapters later out in the field in the afternoon, apparently davening Minchah: "*The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob*", and the same for each of the matriarchs. It's not "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" but the God of *each* of them, for each had to balance both what was passed down to them spiritually and what they were called

to believe in their own hearts. Just as we must do the same, balancing and compromising to heed the call of the future as we tend lovingly to the past. To do so, many of us strike out our own, creating some distance in the search for our independence.

Not chasing him or forcing him into his own mold, Abraham meanwhile prepares for Isaac to step into the role of patriarch. He's an old man, blessed with everything a person could want – “*God had blessed Abraham in all things*”. Rashi notes how the word “*Bakol/all things*” has the same numerical value as “*ben/ a son*”. Abraham's blessings included a son who would now take over his mantle of spiritual leadership and vision, a mantle sealed with a story of compromise and one that has helped shape the world for over 4000 years.

Reading the Akedah as a compromise for peace teaches that we are the fullest actualizations of ourselves when we willingly limit ourselves. Only by compromising, by intentionally diminishing our selves and our need for certainty or perfection, can we achieve shleymut, wholeness. As Rav Soloveitchik would note, it's a sacred paradox, which is the only frame in which we can truly find holiness. For holiness comes not as result of neat and seamless resolutions to life's quandaries, but precisely from acknowledging and learning to live with conflict and contradiction.

Let compromise be the mitzvah at the heart of your New Year resolutions. Mitzvah is translated as commandment but it's related to the Aramaic word “*tzavta*” which means to connect or join. When we do a mitzvah, we connect to one another and to the Kadosh Baruch Hu, the Holy One. When we fulfill the mitzvah of compromising, we bind two people together, and pave a shared path to peace. In the Akedah, Isaac compromised and served as the symbolic sacrifice, the *korban*. Coming from the word “*karov/close*”, a sacrifice, a korban, in the name of compromise brings two people, two visions into deeper relationship.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, the day the world was conceived, and the day to which we return each year to conceive it anew. In truth, each and every day the world is reborn, as we say in our prayers, *“Hamechadesh betuvo bechol yom tamid maaseh breishit/ God renews creation throughout each and every day.”* This is no small task. Renewing creation doesn’t mean creating the same day tomorrow that existed today. For no two days, no two moments are ever the same. It means God has to figure out over and over again how to create the world anew. The same with us. To live means to constantly negotiate with people, with rivals, with faith, with doubt, with love, with hate, with dreams and with reality to build continually renewing and renewable lives.

On this Yom HaDin, this Day of Judgment, as you reflect upon and clarify your values, priorities and goals for the lives you have the power to recreate today and every day, remember these words:

**“We should be judged more by our compromises than by our ideals. Ideals tell us who we would like to be; compromises tell us who we are.”**

Shanah Tovah.