

This is a Test, This is Only a Test

Rosh Hashanah 2nd day

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The *Akedah* - Binding of Isaac is one of the central stories of our tradition. Much has been written and debated about its mysteries and meanings. A Google search of The Binding of Isaac delivered over 3 million options whereas Lady Gaga brought up only about 150,000, just to give you an idea...

The verses we'll read this morning from Genesis begin with Hashem asking Abraham to take his son, Isaac, up Mount Moriah to prepare him as a burnt offering. According to the narration, Abraham gets up early in the morning, saddles up the donkey and without hesitation sets out to obey God's command. He brings along two young men – Eliezer and Ishmael, according to Midrash. Part way up the mountain, Abraham tells the men to stay behind with the donkey and he and Isaac continue up. After Isaac is bound on the altar and Abraham lifts up his knife to sacrifice his son, the angel of God stops him at the last minute, at which point Abraham is shown a ram caught in some nearby bushes. Abraham then sacrifices the ram in Isaac's place. God then tells Abraham that God will bless him and increase his offspring. In the final verses of the chapter the birth of Rebecca through the line of Abraham's brother, Nahor is foretold. The *maftir* describes the sacrifices for Rosh Hashanah.

Considering that the many interpretations of this passage are endless and complex, I'll share just a couple of things that touched me in studying and thinking about this story.

The Talmudic sages teach that Isaac was thirty-seven at the time of the trip up the mountain, this is likely based on the next biblical section, which is of Sarah's death at 127 (she was ninety when Isaac was born). Usually when this story is related we imagine a little boy Isaac being dragged up the mountain, unable to stand up to his father and completely clueless about what's going on. It is easy for us to get stuck with the picture of the little boy being tied to the altar with the knife coming down at him. We express our disdain for Abraham, accusing him of being a murderous father or a fool for his unwavering faith. It's hard to look beyond and see what insights we might gain from this powerful text.

The text states right in the first line that Hashem tested Abraham. Our mystical sages, rabbis and contemporary teachers have much to say about tests.

We are all presented with tests in our lives. At a crucial moment of growth we are presented with a test that very often is opposite to our nature, goes against our core beliefs and doesn't match the skills we've developed.

In the case of Abraham, he is known as the archetype of *chesed* – loving kindness – and here was being called to exercise the power of *gevurah* – strength and determination under discipline.

In our lives, for example, we may be very strong and independent, never asking for help and become seriously ill and need to ask for support from friends and community, trusting that in our vulnerability we will be accepted and loved.

We know we must face the test and we brace ourselves for the worst. But...when we take the leap of faith – because, like Abraham, that is what's required, we realize that the end result is good beyond our expectations.

When our intention is to grow, to move towards wholeness, when we respond with faith to the challenging tests, the Divine opens the gates of mercy and loving kindness.

This is a simple concept and also very difficult to remember and put into practice in our lives which are often ruled by fear – the absence of faith.

May we be blessed to be more like Abraham, responding to the tests and challenges in our lives with faith, and may Hashem respond by opening the gates of mercy and compassion for us.

L'Shana Tova.