

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Speech by David Townsend,. September 15, 2015/5776

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be holy and acceptable in your sight, Adonai our Strength and our Redeemer.

What an honor to be asked to give a talk for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I told Rabbi Aviva in the spring. And then the realization. Oh great. The Binding of Isaac.

Let's start here: God does not desire, God has never desired, the death of children. I'd go so far as to suggest that any healthy and humane and yes, any truly devout and righteous reaction to this story involves an element of visceral revulsion. It's a great credit to the tradition of scholarship on the passage that Jewish exegesis has for many centuries made space for such responses. The early midrash Bereshit Rabbah imagines God as saying "I never considered telling Abraham to slaughter Isaac," distinguishing between the verb for slaughter and the verb for sacrifice. The Spanish Rabbi Yona Ibn Yanach in the 11th century followed in this tradition when he wrote that God demanded only a symbolic sacrifice. A later Spanish Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi in the 14th century wrote that Abraham allowed his imagination to lead him astray, making him believe that he had been commanded to slay his son. Ibn Caspi asked, "How could God command such a revolting thing?"

Another possibility is that the test is actually not whether Abraham will be willing to sacrifice Isaac, but whether he will have the moral integrity to reply to God, "Are you out of your freaking mind?"--a test he fails.

I find great comfort in these voices of exegetical dissent to the disturbingly broad current of interpretation that in considering this story represses empathy and accepts without hesitation the legitimacy of God asking anything God wants, or at very least the legitimacy of God testing Abraham by asking for something so outrageous that he never intended for Abraham to go through with it. "Hey, just kidding," says the angel, which supposedly turns it into a story of God's mercy and favor to one so righteous that he's assented to an atrocity. Such interpretations remain blind not only to the monstrous pressure this puts on Abraham's motivations, but to the trauma suffered by Isaac--a trauma that some have identified as scarring Isaac for life and leading down the generations to some of the spectacular relational dysfunction that follows in the later chapters of Genesis. That kind of emotional dissociation in the interpretation of scripture has led to some heartless attitudes in all three of the Abrahamic religions, as English biologist Richard Dawkins has gleefully pointed out in his ongoing sophomoric rant against all religious faith.

But this morning I want to invite you down a path that begins by looping back for its starting point to Yosef ibn Caspi's suggestion that we might read this story as an account of Abraham being awakened, in the nick of time, from a delusion into which his own imperfect perception of the Divine had led him. I invite you to consider the story as exemplifying the possibilities of our developing understanding of God--through all

human religious history, through the history of Judaism, and through the course of our own individual spiritual journeys.

In other words, we have to make a radical distinction between what Abraham perceives God as saying to him, and what HaShem, the Ground of our Being, could possibly whisper in the hearts of the righteous. So I'm asking you to entertain the possibility that when the text says that God spoke to Abraham, we can read this as stating Abraham's own point of view at the time, not an absolute point of view that establishes the demand to sacrifice Isaac as the genuine will of God. We might support this argument by observing that the description of the command to sacrifice, at the beginning of the parshat, is notably distinct from the last-minute command to stop. We hear at the very beginning of the reading that Elohim tests Abraham. Later, it's not Elohim but an angel who speaks, and more perhaps to the point, God is referred to this time not as Elohim, but by the Divine Name, as Adonai. Some modern scholars have suggested that this represents a splicing of originally separate narratives, or alternatively, that the prevention of the sacrifice represents an interpolation that reflects the unease of later redactors with the story. In any case, if we put pressure on this distinction of language, it's also striking that the voice of deliverance is not the voice of Elohim Godself, but of Adonai's messenger.

We don't have to look far into the record of religious self-assurance to see Abraham's deluded certainty at work. We can see it in the collusion of multiple Christian denominations in the tragedy of the residential school system, with its decades of attempted cultural genocide against the First Nations. We can see it in theocratic tyranny over the lives of generations of women and children in Ireland. We can see it in the rise of Hindu fundamentalist violence in India. We can see it in Buddhist violence against the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. We can see it in the horrors of Muslim-on-Muslim violence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria. We see it in the refusal of ultra-Orthodox settlers to cease from further illegal appropriation of West Bank land to which they have no rightful claim. We can see it in stabbing attacks on marchers in the Tel Aviv Pride parade. We can see it in American Christian fundamentalists picketing the funerals of men who died of AIDS in the 1990s and the funeral of Matthew Sheppard when he died of a brutal queer-bashing outside Laramie, Wyoming. In all these cases, it's the certainty that there is no gap between God and our understanding of God and God's will that has laid Isaac on the altar and put the knife in Abraham's hand.

In and of itself, this isn't a hard lesson for most of us in this particular congregation to absorb. Shir Libeynu exists in great part because many of us have had the experience of being Isaac, laid on somebody else's altar. Many of us had the experience of leaving the faith communities of our origin because of the marginalization we felt as feminist women, as queer, as intermarried, as not Jewish enough, as not Jewish at all. Speaking for myself, I'm here not only in spiritual solidarity with my partner Jonathan, but because of the deep, solemn joy I derive from being called to account in light of the original goodness of my created nature, our created nature; the deep joy I derive from being called in these Yamim Noraim to take part in the sanctification of time itself--a joy I simply cannot find in the self-abnegating penitential practices of Lent in the Christian

tradition in which I was reared, and in which I still participate, albeit with a wary, critical edge.

That said, it's incumbent on us this holy day to remember that we're called to account for the ways in which we've also been Abraham with the knife in our hand, in which we continue to be Abraham, ready to do something terrible if we're not listening for a voice that comes from beyond the limits of our imagination to call us back from the brink. The paradox of our lives is that we can be both Isaac and Abraham at once--even when our liberal, freethinking credentials are impeccable. In our own small way, we participate in Abraham's misguided zeal every time we justify our behaviour toward others by imagining that there's no gap between our conception of the Divine and the Divine itself. Every time we're not prepared to hear the angel say, "Dayenu, already. That's your child on the altar, and any god you imagine might desire his death is not Adon Olam, the Rock of your Salvation and the Sustainer of heaven and earth."

We let ourselves too easily off the hook when we imagine it's only others who can set up their own sense of divinely sanctioned certainty like an internal mental idol on whose altar we're prepared to immolate love. Today's parshat invites us to recognize that our conception of the Holy One is always imperfect, always provisional, always fall short. It warns us that we're likely to go the farthest off course when we forget that and forge ahead, using our own understanding of truth and righteous action to ride roughshod over the dignity, the livelihood, even the lives of others.

More optimistically, today's reading reminds us simultaneously that humanity is capable of spiritual growth, that religious traditions are capable of spiritual growth, that we as individuals are capable of spiritual growth, and that our errors, even our truly terrible errors, once we put them behind us, are themselves part of the path forward. Abraham hears the angel and lowers the hand that he held ready to strike. Ireland votes for same-sex marriage. The Confederate battle flag comes down from the South Carolina Statehouse. Parents who've ostracized queer kids come around to love and inclusion and celebration of their children's lives. Kids who've shut out newly self-declared queer parents, or divorced parents, or polyamorous parents, come around to empathy and acceptance. An eighteenth-century slaveship captain turns his boat around in mid-Atlantic and sails back to Africa, goes on to write *Amazing Grace*, and spends the rest of his life as an abolitionist. We let go of our self-assured knowledge and stop using God, or God's will, or our notion of Truth with the dreaded capital T, in order to justify making those around us into objects of our sacrifice. We open our eyes to the fact that beyond our imperfect understanding, it's the beloved who lies at risk right before our eyes, it's the beloved we're ready to slay who shows us the genuine presence of the Holy One, and the deeper Truth. The angel not only stops Abraham in the nick of time, but blesses him for the worthiness of his desire to serve God that has coexisted with his delusion.

We're all Abraham. At the same time, we're also all Isaac. And I invite you, as these Days of Awe continue to unfold, to engage in some midrash of your own, imagining what it was like as Abraham unbound his beloved child. What passed between them? Did the angel hang out for a while coaching them through a sort of personalized Truth and Reconciliation process? Or just disappear, as angels so often do? Did they break

down weeping together at the side of the road, as Jacob and Esau will do two generations on? Did they succeed in the work of healing as they went back down the mountain, rejoined the servants, made their way back to Sarah?