

## The Ultimate Sacrifice

The *Akedah*. God tests Abraham, instructing him to prepare his beloved son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. In the eleventh hour, the angel and ram enter the scene, and Isaac lives.

We learn that the event was a test: Would Abraham be willing to sacrifice his son, the one he loved? In the end, God did not require Isaac to be burnt as an offering. The lesson the ancient rabbis derive is that human sacrifice is no longer a part of Jewish rites and rituals.

The ancient Israelites rejected human sacrifice, but the priestly class encouraged and exploited animal sacrifice as a means to nourish itself. All the Israelite families who settled in and around Jerusalem were expected to donate significant portions of their produce to the Temple and its caretakers.

Sacrifice in ancient days was something like today's taxes.

Until the rabbis came along, as the priesthood's authority diminished. *Rosh Hashanah*. On this day, at this time of year, our sages point us back to the biblical realm to face the notion of sacrifice in its ultimate form, a father prepared to slaughter his son.

Honest-to-God sacrifice, not a tithe or tax... Consider the faith required to perform such an act. That Abraham would prepare his son, whom the Torah explicitly says he loves, for ritual sacrifice.

We are called, year in and year out, to hear Abraham's story.

To imagine for ourselves:

What must it feel like? Do I believe in anything so strongly that not only would I kill, but I'd kill my own child? Sacrifice exactly what I was put on the planet to do, bear a child who will someday bear children too. My longevity, my future. What am I willing to sacrifice, and for what cause?

And the postmodern twist:

Should I believe in anything so strongly? Shouldn't there limits to faith?

Let's begin with a frank talk about religion. Rabbi to congregation. Teacher to student. One human being who spends a lot of time thinking about such matters (thanks to your generosity and patronage) to a heck-of-a-nice group of people who care about such matters, enough to be here, now, this *Rosh Hashanah* morning.

Religion seems to have emerged in a major transitional period in the development of social order among *homo sapien sapien*, us. Agricultural practices changed the manner in which human beings related to one another.

Early people, organized around hunter-gatherer family units, began to prefer higher density living. The burden of providing and protecting eased when able bodied adults came together and initiated a shared effort to produce food and keep everyone safe.

Tribes emerged. When some people no longer wished to travel seasonally, because they could now produce and preserve food to sustain their families during the winter, they built cities.

Humanity is a powerful, though quantifiably small, sliver of the animal kingdom. Laws of biology apply though they work themselves out in different ways. Alpha-males, strong leaders emerge, employ others to serve their interests, and vie against one another for territory and power.

Among us, some leaders emerge as providers. They feed and protect others.

Some inspire us as visionaries. They present new models for social collaboration, technology, and perspective.

Still others are engineers. They build things. Put these folks in a room with the visionaries and *together* they discover things.

And, there are archivists. These note-takers and storytellers value the transference of information. They collect and organize words of wisdom so that the next generation can learn from it.

Relatively speaking, for us at this stage in the evolution of our species,

*growing up* is akin to

*catching up*

on tens of thousands of years of human beings gleaning pertinent information from life experience, each according to ability, intellectual curiosity, and access to resources.

Religion emerged early in the social development of our species, as we were just learning how to live in communities.

I truly believe that at the core of the development of religion lie existential yearnings that are universal to human beings: like survival, subsistence, satisfaction, and longing.

I also recognize that social organization and politics go hand in hand. Religion is also replete with power mongering and intentional manipulation with regard to the sharing of information.

Religion is so replete with power mongering and the manipulation of access to information, that even in the Western world today, right here in the United States of America, we still entertain debate over creationism as an alternative to the Big Bang and require our schools to demonstrate sensitivity to people who reject science. US Representatives sit, today, on the House Committee for Science and Technology who do not, and I quote, “believe” in climate change.

The only people I hear talking about this astonishing fact are a handful of famous scientists and comedians: Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Woody Allen, Bill Mahr, John Stewart.

And, I hear them.

As an intelligent human being I hear them.

As a rabbi who perhaps takes for granted that science and religion are not in conflict because they serve totally different purposes, I hear them.

I think they are absolutely right.

I wish I could speak with them and show them a different kind of religious experience and perspective...

And then I return to earth and realize that no one has adequately explained what *it is* we are doing here, in our nonorthodox, liberal, or progressive religious community, Temple Beth Tikvah.

We are some sort of post-modern paradox.

We are non-believers (in the Abraham's willingness-to-slaughter-his-son-kind-of-belief), who still cling to a religious venue for social gathering.

I get it. We get it. Belonging to a synagogue, visiting a synagogue during the High Holy Days, gives us some sort of script. We all agree that the script is not to be taken literally, but that we can derive worthwhile and interesting lessons from it.

We make religion endurable.

Palatable.

And every so often... inspiring.

Then we socialize. The bottom line is that we are friends and neighbors. We like the idea of being part of a community that is close knit: an extended family, without the baggage of real family.

We don't address the literal meanings of the words on the pages of our prayer books. We don't worry about the details of Jewish practice. We don't even feel hypocritical. We just feel connected with other Jewish people when we share the ceremonies and rituals, and we go with it.

We are not alone. There are liberal synagogues, churches, Islamic community centers, Hindu temples, Buddhist meditation halls, and indigenous cultural centers, all over the

world that are filled with educated, civilized people who like being part of a community that shares values and ritual ceremonies, but rejects literalism and fundamentalism.

We are not atheists, but we are not theists either.

We cling to religion not because we believe in a God with a master plan, but because it is a part of our narrative, our cultural identity, passed from one generation to the next. We want to infuse our days with meaning and we want to immerse ourselves among other people who speak the same language, eat the same foods, and tell the same jokes.

Some of us may believe in God as some sort of connective tissue that binds us to certain ideals about justice and compassion. Others among us may simply see God as a character in our sacred literature and liturgy.

We pray not as a form of communication to an external source of power or partnership, but rather as a meditative or contemplative exercise for ourselves:

A means for slowing down our pace of life in order to appreciate simple pleasures and gifts.

A moment to regain perspective about what's important in life.

A moment to acknowledge gratitude or longing.

Whether we realize it or not, we have redefined Judaism, we have redefined the role religion plays in our lives. We have made perhaps the most radical *sacrificial offering* in the history of religious thought.

While we stare aghast at Abraham lifting his knife to the throat of his own son, religious fundamentalists – Muslim, Christian, and Jewish – tremble when they pay attention to us. They fear we have placed God onto the sacrificial altar.

And the truth is we have.

We just aren't that comfortable admitting it.

While many of us find comfort and strength in relationship to divinity, few if any of us "believe" literally. Religion is not where we pay taxes or homage to a mythical provider and protector.

We no longer gather to practice our religion because society demands it of us. We are here, today, because we choose to be here.

We are part of a post-modern world.

We employ science to seek knowledge about how the universe works and understand how living species come into being and go out of being.

We rely on political systems and education to legislate and maintain a social order.

We call upon religion to give us stories, wisdom collected through millennia, ceremonies for marking time and season, and a venue for ethical discourse.

As Abraham slaughtered a ram in the place of his son, we have indeed sacrificed the anachronistic and authoritarian structures of religion that are not only dangerous but also stifle healthy religious curiosity and discourse.

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We are better off having shed blind faith.

Ignorance is not bliss, it's just not knowing.

There is no divine purpose or justice. There is only what we create. And we, human beings, have powerful minds. We observe, we imagine, we improve and innovate. We create.

Religion ought to be the place we go to create meaning. Our religious tradition offers us a tool box and a reference library. The impetus is on us to learn, to integrate past lessons with new ones, experiment, and make choices that make sense, today.

Religion is not an essential life ingredient.

Religion is not science. It is not law. It is not philosophy.

And that's OK. Because we have science and law and philosophy.

Religion is a conversation of *what if's* and *could we ever's*. It is a luxurious endeavor.

Religion presents us with an opportunity, an opportunity to create meaning and develop disciplined practices that better equip us to face life's challenges, celebrate precious moments, and glean perspective. And, *dayenu*, that is enough.

Ultimately, it is up to us, each and every one of us. There are no passes, no failures. In the end, what we said to one another and what we did are all that remain.

In the words of Rabbi Hillel:

*Im ain ani li, mi li?*

If I am not for myself, who am I?

*Uchshani l'atzmi, mah ani?*

If I am only for myself, what am I?

*V'im lo achshav, eimatai?*

If not now, when?