

Another Rosh Hashanah morning. Another reading of the Akedah, the Torah story of Abraham who leaves his homeland to father a nation and God's final test of his faith. Will Abraham agree to take his son, his only son, the son that he loves into the wilderness and slaughter him?

Of course he will. He always does. Year after year. And, year after year, I find myself, rabbi, turning the text...turning it and twisting it. What can I learn, this year? What can I speak to, this year? How can this dreadful, barbaric story speak important truths to us? Or speak truth to power?

We are getting to know each other pretty well by now. This Rosh Hashanah is the seventh Jewish New year we have celebrated and embraced together, rabbi and congregation. You know Abraham in this story infuriates me. Not to mention, what sort of God creates such a test? Remember Abraham has already left everything he knows behind to start a new life in a place he doesn't know... In trying to understand Abraham's willingness, his agency, leading his own son, his own child, to slaughter, I turn everywhere.

The ancient rabbis tell us that God never intended to allow the sacrifice to happen. The "test" was a demonstration to the other nations of Abraham's loyalty to this YHWH-god. Abraham's deed let his neighbors know he was a tough guy, the baddest cat in town. Don't mess with Abraham. This guy will slaughter his own kid.

Kierkegaard tells us Abraham is a "Knight of Faith." Kierkegaard coins the term knight of faith to describe a man who can inexplicably comprehend a truth that appears to the rest of humanity to be a paradox. Abraham believes he will sacrifice Isaac and will father a nation through Isaac. Impossible. He is alone in that belief. So alone, he cannot even communicate it to his wife, Sarah. So devastated, the ancient rabbis say, when Sarah hears the neighborhood gossip before Abraham returns home from Mt. Moriah, she drops dead.

Michael Lerner who wrote the brilliant book, Jewish Renewal, suggests Abraham is a man formed by his experiences thus far in life. Drawing on rich interpretations left by the ancient rabbis, Lerner describes Abraham through a filter we refer to today as adverse childhood experiences. Abandoned by his parents at birth. Reunited but abandoned and even betrayed again in his teen years. Abraham does not know what love feels like. He demonstrates this deficit when he gifts local kings with his wife in order to gain their favor. Except in this moment, the moment that Abraham lifts the knife, his gaze catches Isaac's gaze.

It is as if he hears a voice calling out: Don't hurt the boy, don't even leave a mark. Abraham experiences human love, a deep connection with his son and drops the knife.

For the Rabbis: It's propaganda for the purpose of intimidating the other nations. For Kierkegaard: It's a story about the loneliness of an exceptional leader who is so ahead of his time, nobody around him can understand him. For Lerner: it's life: a drama about human dysfunction and resilience, the promise of the human spirit.

Great sermons. Imaginative...and, all conjecture. This story is so disturbing that every generation of rabbi and scholar has tried to shift our attention from moral repulsion to possibly positive outcomes. If we could just learn such and such lesson from the story, we needn't focus on a God who asks a father to sacrifice his son and a patriarch who not only doesn't hesitate but rises super early in the morning to do the deed.

I cannot help but feel like this is wrong. Very wrong. And this Rosh Hashanah, I am wondering if the wrongness of it all might be the lesson? What if Abraham is wrong in story? What if God is wrong? What then?

Kathryn Schulz, journalist and author, offered a TED Talk in 2011 entitled "On Being Wrong." She asks the question: What does it feel like to be wrong? I am asking it now: What does it feel like to be wrong?

Interestingly, we answer the wrong question. What we say it feels like to be wrong is, in fact, an answer to the question: What does it feel like when we *realize* we are wrong? Wile E. Coyote teaches us what it feels like to be wrong.

Remember Wile E. Coyote? Stuck in an eternal chase after the Roadrunner, Wile E. Coyote chases the Roadrunner over a cliff. That's OK for the Roadrunner, he is a bird. But the coyote, well after leaving solid ground continues to run. We see his legs spinning. Only after he realizes he is in mid-air, does he register fear and only then, fall. Until we realize we are wrong, we feel just like we feel when we are right. Being wrong feels right.

A woman goes into the hospital for surgery. She arrives on time and is prepped. The surgeon enters the operating room, performs the surgery, and closes her up. She wakes in the recovery room and panics, wondering why the wrong side of her body is bandaged.

Following the incident, the director of the hospital issues a press release. (This is a true story and a real press release.) "For whatever reason the surgeon FELT he had operated on the correct side." Our feelings are not enough for making sure we do what is right and avoid what is wrong.

Feeling right suggests that what we see and hear and think is reality. And, reality is self-revealing, self-evident, at least to us. What happens when others disagree? Feeling right when we are wrong, but have not yet realized it, leads us to make assumptions about those who disagree with us.

Our first go-to is to assume those who disagree with us are ignorant. If we just explain whatever it is we know to them, they will understand and come over to our point of view.

When they don't, our assumption about them shifts. We begin wondering what is wrong with them. They have all the pieces of the puzzle, thanks to our generosity in explaining it all to them. They just can't seem to put the pieces together into an intelligible whole.

Sometimes we go further, assuming if those who disagree with us are neither ignorant nor unintelligent, they must know and understand the truth but distort it for their own gain or some other malevolent purpose.

Failing to consider that we may be wrong in our understanding gets in our way. It becomes difficult to prevent mistakes. We derive license to be mean to one another.

Abraham seems to treat the people closest to him in his life as if they are props or tools for his agenda. Sure you can sleep with my wife, so long as you don't hurt me. Sure I'll slaughter my son, if you will really make a great nation of my descendants.

In the 17th century, Descartes said "I think, therefore I am." Something about our capacity for rational thought is what makes us human.

Thirteen hundred years earlier, Augustine said "I err, therefore I am." Our capacity to be wrong is what makes us human.

Unlike God in the Torah, we don't know what is happening around us, to us, or with us. And unlike all the other animals on the planet, Kathryn Schulz adds in her TED Talk, we human beings are obsessed with trying to figure it out. And, in figuring it out, we are often wrong. We learn from our mistakes, after all.

We observe and infer and try to predict what will happen next. Occasionally our predictions come true. But I would venture to say that more often, we think one thing will happen but something else does. Such is life, as we experience it. We think *this* will happen, but *that* occurs instead. And accordingly, we respond.

Abraham seems to think his family members are expendable in the master plan pushing his relationship with this YHWH-god forward and siring a great nation. In the moment he can no

longer reconcile offering his beloved son as a sacrifice and birthing a nation through that same son, Abraham's agenda shifts.

He does his best to bury Sarah respectfully and with dignity. He does his duty to Isaac in finding him a wife and leaving him Sarah's tent, aka estate, in which he can begin his family. And Abraham remarries and lives out the rest of his days quietly. I'd like to think he becomes present in the lives of his new wife and kids.

Abraham seems to recognize where he was wrong in his way of being with those he was supposed to love. And he seems to do his best to do right by Sarah and Isaac and not repeat earlier life mistakes with his second chance at a family.

The ancient rabbis suggest God never intended Abraham to go through with slaughtering Isaac. Kierkegaard argues Abraham believed he could do it and still Isaac would survive and bear children. Michael Lerner invites us into Abraham's psyche, suggesting while the act is morally unbearable Abraham's capacity to put himself and his son in the situation is the consequence of a failure to make primary attachments in infancy and childhood and that Abraham "gets it" in the final moment is a great victory for the human animal.

All of them, and most of us, receive the Akedah each year on Rosh Hashanah and we see everything that is wrong with the story and in the story. And I think, this year, the wrongness of it all is exactly the point.

Being wrong is being human. The miracle of the human mind is not that we see the world the way it is, but that we can see the world the way it isn't. We can reflect on the past. We can see into the future. We can imagine what it would be like to be someone else somewhere else other than who we are and where we are.

Making mistakes sheds new light, brings new information into our awareness. We keep trying until we get it right, if we get it right. Unlike God, we humans are not all knowing. And unlike the rest of the animal kingdom, we are obsessed with trying to figure "it" out, whatever "it" may be: how the world around us works, how the people around us operate, what we can do better, or faster, or more sustainably.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi in Israel and the rabbi who brought religious Jews into the Zionist enterprise of building a Jewish state, wrote a book about *Teshuvah*, our repentance for wrongdoing. In it he says: "The soul feels in *teshuvah* the greatest natural delight. The expulsion of the harmful substances has a good and healing effect on the body."

Rav Kook teaches that the process of becoming aware of being wrong is exactly what increases what is good and right in the world. He draws on the Talmudic statement that the person who has sinned and repented earns a greater portion in the world to come than the person who has never sinned, never been wrong, literally.

When we shed our fear of being wrong, we open ourselves to finding out what mistakes we've made. Only upon knowing how we've miscalculated can we redirect our efforts, recalibrate our perceptions, and emerge smarter and healthier.

When we refuse to be wrong or to admit we have been wrong, we alienate ourselves from others and from natural processes of growth and evolution. This is why the individual who has sinned and repented earns a greater portion in the world to come than the individual who has never sinned.

We human beings will be wrong, again and again. We will think one thing will happen, and something else will occur. This is what it means to be human and this is how we grow and learn and evolve our species. So why be embarrassed? Why try to protect ourselves from the realization that we've erred?

I say, let me try and be wrong and maybe learn something along the way...