

Sacrifices: A modern midrash on the Binding of Isaac
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Who doesn't love a good reality show? Survivor, Bachelor, America's Next Top Model, Extreme Home Makeover, The Life of Ryan, The Hills, (Oh yeah, you get an idea of what is on my DVR). We are suckers for good melodrama. Well, let me ask you, can one of those shows top what takes place in the story of the binding of Isaac, the Torah portion we read for Rosh Hashanah? In nineteen brief verses Abraham is called by God to take Isaac on a three day journey, at the end of which he binds his son, places him on an altar, holds a knife over him and then, finally, is called off and provided a ram instead.

Really good stuff. Really *disturbing* stuff. But really good stuff nonetheless. Not such great television though because the story is virtually silent. Only one question and an answer passes between father and son in three days. Isaac asks, "I see the firestone and the wood for the offering, but where is the lamb?" To which his father offers the double layered answer, "God will see to the sacrifice ... my son." So much is left unsaid, so much for us to consider and struggle with. And so, as a service to those of you in 'the business', I would like to offer my attempt to fill in the silence, a contemporary version of the story,. Afterwards, I will entertain offers to buy the rights ...

With age, Abraham had found it more and more difficult to sleep through the night. There were the physical issues that plagued him. But beyond that, once he was up his head would start buzzing with lists of things to do, emails, phone calls that needed to be returned; and then there was that Sodom and Gomorrah conflict he had had with his Boss that just never worked out the way he had hoped. Among his concerns was the growing distance between him and his son Isaac. Now a full fledged teenager the communication gap just seemed to be growing wider and wider. Abraham had no idea how to bridge that gap ...

One very, very early morning as he lay in his dark room staring at the ceiling, a voice seemed to call out, "Why don't the two of you take off for a few days together, maybe an extended weekend in the mountains?"

"What a great idea," thought Abraham, "But, where should we go?"

"Don't worry about it," the voice seemed to say, "just hit the road, you'll know it when you get there."

Being the impulsive guy that he was, Abe bounced out of bed, threw some things together and walked down the hall to wake up Isaac.

"What's going on?" Isaac asked, dizzy from being woken up out of a deep sleep.

"We're going on a little road trip, just you and I, up to the mountains. Come on, throw a few things together and let's go."

Too tired to protest, Isaac stuffed a few things into his backpack and met his dad in the kitchen.

"What about mom?" he asked.

"Don't worry, I've left her a note. She'll be delighted that we're getting some time together. C'mon, let's go."

Abe and Ike walked out to the family SUV. Throwing their things in the rear, Abraham hopped into the driver's seat while Isaac took his normal place in the rear.

"Why don't you join me up here?" Abraham asked.

"Dad, it is so early in the morning and I am so tired. I'm just going to stay back here, where I can stretch out and go back to sleep." With that, Isaac stuck in his earbuds, turned on his iPod and fell back asleep.

Most of the first day went this way, Isaac sleeping on and off ... or silently staring out the window while listening to the random shuffle of songs cycling through his "favorites" list, while Abraham, hardly noticing, scanned through his own XM channels.

After a full day's drive they found a motel for the night. They checked in and went to get a quick bite to eat. Abe tried to find a way to start a conversation but his son was so busy texting on his phone that he could never get a word in edgewise ... so, instead, he turned to his own phone to catch up on sports scores.

Father and son returned to their hotel room and Isaac went immediately to wash up and get ready for bed. He returned to find his father engrossed in a baseball game. Years of experience had taught him not to try and speak to his dad when he was focused on television, "No use trying to talk to him now," Isaac thought. "When he is involved in sports I am lucky if he will grunt two syllables at me." Instead he opened his laptop to his Facebook site and began to instant message his friends.

When the game ended, Abraham looked over to find Isaac equally engrossed. "No use trying to talk to him now," Abraham thought. "When he is involved in his computer I am lucky if he will grunt two syllables at me." And so, he turned to his own laptop to catch up with some office work.

When Isaac finally did look up from his computer he saw his father sleeping. Quietly he got up, closed his dad's laptop, switched off the television and the lights and turned his attention to a late night game of World of Warcraft.

The next morning the scene repeated itself: Abraham rising early and pushing Isaac, half asleep into the car. Isaac alternating between sleep, music and a movie on the back seat monitor. When they were not in the car, it seemed they were always connected to their cell phones, Abe checking in with the Boss and Ike texting his friends. At night dad sacked out in front of the television while son engaged in all night online game.

Day three dawned much the same.

Reflecting on their last couple of days together Abraham became increasingly frustrated. "This is not what I had envisioned. We've barely spoken a word to each other." So, he was pleasantly surprised when he heard Isaac's voice, "Dad?"

"Yes, my son?"

"We've brought our sleeping bags and our camping equipment, *but where in God's name are we going?*"

Taken aback by the annoyance in Isaac's voice, Abe responded with the intent of putting his uppity son in his place, "You know what, God will let us know when we get there."

Angrily, Ike replaced his earbuds, while Abraham silently regretted the sarcasm with which he had replied.

As they wound their way up the mountain, Isaac stared out the window while Abraham silently negotiated the twists and turns in the narrow road. Finally, he stopped the car. "C'mon, let's get out and look around."

The view was magnificent, the air clean, brisk and pristine. "Take a breath of that air," Abraham exclaimed as he turned around to see his son's face not basking in the glory of this Divinely inspired portrait, but, once again, buried in the screen of his cell phone.

His anger and frustration over their inability to communicate boiled over. "God, I'm going to kill that kid!" This sudden burst froze Isaac in his place. He felt bound up in unjust and unfair accusations. "We can never talk!" Abraham was saying as his own phone rang. He looked at the screen. It was his Boss. "Just a minute, I have to take this."

In that moment, as he put his phone to his ear Abraham looked up and saw Isaac: mouth agape in surprise, eyes wide and brimming with tears. He looked down at his phone then again at his son. "Oh my God, what am I doing?" Isaac listened in disbelief as he heard his father say to the anonymous voice on the other end, "Listen you old goat, this is just going to have to wait." With that he turned off his phone and walked over to his son. "Let's go look around." Together they walked off through the forest.

For our Abe and Ike, as for many of us, technology is a devious god enticing us with promises of abundant and bountiful blessings: more time and more connection. In milliseconds we can handle tasks that might have previously taken minutes, or hours, or even days. We can reach out to people in ways and in places that we never imagined. We can create global communities never before possible. We can link up with resources once unimaginable. The blessings are indeed abundant and plentiful.

But, our modern technology is also a demanding god asking a great deal in return: that we sacrifice the sanctity of our home, the sacred barrier that once separated us and our family from our work. By making our workspace accessible anywhere, in making our emails available on our BlackBerries, technology has not reduced the demands placed upon us, it has increased them, geometrically. Our bosses, our colleagues, our friend expect instant access and we expect it of them as well. And so, our iPhones are strategically placed next to the knife when we are out on a date with our spouse. We walk down the street in physical proximity to our friends, but busily talking to someone on the other end of a text message rather than to the one walking next to us. In all the ways that technology connects us ... it disconnects us as well.

Don't get me wrong, I am a gadget freak. I stand here first among equals in admitting my guilt, admitting that I have sinned. I have too often sacrificed connection to "just answer a quick email or make a quick call." After all, where do you think this little interpretation came from?

Like all such false gods, the devil is in the details. The question is "who is in control?" Is technology a god to which we have sacrificed of our lives, or is technology a resource that we use in the name and for the benefit of those ideals and values to which we are called today? Can we turn off our phone when we go home? Can we turn off the television at dinner time? Can we avoid the temptation to log on to our work desktop? Can we use our modern communication devices to offer us unprecedented possibilities for making our lives easier, for creating space and opportunities? Or, do we allow technology to become the medium for creating barriers -- distancing and removing us from any true connection and relationship. Do we offer up our families in the name of technology or technology for the sake of our families?

The most common interpretation of the Binding of Isaac is that it is the last and most serious test of Abraham's faith: a test that he passes by not disobeying God in even this most horrible of requests. But, there are those commentators as well who feel that Abraham failed by putting his work before his family. They look at Abraham's vehement protest for the people of Sodom and Gemorrah and ask "Why not your son?" His true success, by their way of thinking, would have been to respond to God in the strongest of terms, "No, this I will not do, not even for You!" What an example that would have been for us! Proof of his failure they find in the very last lines of the

story where Abraham returns alone, having, at the very least, seemingly sacrificed his relationship with his son.

As we begin our journey once again Abraham and Isaac offer a profound and potentially life altering challenge as they ask us across the millennia, "What mountain are you climbing?" "Whose voice is it that beckons you to that place?" "Who," or "what, are you worshipping?" "Who are you sacrificing along the way?" "Will you return from the mountain alone?" Or, will you pass the test and "just say no." "No" to the gods that urge you to stay connected to them, that demand the sacrifice your family, your friends, your community so that you might be always accessible to them. Will you say, "No," in order that you might establish more sacred connection with those who truly matter? Emails, instant messaging, text messages are wonderful and certainly have their place but, they are not substitutes for actually speaking with someone, looking them in the eye, seeing the expression on their face. They are no substitute for holding someone's hand, for sharing a cup of coffee or a soda. They are no substitute for true, human connection.

As we begin again, we are asked to consider the quality our journey. If we journey alone, "to what end?" This is the time and the place for renewing human connection. When the need for reconnection arises – as it most assuredly will -- when we yearn for a shoulder to cry on, an arm for support, when we want someone to share in our joy, whether it is at moments of celebration like today, or, at a moment of personal or communal tragedy, we will not text, or IM, or email, we will come running to each other's arms, we will come running to *this place*, to this community; and rightfully so, for here we find connection not only to one another, but *through* one another to God as well. In the Torah, Abraham, names the mountain top *Adonai Yireh*, the place from where God can be seen. This is our mountain, this is *hamakom*, *the* place from where, in each others eyes and hearts and souls, *Adonai Yireh*, God's presence can be seen and felt.

How could we ever consider sacrificing that?