

## THE TESTING OF ABRAHAM

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read a portion from Genesis Parsha Va-Yera known as the "Binding of Isaac." Maybe the best-known tale in the entire Torah. Beautifully written, perfectly paced, but I submit, misnamed.

While Abraham does actually bind his son Isaac, that is just one step in an elaborate scheme by God to confirm Abraham's loyalty and thus his fitness to father the Jewish people. The more accurate name of this parsha should be "The testing of Abraham."

Indeed, the very first sentence of the story tells us, the readers, but not Abraham or Isaac, "God put Abraham to the test." This is a classic plot "spoiler," telling us in advance, "Don't worry. This is a test. This is only a test. It will all end well." With all that Abraham and God had already gone through, how could it not end well for him. Would God suddenly have to sack Abraham and Sarah and need to search for a new father of the Jewish people. Unlikely. Abraham will somehow pass the test.

Recounted next is an ever-escalating challenge by God to Abraham's loyalty. God tell Abraham he wants him to sacrifice a human being as a burnt offering to God, in itself a practice antithetical to his religion. Abraham by silence acquiesces. God continues, "By the way, It's your son." Silence. "Your favorite son" Silence. "Isaac." Whom you love" Silence. Silence. Abraham remains committed to following God's command.

These events bring to my mind a well-known hiring tactic of the New York State Legal Aid Society for beginning criminal defense lawyers. All Gong Ho to defend the innocent, the applicant is asked a series of escalating questions: What if you find out your client actually did the crime? What if it was murder? What if he also raped the victim? What if he made her children watch? All this to test the applicant's unwaivering loyalty to the bedrock legal premise of entitlement to representation under the law no matter what.

God presents Abraham with one more heart-rending emotional challenge. On the way to the sacrificial site Isaac, at an age of growing perception, plaintively blurts out, “Father, here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” Unable to admit the truth to Isaac, Abraham evasively answers, “God will see to the sheep for his burnt offering, my son.” They continue onward.

Abraham dutifully builds an altar, lays out the wood, binds his son Isaac, and lays him on the altar. He then takes out his knife.

This part of the story recalls for me my experience as a New Jersey Deputy Attorney General sending undercover investigators to apprehend unlicensed individuals practicing medicine. The goal was to catch the perpetrator in the act but not have the investigator harmed—a fine line. In one case, we tracked a fellow offering unlicensed colonoscopies. We told our investigator to “make him show you the hose,” but cautioned him, “Don’t take your pants off.” A fine line requiring quick action.

God here found himself in a similar situation. He had to ensure undeniable proof of Abraham’s loyalty but also make sure that Isaac remained unharmed. I can picture God acutely watching Abraham’s every movement, and, when Abraham picked up the knife, suddenly yelling to the host of angels, “Quick! Send in the ram!”

All were saved, though the Torah contains no record of any subsequent conversations between Abraham and Isaac, or between Abraham and Sarah for that matter. They might have been interesting.

One, of many, other questions about this story intrigued me. Since this was a loyalty test, why did God not administer it at the beginning rather than near the end of their relationship. The clear answer appears in the fourth aliyah: “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow my blessing on you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore”.

The testing of Abraham was also Abraham’s graduation ceremony.

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