

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun
Temple Beth-El
Northbrook, Illinois

Rosh Hashanah Day 5779
The Unanswerable Question of the Akedah

There's an annoying commercial that I feel like I've seen too many times, a BMO Harris ad featuring a little girl who asks "Why?" after every statement a banker makes, until finally he turns to her mother, looking for a reprieve. Instead, the mother looks at the banker and exclaims: "What? These are important questions." In truth, as annoying as the question "Why" is, the mother is correct.

Over my years as a rabbi, the most difficult question I've been asked is: "Why?" Like the banker, I've heard it too many times: from parents and spouses, siblings and children, relatives and friends. It's a question I often don't have a good answer for.

Today I want to look at a text – the Torah's preeminent "Why" text: the Akedah. It's the story of a journey taken by a father, Abraham, and his son, Isaac; a story we Jews have puzzled over for more than a millennium, trying to decipher its secret meaning.

The story begins with a call that is unlike anything Abraham has experienced before. In the past, when God spoke to him, His words brought blessing. But this time they bring nothing but heartache. God tells Abraham to take his son, his favorite one, whom he loves, and offer him as a burnt offering on the place that he will show him. And all I can think to do is scream: Why?

For over a thousand years we've looked at this story, searching for meaning. Some have viewed it as a Jewish response to the savagery of human sacrifice, and say it is a test that Abraham failed. Others, during times of brutal oppression and forced conversion believed just the opposite – that it was a prototype for *kiddush hashem* – for martyrdom, a test for Isaac, not Abraham, which Isaac passed. In every generation we are told to read this story and challenged to find its meaning. This is mine.

The Akedah begins with a concise introduction: "Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test." What follows is an account of that test. But what is not clear is what is being testing.

Our sages had great difficulty defining this test, because no matter how hard they tried, they were always left in an untenable position. Most believed the test was an ethical challenge; that God's call for Abraham to sacrifice his son was immoral. And that, in order to pass the test Abraham needed to reject the command. Yet, Abraham accepted the command and received a blessing. So, did he pass or fail?

Others believe that Abraham's faith was being tested: Would he obey God's command when it caused him harm? And that while Abraham passed the test, (he was faithful,) God failed for calling on Abraham to act immorally. While this view lets Abraham off the hook, it creates a theological problem for all of us: How can we worship a God who tells his followers to kill their children? As I said before, this test is a real conundrum.

But what if, instead of an ethical challenge; what if, instead of a question of faith, we view this as a test of character. Instead of: “Will Abraham offer up Isaac?”, the purpose of this test is to see: “How?” How will Abraham respond to this monumental crisis?

Think about it for a minute. Abraham left his birthplace, his family and friends, and went on a journey to an unknown land, just because God asked him to. In return, Abraham was to be rewarded. He was to become the head of a new nation. His descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky; as countless as the grains of sand on the shore of the sea. But Abraham had lived for one hundred years and had not had the child who would fulfill the promise.

And then, finally, Isaac was born. Isaac was Abraham’s future, his hope, his dream. It was for Isaac that Abraham had endured his journey. And now, Abraham learns that his life’s work has been for nothing. Abraham is told that his future, his hopes and his dreams are gone. Isaac will die. Abraham faces a crisis.

Abraham’s test, this ancient story, does not need to question Abraham’s faithfulness. It has already been proven. This story does not need to question Abraham’s morality. He demonstrated his worth when he argued on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead, this story comes to show us something of Abraham’s character. The challenge is not: “Will Abraham sacrifice Isaac?”, but rather, “How will Abraham face this crisis?”

Abraham’s test is now relevant to us; in fact, it is timeless. For even though none of us will be asked to take our children up a mountain, bind them and offer them as a burnt offering to God, all of us will have to deal with moments of crisis; times when our future becomes uncertain and

our hopes and dreams seem impossible. How do we deal with these moments? Well first, let's see how Abraham dealt with his.

The first thing we learn about Abraham is that he did not put off dealing with his crisis, as we so often do. Instead, "he rose early the next morning." Abraham also did not expect others to solve his problem for him. After all, he was a rich and powerful man. He had many servants. He could have delegated responsibilities. He could have told one of his servants to saddle his ass, and another to split the wood. In fact, he could have had his servants prepare the whole offering. He could have had them take the wood up the mountain, build the altar, and bind up Isaac. He could have left every bit of the preparations up to them. This would have been an easier way to deal with the crisis. But this was not Abraham's way.

Abraham realized that in order to deal with this crisis he had to face it himself. It was not up to others to handle it for him. It was his dream that was dying, his future. Thus, it was his responsibility. Others could be with him on this journey, comforting him on the way, but in the end, it was he who had to act. Him alone.

So, Abraham saddled his ass, split the wood, and with his son and two servants beside him, he set out for the place of which God had told him. Abraham passed the first part of this test.

The second element in this test concerns Abraham's relationship with Isaac. Isaac was the fulfillment of Abraham's dream. But now Isaac was going to die. If I was standing in Abraham's place, I might have been tempted to blame Isaac for my situation. After all, if Isaac had never been born, then I would not have to lose him. If Isaac had never been born, then I would not

have placed so much hope in him. I would not have planned my future through him. I would not be losing so much now.

If I was standing in Abraham's place, I fear I would have begun to resent Isaac. I would not want to see him on my journey. I would not want to talk to him. In fact, I might even begin to curse him and the day he was born. *The pain I must now bear is because of him. This test is his fault. He is to blame.*

But Abraham was stronger than me. He was wiser. He realized that Isaac was not to blame for this situation. In fact, he cherished the journey with his son, realizing that this would be the last time they would be together.

Abraham's love for Isaac is clearly reflected in our portion. When God spoke to Abraham he referred to Isaac as "your favorite one, whom you love." Indeed, in this short story, Abraham refers to Isaac as "my son" and Isaac calls Abraham "my father" no less than twelve times. The story also tells us not once, but twice, that Abraham and Isaac "walked together."

Our portion tells us, quite clearly, that Abraham did not blame Isaac for this crisis. He did not look for a scapegoat. Instead, he continued to love his son. He understood that in spite of the difficulty of the moment, Isaac still deserved a loving father. He did not make Isaac suffer for *his* trial. Once again, he took the responsibility on himself. And he passed this second part of the test.

At this point we might be tempted to think that the test is over. After all, Abraham did all that was asked of him. He took his son up the mountain, bound him, and was prepared to offer him

as a burnt offering to God, when at the last possible moment, he was stopped by an angel. He did not ask others to handle this problem for him; and did not blame others for this dilemma. He acted with love, care and responsibility. But the test was still not over.

The Torah tells us that after the sacrifice was stopped, Abraham saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. He took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. It was at this point, and not before, that the angel reappeared and gave him God's blessing.

Why is this part of the test? Once again, permit me to stand in Abraham's place. If I was standing on a mountain top with my child, whose life had just moments before been spared, I don't think I would have noticed a ram caught in a thicket. And even if I had, I can't say that I would have bound it on an altar and offered it up to God. I think at that moment, I might have resented God. I would not have been searching for a way to honor Him. After all, God had caused me to undergo a tremendous trial. Instead of thanking God, I might have shouted at Him: "Why God, why? Why did you put me through such a crisis? Why did I need to endure such suffering? Why did you treat me this way?"

But again, I am not as strong as Abraham, nor as wise. For Abraham understood that *sometimes there is no answer to the question: "Why?"*. He realized that this situation was beyond his control; that there could never be a satisfactory answer to the question. Instead, he concentrated his energy on "HOW?". How should I deal with this crisis?

Abraham recognized that God was a source of strength in his time of weakness, and a source of comfort in his time of pain. Abraham realized that the “why” was really not important. He realized that what was important was **how** he endured this trial; how he would live through it.

Abraham recognized that God was an important part of his life, whether he was celebrating a joy or mourning a loss. He recognized that he needed God, and that in all times God’s presence is a blessing. And so, when Abraham saw that ram caught in the thicket, he did not hesitate to bind it on the altar and offer it up in praise of God. It was through this action that Abraham passed the third and final part of his test.

Abraham’s test was now over, but the story is not. The Torah gives us one more detail about this event. After receiving his blessing, Abraham left the mountain. But he did not leave it alone. The two servants who had accompanied him on his journey had remained. And so, Abraham, together with his servants, left the mountain and returned to Beersheva.

Why is this detail included in the story? What is significant about Abraham’s servants? I believe that we’re given these details to remind us that no one, not even a person as strong, wise and courageous as Abraham can survive a crisis alone.

It is true that Abraham accepted responsibility for this situation upon himself. And that he did not try to blame others for his test. But Abraham was aided in his actions because he knew that he had two companions who would travel the bitter path with him. He knew that whatever the outcome of his trial, in the end he would not walk alone. There can be no doubt that this knowledge aided Abraham throughout his journey.

This is the story of the Akedah; the story, not of “Why”, but “How”. Not the unanswerable: “Why did this happen to me?” but the other question we all must face: “How do I deal with it? How do I carry on? How do I love and care in moments of heartbreak? How do I find the strength to live up to my potential? How can I be a good companion and friend, walking along side those I care for? How can I find blessings, even in the midst of sorrow and pain?”

“Why?” is a question without an answer. “How” is a path that we can follow; a path that leads to fulfillment, purpose, perhaps even to holiness; to finding meaning even in chaos, to finding light even in darkness, to walking with God and being a blessing.

Adonai, on this Rosh Hashanah, this day of new beginnings, may we learn from the Akedah. May we realize that there are some questions that have no good answer; and come to understand that tests are an inevitable part of everyone’s life; that rather than spend our years asking why, we spend our days moving forward, step by step, mile after mile, year after year; walking along the path of life with courage and faith, love and dignity. And if we’re fortunate, may we also be, and be blessed with, the companionship of good friends, and the comfort of a community whose presence enriches us through all the seasons of our lives.

May this be God’s will. Amen.