

DRASH: On the Binding of Isaac
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In preparing for the High Holy Days I've been thinking about tests. My personal test, for example, to be able to "stand and deliver" on such an important day of the year! One I will remember, believe me.

There are small tests and large tests. Sudden, quick tests or hard, protracted tests that require time and patience. We are surrounded by tests, those we step up to meet and those we never imagine or expect that loom and shadow us.

Here we are at the binding of Isaac. What is at the heart of this story about tests? Abraham, Isaac, and God. Abraham trusts, obeys, and would willingly sacrifice his beloved son. His actions result in the sparing of his son's life. God blesses Isaac along with his descendants, securing Abraham's place in the world and his future. Abraham's acceptance of God's test is a personal affirmation of his relationship to God. Theirs is a mighty covenant.

However, the power of God's test of Abraham should not obliterate what Isaac comes to learn as a son. While we aspire to be Abraham, we are all Isaac to a degree. So, what does Isaac teach us? How does he operate in our lives?

Until the binding, Isaac is the every-child who learns by doing in the company of his father whom he trusts.

Imagine the angel's command. "Abraham, Abraham!" The weight of two words. "Abraham, Abraham!" The exact moment Abraham holds the knife to his son's throat. Isaac wide awake in his fear.

Consider Isaac's state of mind. If God had not intervened, *his own father would have killed him!* How would you feel being Isaac? If God can choose to intervene, what about all the times he chooses not to? Who is he? Where is he? What kind of God is he? This is the question Isaac has to be asking. These are the questions we ask.

I feel for Isaac. I ask where is there protection from trial and tragedy? The point is *we can't know*. Yet at a point, each of us dies. The certainty of death is what Isaac has to confront, even though he is spared *this time*.

Isaac's test is shockingly harsh. If the binding of his son strengthens Abraham's faith that God is his companion for life, could it also weaken Isaac with doubt? Perhaps Isaac's trauma becomes his reoccurring dream. His doubt, an unfinished test.

To travel, to move forward, diminishes distance, but it also tests the limit of their patience. To test and be tested *over three days* heightens what each of them faces. Abraham travels toward a distant mountain that God will make known to him. He is moving towards, and closer to, his relationship to God. For Abraham, God is ever-present. Indeed, God is within Abraham. Abraham's intention is God-driven.

Isaac, on the contrary, goes through all the motions, walking with his father, praying with his father. He is present, but does he comprehend what's coming? Is he naïve? When he asks how the sacrifice can happen without a lamb, he is putting the pieces together but doesn't yet see the whole.

Nowhere in the narrative does God explain to Isaac what is happening. He leaves it to Abraham to explain. And Abraham says that God will see to the lamb, which makes me wonder what Abraham is actually saying. Is this his faith speaking? Is his patient obedience a form of deep faith? Can there be, in fact, no doubt in Abraham's mind precisely when *we are terrified of the violence of his intention*?

Isaac is witness. The real, lasting shock to Isaac is that his father *would have done it*. By being spared, Isaac's trauma is that he comes face to face with the fact that his life can end. How is Isaac expected to commit himself to God? He can't. He is caught in the grip of learning about himself.

Because of Isaac's vulnerability, our worry for him hangs in the silence as action unfolds. Imagine what he experiences!

Does this mean the hardest test for each of us is to open ourselves at the very moment we are inclined to give up, close down, or shut ourselves off? When we feel that the knife is at our throat?

By including Isaac, the story makes us examine intention. It also makes us question the boundaries of trust, and what it means to achieve understanding. The story takes place over three days. Distance here is the span between seeing and knowing. Time unfolds. Isaac and Abraham journey from lesser to greater insight.

Between what we seek and what we understand, imagine an arc of three bands. One for DOUBT (think of Isaac), one for HOPE (think of Abraham), and one for PATIENCE (think of us here in our world.)

I believe PATIENCE is the linchpin that lifts us from Isaac's frame of mind, doubt. It moves us closer to Abraham's powerful source of hope.

Patience in Hebrew is *savlanut*, which has the same root as the porter or person who carries a load. Patience is thus the ability to carry a weight. The binding burdens Isaac with new understanding that opens his eyes to inexplicable ambiguity. The moment his father would have killed him is also the moment Isaac has no answer for what is happening.

How patient Isaac had to be! Tests teach us. But patience helps us face the immensity of what we don't know.

It is important to dwell on the interpretation of his dilemma.

Robert Alter says the Bible (and I would say this chapter in particular) conceives of the world as a place full of things to understand in which the things of ultimate importance defy human understanding. (1992 Alter, p. 22) This is the central paradox that brings us to this very story of Abraham and Isaac every Rosh Hashanah. Part of the immense power of the story is that we are made to feel how alone Isaac is in what he has to face.

Isaac helps us see what is human. He helps *us* see the importance of patience as we ourselves navigate our lives. How do we tolerate sitting with ourselves? Where are the answers? Whom do we ask? We turn our attention outward to life, conversation, and love. We operate within community to soften the impact of our own existence. Through community we build a sense of trust. Through trust we achieve a greater degree of patience. And through patience, courage.

For me when I feel especially tested, and without answers, I concentrate on patience. The small things like saying, “Thank you,” or “I’m sorry.” Or giving time or space to those who need it. To sit with a friend who is dying. Trying to be actively patient. Even being silent. Or remembering to say, I love you. Finding patience can lift us out of doubt when answers feel incomplete.

The point is we can give back in small, daily doses, and patience is our conduit from doubt to hope. Patience in small things strengthens us for the big tests we can’t foresee.

Our task is to interpret the future with hope—as a promise. We can’t always be Abraham. We can’t all be patriarchs! But Isaac, the boy, reminds us to be honest and say: I’m scared; I don’t know. Yes, there is Isaac in each of us.

Our truest test is to accept the existence of terrible paradoxes that thread this world and our relationships in it. Another test is for us to understand ourselves, which can only be done over time—with patience. “Abraham. Abraham!” Isaac is awake. He fastens us to ourselves in this world.

Let’s set out for an unknown tomorrow where there are tests and tests. Let’s call upon patience. Let’s be brave together in a sweet new year full of challenges. How many unfinished tests do you have? How many dreams?