

D'rash for second day Rosh HaShanah 10/1/19

In thinking about what I would say today, it occurred to me that the Akedah is one parsha that we almost never try to connect to our daily lives. Discussions of it almost always concern what was in the minds of the characters, or perhaps what the portion has to say about the history and nature of Judaism. Unlike, say, yesterday's parsha – which is difficult, too, in its own way – there's rarely an effort to interpret the Akedah in terms directly about ourselves.

That may not be surprising. Its surface messages give one little to work with. The idea of Abraham's obedience to G_d is almost too impenetrable and abstract to deal with, and the proposition that we should not sacrifice children is, at least in a literal sense, too self-evident to merit much conversation.

But I think the story can speak to us more directly.

When I read the portion this time, what riveted me was the first line.

In Alter's translation, it is: "And it happened after these things that G_d tested Abraham." (Or some translations say "put Abraham to the test.")

The opening is noteworthy in many ways – first, for its economy. Those who know the Strunk and White writing dictum, "Avoid needless words" would be hard-pressed to find a better example.

But there's more than that; many scholars and critics see it as one of the great opening lines of world literature.

The sentence combines a matter-of-fact tone with astounding substance. The effect is both disorienting and attention-grabbing. The line also simultaneously puts the reader at ease – this is only a test – and heightens the tension – it's a test! What will come of it?

And the opening both seems to close out questions – this is happening because it's a test – and to raise them – why, in Heaven's name, does Abraham need to be tested at this point?

But to me, most interestingly, it's a line that brings the story into our own lives. It's a *test*. What could be more familiar? We all have a sense of what it means to be tested, whether from our own experience or that of others. And I mean tested, in terms of life; not by an exam.

We tests for ourselves; and we set tests for others, rightly or wrongly, purposely or not. But the most profound tests we face – as individuals, as a community, or as a nation – follow some of the patterns of the Akedah. They appear to come out of nowhere (though we may try to perceive a pattern), they feel outside the normal sequence of time, they are abrupt, they are inescapable. We may describe them as coming from G_d.

Not surprisingly, literature is filled with these kinds of moments. They do not just challenge great figures like Abraham. In preparing the d'rash, I recalled a short story by Richard Bausch about an average guy, who is suddenly tested when a car accident happens, and he shocks himself by behaving heroically – though he can't quite integrate that back into his life or get his family to picture it.

Here's the opening of the story ("Valor"), which has some echoes (no doubt inadvertent) of the Akedah:

“After it was all over, Aldenburg heard himself say that he had never considered himself the sort of man who was good in an emergency, or was particularly endowed with courage. If anything, he had always believed quite the opposite. The truth of this hurt, but there it was. Problems in his private life made him low, and he’d had no gumption for doing anything to change, and he knew it, way down, where you couldn’t mask things with rationalization, or diversion, or bravado – or booze, either. In fact, he would not have been in a position to perform any heroics if he had not spent the night sitting in the bar at whose very door the accident happened.”

We probably all face these moments – accidents, illnesses, moral choices at home or at work, or in national policy. Situations that suddenly raise stark choices and provoke a heightened awareness.

These are truly tests. We don’t know with any certainty how we’ll react. (I’m reminded of the playwright Lisa Kron whose father was a Jew growing up in Nazi Germany. He told her he was always glad he was Jewish because it meant he never had to find out whether he would have become a Nazi.) We surprise ourselves – positively or negatively, and learn things about ourselves we had not expected, as we rise to the occasion or fail to do so.

We often don’t know if we’ve “passed” the test, even much later. We only know it’s given us a different sense of ourselves, and a different kind of self-awareness. Maybe we are a different person for having lived through it.

The Akedah itself may leave us feeling uncertain about whether the test was “passed” – even with G_d’s reassuring words to Abraham. Was Abraham really supposed to agree to bind Isaac? And so readily? Some scholars even think the language lauding Abraham was a later addition to the story.

To me, the ongoing power of this story comes not from its details – mesmerizing though they are – but from its shape.

The story conveys what it feels like to be put to the test – it’s sudden, disorienting, beyond everyday experience, uncertain, revelatory, life-changing.

And maybe that’s one reason we read this story on Rosh HaShanah – not just because it speaks of the covenant. As we sit and contemplate our lives during the Days of Awe – what we’re like, what our strengths and weaknesses are – this story is a reminder not to be too sure. We will face unexpected tests as individuals and as a society – as parents, teachers, professionals, citizens. Do we really know how we will respond? We need to avoid both being too complacent or too cynical.

It’s interesting that in all the centuries of commentary on the Akedah, there doesn’t seem to be much, if any on how Abraham saw himself after going back to Beersheba. There’s plenty of discussion of what he may have been thinking beforehand, and lots on what Isaac and Sarah might have experienced in the aftermath. But I haven’t seen anything about what Abraham thought afterwards. Maybe that question hits too close to home. Maybe it’s the one we have to ponder for ourselves.

The parsha itself, though, wants to move on quickly – and the decision to make Jeremiah today’s haftarah seems to reflect the same impulse. The parsha jumps to a genealogy, a return to normality. The haftarah, filled with some of the loveliest language in the Tanakh, portrays G_d as a loving father, doting on the people Israel as his first-born, returning us to the land in glory, banishing all prior weeping.

But those beautiful pictures of redemption are not enough to sweep the Akedah from our minds. It's too powerful. We have had the realization that, without warning, at some moment, our lives may be balanced on a knife point. We may be put to the test, and we have no real idea how we will perform or even what performing well may mean. That's part of life that we need to contemplate during the Days of Awe.