

Rosh HaShanah 5785, Day 2: Akedah Reimagined
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“I remember lying quietly in our tent. Abraham had fallen asleep beside me. My mind drifted back to my favorite memory, of the day when three guests came to tell me I’d soon be pregnant. After so many years! I actually laughed in disbelief until the Source of Life reassured me it was true. With Isaac, God gave me one of my life’s great joys.

Suddenly, Abraham began stirring and called out, ‘*Hineini*, Here I am.’ He began to talk with God. As I often did, I pretended to be asleep to listen in.”

Thus opens a modern midrash¹, or interpretation, of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, which we read from the Torah² this morning. This midrash is part of a project called Midrashic Monologues³, and it was written by Rabbi Paul Kipnes and Rabbi Rachel Bearman, who used to serve Temple B’nai Chaim in Georgetown. As you can tell from these opening sentences, we are about to experience the harrowing tale from the perspective of Sarah, Isaac’s mother, Abraham’s wife. And I promise that I’ll read you more in a couple of minutes.

But first, let’s talk about midrash. The word midrash comes from the Hebrew root *dalet-resh-shin*, which means “to seek out”. Traditionally speaking, midrash refers to ancient collections of interpretations of the Torah and other biblical texts, composed over the first 500 years or so of the common era, and they are usually organized according to the book and parasha of the Torah. When one composes a midrash, the goal is to seek new meaning in an ancient text. Perhaps it’s to answer a question—who is that unnamed character anyway? Why are there 2 Creation stories and 2 versions of Noah and the flood? Why did God make this choice or that? Or perhaps it’s to offer a different perspective than we’re used to. That’s often the case with midrashim composed in the 20th and 21st centuries, which seek to amplify the voices of women and to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people, and others whose voices have mostly been ignored in the text. While we always search for connections to ourselves in the Torah, midrash can be a delightfully creative way to seek and add new layers of meaning in our sacred Scripture.

And the Akedah, the binding of Isaac in Genesis chapter 22, begs us to do just this. Every reading of this narrative presents a host of questions. Now, we just read it, so it’s fresh for you, and now I’m going to give you a chance to participate in this D’var Torah. I’ll give you 1

¹ <https://www.midrashicmonologues.com/post/where-was-sarah-during-the-akedah>

² Genesis 22

³ <https://www.midrashicmonologues.com/>

minute to turn to a nearby neighbor and share at least 1 question the text raised for you.
Ready... go!

[time 1 minute]

Let's make it more interactive. Share your questions with the whole congregation.

[I repeat them into the microphone.]

Great. And here are some more:

- What was God really testing Abraham about?
- Did Abraham question God's command? How did he decide that following through was more important than protecting his precious son? What did he imagine would happen if he were to sacrifice Isaac?
- How old was Isaac when this happened? And what was going through Isaac's mind this whole time?
- What about Sarah—how much did she know of these events? What was she doing the whole time Abraham and Isaac were at the Akedah?
- The only other thing we ever hear about Sarah is her death—what happened to her after the Akedah?
- Did Abraham pass or fail the test? How do we know?
- Other than the ram/shofar connection, what moral message did the Sages want us to get out of this text at the start of the new year?

These questions broaden this troubling narrative from a story of blind faith to a story of individuals navigating an impossible situation, mostly in silence, each no doubt with a world of fears and questions of their own.

In Rabbi Kipnes' and Rabbi Bearman's midrash, Sarah listens in on Abraham's conversation with God and gleans that something is about to happen to Isaac. She can't bear it, and she sees that her husband is deeply saddened at the command, too. Determined to save her son's life, she tries to understand why God would make such a demand.

Let's rejoin the midrash:

“What was God looking for? Why would God suddenly seek reassurance of our commitment? I remembered God's promise that our offspring would inherit this land and become a great nation. I always assumed that Isaac and his future bride would follow in our footsteps to lead as heads of the tribe, but I never considered just how they would inherit our commitment to serving God. Abraham and I were not getting any younger. If we were to pass on the covenantal responsibility, it would have to be soon. Perhaps God was hinting

that it was time for a journey together, to meet God on a mountaintop and begin the transition of spiritual leadership to the next generation?

My heart began to pound as I realized Abraham had misunderstood. God was commanding an offering to help transmit leadership to Isaac. A sacrifice of the finest of our flocks was called for, not a sacrifice of Isaac. I realized then, that the future of our people depended upon me. I had to prevent a nonsensical death, and ensure our continued covenant with God. It was on me.

I hoped Abraham would figure this out himself. But in case he did not, I had to intervene. So I went back to bed and with my eyes closed, I planned my next step.

Abraham got up early, gathered his supplies, and took off with Isaac. He didn't even try to wake me. No explanation; not even a kiss goodbye.

As soon as they were gone, I gathered my supplies and took our finest ram. I followed carefully, hiding in the shadows. At dawn on the third day, as they slept, I hurried up the mountain, releasing the ram into the bushes.

The rest happened so quickly. Abraham was holding the knife, about to sacrifice Isaac. He seemed to be in a trance. So in my voice that he often called 'angelic,' I called out, 'Avraham, Avraham.'

That broke the trance. Realizing what he was about to do, he dropped the knife. He looked up, saw the ram that I brought for him to sacrifice instead, and stepped toward it. Relieved at having saved my son's life, and grateful at having ensured the survival of our people, I was exhausted. I cried and cried.

Then I lay down on the ground for what I sensed would be a long, long sleep.

This is really incredible midrash, right?

As I read it, I tick off the questions it responds to:

- What was Sarah doing during the Akedah? How much did she know? [She knew it ALL, and instead of being left home and left out, she was being thoughtful and industrious, orchestrating the entire save.]
- Who was the angel? [It was Sarah, who could predict exactly what Abraham would do, who understood what God actually wanted.]
- How did the ram get caught just there, in the thicket, at just the right time? [Sarah again.]

- And did Abraham pass the test or not? [The jury is out on him, but Sarah seems to have aced it.]
- What *is* the core message of the Akedah? [Perhaps there are several: God wants us to choose life; God values the continuity of the Jewish people; sometimes we misunderstand the instruction of our own faith tradition; the actions of one individual have the potential to impact the entire future.]

After that heart-pounding intervention, according to this midrash, Sarah lets out all her emotion and lays down for a long, long sleep. According to the classical midrash⁴, Sarah learns of her son's almost-death after it was all over, and dies immediately. After all, in the Torah text, the next chapter notes her death. Here, her long, long sleep also hints at her death, not from shock, but from sheer exhaustion, having given every ounce of strength to save her son.

Now, this midrash does not make an explicit connection to yesterday's reading from the Torah—the one in which a jealous Sarah kicks Hagar and Yishmael out of the home, leaving them to certain death. In the Torah, there's really nothing more about Sarah between that awful scene and her death. But I think this midrash provides a real redemption opportunity for Sarah, a chance for *teshuvah*, repentance. She cannot fathom the idea that her beloved son would be sacrificed, that his precious life would be cut short. She pretty literally gives every last breath in her body to ensure his survival, and by extension, the survival of the Israelite and eventually the Jewish people. No doubt she is motivated most by her love for her own flesh and blood child. We all would be. But perhaps she still carries with her the shame and embarrassment for how she treated another boy, how she privileged her own comfort over the very life of Hagar and of Yishmael. Centuries later, Maimonides/Rambam would come along and assert that the mark of true and complete *teshuvah* is making the right choice when presented with the same situation wherein we previously failed. Sarah did just that.

This element of *teshuvah*, repentance, is so crucial for us on these holy days. I think we often picture *teshuvah* as a conversation of repair between individuals. That's not possible here, since Sarah and Hagar never meet up again. She never sees Yishmael again either. *Teshuvah* doesn't require that conversation, though. At its core, it's a shift in our orientation, a shift that leads to a different outcome. More than anything else, I think that's what Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur beg of us. In Sarah's case, according to this midrash, she shifted her orientation to place the value of human life as the top priority, even higher than obeying God's command. What about us? How will we shift our inner orientation in this new year?

⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 20:2

In the Torah, Sarah's legacy is limited to two main accomplishments—first, partnering with Abraham to forge a nascent monotheistic religion; and second, bringing Isaac into the world. This midrash expands not just her role in the Akedah, but her very legacy as well: She will be remembered as *the* model of someone who takes action to effect her fate and the fate of her family, of the new nation. On her darkest day—when it seemed like her beloved son might not come home—she found the strength to stay grounded, focused, and forward-thinking. Sarah becomes the very inspiration we need right now. The world is feeling extra dark these days. Perhaps when all hope seems lost, we can hope that someone out there is eavesdropping, just as Sarah was. *Ken Yehi Ratzon.*