

Courage, my friend /
You do not walk alone /
We will walk with you /
And sing your spirit home

This song is attributed to the anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, sung as protesters were being taken to jail. It has since emerged as a popular song of protest movements and minority groups across the world – a song of resistance in the face of oppression, bravery in the face of fear, and community in the face of loneliness.

An important community of mine has also sung these words. In high school and college, I had the privilege of attending Keshet Shabbatonim, Shabbat gatherings of Jewish LGBTQ high school students run by Keshet, an organization which works for the full equality of LGBTQ Jews in Jewish life. During these weekends we created a beautiful environment of safety, community, and authenticity, a sacred island of freedom for individuals who may not have felt that way in their daily lives. We sang this song during the last hour of programming, as people were emotionally preparing to reenter the real world, where many participants felt much more alone and vulnerable than during the 48 hours of the shabbaton.

An emphasis on walking together into difficulty, rather than alone, is a focal point of parashat Vayera, where God commands Abraham to do the impossible – to sacrifice his son Isaac. For three days, according to the Torah's description, וילכו שניהם יחדו – the two of them walked together. The text emphasizes their togetherness in multiple ways – by adding the word יחדו, together, when it could have just said that the two of them walked, and by repeating that phrase twice. To me, this suggests that Abraham and Isaac were not just physically on the same trail,

but emotionally together, accompanying each other on the journey from safety into the unknown.

In the end, of course, Isaac is not sacrificed, but both he and Abraham are forever changed. We can see that change in the Torah's description of the descent down the mountain:

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל-בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵאֵר
שֶׁבַע:

And Abraham returned to his servants, and they got up, and they went back together to Be'er Sheva, and Abraham lived in Be'er Sheva.

The verse explicitly mentions Abraham and the servants, but not Isaac.

Obviously, the traditional commentators notice this, and many of them pose the question "So where is Isaac?" The Midrashists of our tradition get creative in providing answers. In B'reshit Rabbah, Rabbi Berekhya says that Isaac went to learn Torah at yeshiva, and Rabbi Chanina says that Abraham told Isaac to wait a few hours before traveling home – traveling at night would afford him greater protection from the Evil Eye. Chizkuni imagines a different place of refuge for Isaac, saying that God kept Isaac in the Garden of Eden for three years, until it was time for him to meet Rebekkah. These midrashim imagine Isaac needing to be safe and sheltered – which requires being at least temporarily away from his father.

Ibn Ezra suggests something radically different. The 12th century grammarian and p'shatist wrote:

לא הזכיר יצחק, כי הוא ברשותו

The text doesn't mention Isaac, because he was in Abraham's domain, his רשות.

For Ibn Ezra, not mentioning Isaac doesn't mean that he's not there. And indeed, the verse describing the descent down the mountain uses the phrase וילכו יחדו, evoking the earlier phrase and perhaps hinting at Isaac's presence, but the word שניהם is missing, implicitly suggesting a change in Abraham and Isaac's togetherness. Ibn Ezra might even be suggesting an *increase* in their togetherness – they are so connected that they don't even need to be mentioned individually.

But how on earth can Ibn Ezra imagine that after the terrifying and traumatic experience atop the mountain, after the father very nearly killed the son, that they walked down the mountain and returned home together? I find this image absurd, laughable, impossible. But since I discovered this commentary in my first year at JTS, I haven't been able to shake the image of them walking down the mountain together. I keep coming back to it – but why? What's at stake in the idea of them going down the mountain together?

I want to suggest two different answers to that question. One answer challenges me and my preconceptions, and one guides me in my rabbinate and my moral convictions.

First, the idea of them walking down the mountain together allows the Akedah to be a shared trauma between Abraham and Isaac, rather than a trauma that Abraham *inflicted upon* Isaac. Abraham, who left everything behind to follow this God, who waited for decades for Isaac, is faced with a cruel Divine command to slaughter his beloved son.

But Abraham is not just a zealot, Isaac not just a victim. The narrative is more complicated than that. They were both put into a horrible, impossible situation, and they both made their choices and had their reactions. While this experience is

usually read as having driven them apart, if they walk down the mountain together, we can see them beginning the healing process, choosing to pursue repair in their relationship, facing the future changed-but-united. In this sense, despite experiencing the same world so differently, they continue to walk together – וילכו יחדו.

Of course, there are abusive relationships where continuing to walk together may be UNHEALTHY or UNSAFE, and I do not mean that people should put themselves at risk. But when we can, I hear ibn Ezra as calling us to emulate Isaac and expand our רשות, even – or especially – in a time when our dividing lines feel firmer than ever, our instincts to retreat into binaries at their most powerful. None of us holds a monopoly on victimhood, righteousness, or wisdom. Even in our struggles, the response must not be to walk away, but rather to walk together, to accompany and be accompanied.

To maintain our relationships and to face the world in its full complexity requires us to broaden our רשות and to engage in difficult walkings, to think not only of our own trauma but to be compassionate in seeing what others are carrying with them, and being willing to walk down the mountain with those whom, in moments of self-centeredness, we might be tempted to abandon.

A second idea that resonates and that I cherish from Ibn Ezra is the importance of not letting people walk down life's toughest mountains alone. This is at the center of being a rabbi. We have an obligation to walk with people, to accompany them on their life's journeys, to be present for them as they face and experience sacred, life-changing, traumatic, or heightened moments. We are the people who aim to ensure that no one walks down the mountain alone, like Abraham when he held Isaac in his domain after Isaac's traumatic near-death experience. Whether it's

sitting with a patient or a patient's family member in the hospital, supporting people facing difficulties in their home lives, or studying Jewish text together in search of meaning when the world feels heavy, our job is to accompany people down *their mountains* as best we can.

Too many people walk alone. Individuals with disabilities who are homebound or for whom too much of public life is inaccessible. Folks who are grappling with loss, in all its diverse forms. Jews who have to make hard choices about whether to wear their kippah proudly or prioritize their sense of safety. My friends at Keshet Shabbatonim who felt vulnerable walking alone in their schools or growing up in their homes.

To all of them, and to so many more, I hope we can all pledge ourselves to say:

You are in my רשות, I am in yours, and you do not walk alone.