

Fear, Trauma, and the High Holidays: Reading Ancient Texts with Compassion

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Amid gatherings with family and friends, festive meals, blessings for a good year, and expressions of gratitude, the Days of Awe are often accompanied by unsettling feelings. Our liturgy and customs encourage us to reflect on the year that has passed and imagine what may come in our future. Over the centuries, the haunting prayer of *Unetaneh Tokef* has prompted us to wonder who will die in the year ahead and who will live. We pray to be written and sealed in the Book of Life for the year to come, but the uncertainty of what this means and how it happens can leave some people feeling agitated. In addition to the personal difficulties we may be experiencing and reflecting upon, our feeling of being ill at ease may be intensified by the rise in antisemitism and hate speech and crimes in general.

The story of the Akedah, traditionally read on Rosh Hashanah, is one of our tradition's most powerful and troubling stories of fear, threat, and survival. We often read it as the story of Abraham's test: Will he obey God's command to sacrifice his beloved son? But what happens when we shift our focus from Abraham to Isaac, the child at the center of the story? Through Isaac's eyes, the Akedah becomes not only a story about faith and obedience, but a story about responding to threat, managing fear, and finding the will to survive and heal.

While the text is rich in its description of Abraham agreeing to God's command and preparing to sacrifice his son, little attention is given to Isaac who is portrayed as passive and silent. After three days of quiet traveling, in a startling moment and disruption to the narrative, Isaac breaks the silence and speaks directly to Abraham: "Then Isaac said to Abraham his father: he said, 'Father?' and he [Abraham] said, 'I am here, my son'" (Gen. 22:7).

Some commentaries imagine that Isaac understood Abraham's intention to sacrifice him and specifically called to him as father to prompt him to show the mercy he imagined a father would have for a child (Keli Yakar, Gen. 22:7). Charlie Buchholtz and Tova Hartman describe the tension between Abraham and Isaac at this moment as one between a "spiritual-sacrificial ethic" and an "ethic of love, memory, and relationship" (*Are You Not a Man of God?: Devotion, Betrayal, and Social Criticism in Jewish Tradition*, Tova Hartman and Charlie Buckholtz).

In Isaac's next utterance, he challenges his father: "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds, "It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together. Abraham has evaded the question. The two walk off together, but, we

may wonder, are they together? Is Isaac's silence one of comfort, reassurance, resignation, or terror?

Isaac remains silent for the rest of the story of the Akedah. The sacrificer and the intended sacrifice arrive at the place that God had designated. Abraham builds an altar, lays out the wood, binds his son Isaac, places him on the altar on top of the wood, and raises his knife to slaughter him. Isaac is silent. At this crucial moment, the Messenger of God intervenes, calling out, "Abraham! Abraham!" As with Isaac, Abraham responds, "Here I am."

The scarcity of language regarding Isaac's thoughts, feelings, and language may prompt us to wonder how people have found ways to persevere in harrowing and terrorizing situations.

The plan is disrupted. The Messenger redirects Abraham to offer an animal sacrifice instead. The text lets us know that Isaac has survived. Learning the outcome of a story, especially a harrowing one, can collapse the telling of how the characters lived through it, moment by moment, uncertainty by uncertainty, and how they managed their fear in the face of threat. The scarcity of language regarding Isaac's thoughts, feelings, and language may prompt us to wonder how people have found ways to persevere in harrowing and terrorizing situations.

In our post-October 7 reality, we are learning more and more from those who were abducted and held hostage in Gaza about strategies they used to survive. One story of survival is told by Rachel Goldberg-Polin about her son, Hersh, who was abducted on October 7 and murdered in captivity. As reported by others who were captive with him, Hersh frequently gave voice to how he was carrying with him a central message from a book that he had read. Rachel writes:

Or [one of the other hostages] explained that Hersh had repeated, like a mantra, a line from Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* . . . Frankl riffs on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that when a person has a reason to live, he can deal with any challenge. Frankl said, "He who has a *WHY* can bear any how." Or said Hersh repeated that specific line of wisdom to everyone in that tunnel. "What is your *WHY*?" he kept asking over and over, prompting them to consider what was of utmost importance to them and to formulate their sense of purpose. (Rachel Goldberg-Polin, *When We See You Again*)

The story is told that before deportation to Theresienstadt, Frankl's wife, Tilly, had sewn his manuscript into his coat. But, at Auschwitz the coat was confiscated, along with the manuscript he had just completed on his theory of logotherapy. It was his life's work at that time and a manifestation of his sense of purpose. Bereft, Frankl wrote that his deep desire to rewrite the manuscript helped him survive. At one point he became ill with typhus fever and began to write down notes on scraps of paper to help him reconstruct the work. He wrote, "I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse."

Both Frankl and Goldberg-Polin found ways to stay connected to who they were as unique people with a sense of purpose amid the most horrific and dehumanizing experiences.

Psychologists differentiate between fear as a physiological and often unconscious and reflexive response to real danger in the moment, and fear that is relived from the past after an imminent threat has concluded. After the Akedah, Isaac's story continues as that of a trauma survivor.

Following the Akedah, Abraham returned to his servants, making no mention of Isaac returning (Gen. 22:19). The next we hear of Isaac is when Abraham's servant Eliezer has arranged a marriage for him. When he finds Isaac, the text tells us:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לִשְׂדֵה לַשָּׂדֶה לַפְּנוֹת עֶרֶב

“Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening.” (Gen. 24:63)

Rabbinic commentators estimate that three years had passed since the Akedah. What did Isaac do during that time?

Genesis Rabbah imagines Shem and Ever (Noah's son and great-grandson) establishing a yeshiva at which numerous subsequent ancestors studied. My teacher Rabbi Morton Leifman, of blessed memory, used to emphasize the special power of the classic midrash that suggests that after the Akedah, Isaac went to this yeshiva to study with his ancestors (Genesis Rabbah 56:11). Rabbi Leifman suggested that Isaac went there following his experience of trauma to grapple with existential questions and to seek healing.

The commentators imagine numerous other ways this verse could be understood. Some envision Isaac seeking solace in the natural world, understanding the Hebrew *lasuah* as connected to *siah*, “vegetation,” and picturing him gardening or walking in nature (Rashbam and Ibn Ezra on Gen. 24:63). Still others understand *lasuah* to mean “prayer,” linking it with the phrase *yishpokh siho*—“pour out his plea” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b; Ps. 102:1). Still others imagine Isaac turning to study in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever (Genesis Rabbah, see above).

Instead of reading these commentaries as a debate for what the text means, we can understand them as offering different ways one might seek to heal from a terrifying experience.

This year, as we reflect on our joy and gratitude from the past year, may we also find and affirm our own sense of purpose, perseverance, and healing.

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