

# Enduring Faith

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“The place where-on thou stands is Holy ground.” Think about it. For those with eyes to see all the earth is Holy. So the text tells us to open our eyes, to become conscious of the spiritual radiance which undergirds and nourishes our lives. The place we find ourselves, wherever that may be, is Holy ground. And friends, we find ourselves, through prayer. Let me try to be clear. When I say prayer, I’m pointing to a quality of attention, a way of being usually cultivated over years of patient devotional practice. Home, I like to say, is every place I’ve ever prayed.

Imagine Abram the, the tragic hero of the old strong story, the radical son of a radical father who, scholars tell us, is the great exemplar. The first section of the Book of Genesis, according to Leon Kass, in his masterful book, The Beginning of Wisdom paints a dire portrait of the human experience. He writes:

*To appreciate God’s education of Abraham, it is necessary to keep in mind the pre-Abrahamic, which is to say the natural and uninstructed, human condition and to see just what needs educating and why. The necessary background is presented in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. These primordial stories have shown us why it will be extremely difficult to establish a better way of life for human beings. For they have exposed the perennial problems in human relations and laid bare their deep psychic roots. From these stories we have learned especially about the dangers of human freedom and rationality, about the injustices that follow from excessive self-love and vanity, and about the evils born of human pride and the aspiration to full self-sufficiency...*

*By the time the careful reader has finished the first eleven chapters of Genesis, he is well-nigh convinced that mankind, left to its own devices, is doomed to failure, destruction, and misery. The reader hopes there might be an alternative, a way of life different from the natural or uninstructed ways of men, a successful way in which our kind might flourish. According to the text God more than shares the reader’s hopes, and God decides to take a more direct role in the matter, beginning with Abraham. God...will, as it were, take Abraham by the hand, will serve as his tutor, and will educate him to be a new human being, one who will stand in right relation to his household, to other peoples and to God—one who will set an example for countless generations, who, inspired by his story, will cleave to these righteous ways.*

It should come as no surprise then, that Judaism, one of the great wisdom traditions of the world, asks that we begin each year by considering what must have been the most challenging chapter is a life filled with challenge. The traditional text for Rosh Hashanah, for the Jewish New Year is called the Akedda, the Binding of Isaac. It is among the most troubling of the old strong stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. One might well prefer to explain it away as

many have modern thinkers as an admonition against blood sacrifice, a transitional moment in the development of monotheism when all of a sudden we find out God doesn't want parents killing their children. Some scholars teach that the God's testing of Abraham is parallel to the Book of Job in which Lucifer and God make a friendly wager as to whether or not Job's faith is strong enough to carry him through a series of horrific trials. It seems an awfully cavalier image of God.

Jewish tradition does not suggest we settle on a single interpretation of any significant text. That's why we're asked to consider them over and over again. This year I find that I'm less interested in why God put Abraham to the test than I am with the astounding fact that having been tested, having held and raised the knife to sacrifice his beloved child, Abraham somehow must found the faith to ask forgiveness, if only in his heart, and to, by grace, forgive himself for almost committing an unpardonable crime.

To begin to understand the strength of Abraham's faith let's go back to where the story starts, to the Sumerian city of Ur, which had always been Abraham's home. He is already seventy-five years old when Abraham discovers that God wants him to leave home. The 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis begins:

*The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your own country, your kinsman, and your father's house, and go to a country I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings...all the families on earth will pray to be blessed as you are blessed.'*

The thirty eight chapters which follow tell the story of his pilgrimage, the story of a man who went out by faith into the unknown, a man for whom the promise of God's blessing was cause enough to risk it all.

It's possible to preach against the text. The narrative can certainly be seen as little more than one more story of conquest. Though often portrayed as a lonely pioneer, leading his little family and their retinue across the wilderness, Abraham was in fact, a complicated character. He was a patriarch, a chieftain, a war lord, a husband, a father, a pilgrim, and a prophet. He is said to be the founder of both Judaism and Islam.

Sarah was not his only wife. Isaac was not his only son. A few years before the birth of Isaac, he slept with Sarah's servant Hagar. She bore a child whom they named Ishmael. Under Mesopotamian law, Ishmael would have been considered Sarah's child and therefore Abraham's heir. But when Isaac finally arrived, the unanticipated child of Sarah's old age, she demanded Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael in order to make Isaac Abraham's sole heir. Ishmael is to Islam what Isaac is to Judaism and so to Christianity. The three traditions argue over which son was to be sacrificed there on the hill of horrors. Millennia later they still fight for control of, the Al Aqsa Mosque and of the Dome of the Rock which mark that wind-swept mountaintop. For three thousand years and more the nameless dream that called him to leave home, the nameless dream for which he abandoned his birthright has continued to inspire and enflame the desert faiths.

We religious liberals like to imagine we're immune. We prefer to stand outside the story, to frame it as a lesson in cultural anthropology, something we can study from the outside. *First having read the book of myths*

*And loaded the camera, and checked the edge of the knifeblade...we descend, we dive into the wreck, the wreck itself and not the story of the wreck the thing itself and not the myth. You and I are Abraham called to leave the familiar comforts of home and hearth in search of something we can hardly name; call it wholeness, call it a new way of being, call it love. You and I are Sarah waiting at the tent, there in the den of the winds, our own stories stolen and hidden away. You and I are Hagar dying of thirst in the desert. You and I are Ishmael, founder of the Arab nations, prophet of Islam. And you and I are Isaac walking down to Abu Ghosh in silence. We are, I am, you are by cowardice or courage the one who find our way back to this scene carrying a knife, a camera a book of myths in which our names do not appear. Sometimes I wish that the poet was right. We may wish the book of myths did not contain our names but there they are. There we are. We find ourselves over and over again in the stories we'd rather not hear. Each year we're asked to wrestle with this story as we prepare ourselves for Yom Kippur. I imagine you share my deep discomfort with the notion that one can demonstrate one's faith by threatening to kill one's child. And yet we know full well we sacrifice our children every day despite and because of the fact that we love them.*

Today I want to set aside the question of whether or not Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son serves as proof of the strength of his faith. Instead I invite us all to think about the faith it took for him to risk it all when he went out from Ur. Instead I want us all to imagine the faith it must have taken to walk down from that hill of horrors, feeling the sacrificial knife still heavy in his hand. I want us to imagine the faith it must have taken to beg his son's forgiveness, to plead for Sarah's mercy, and most of all to find a way to live and love again in light of what he'd done. Is it possible that the message we need most to hear on this and every New Year is that there is no sin so terrible that it cannot be forgiven.

Despite his agony at what he'd almost done Abraham chose life. How can you and I lose faith when our transgressions can't possibly compare with the sins of him who God has blessed beyond all measure?

The great New Jersey poet, Stephen Dunn, in his poem "A Postmortem Guide: for my eulogist in advance" directs what he wants said at his funeral. Speaking of that nameless dream, that self-same hunger that calls and compels us, each and all he writes:

*Still, for accuracy's sake you might say  
I often stopped,  
that I rarely went as far as I dreamed.*

*And since you know my hardships,  
understand that they're mere bump and setback  
against history's horror.  
Remind those seated, perhaps weeping  
how obscene it is  
for some of us to complain.*

To be a truly universalist is to have enduring faith that in the end, whether or not we manage to forgive and be forgiven we will be welcomed home as we are reunited with a larger love which never really let us go. So summon as you can the strength to pray. By patient practice learn to see the radiance that's always at the heart of things.

May it be so and amen.

As we settle into silence let the music call to mind the faces of those you would forgive and of those you hope to be forgiven by. When the music ends please stand, find a partner if you wish to, face them and hold hands and join me in a litany of atonement.

Readings

September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

### Diving Into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,  
and loaded the camera,  
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,  
I put on  
the body-armor of black rubber  
the absurd flippers  
the grave and awkward mask.  
I am having to do this  
not like Cousteau with his  
assiduous crew  
aboard the sun-flooded schooner  
but here alone.

There is a ladder.

The ladder is always there  
hanging innocently  
close to the side of the schooner.

We know what it is for,  
we who have used it.  
Otherwise  
it's a piece of maritime floss  
some sundry equipment.

I go down.  
rung after rung and still  
the oxygen immerses me  
the blue light  
the clear atoms  
of our human air.

I go down.  
My flippers cripple me,  
I crawl like an insect down the ladder  
and there is no one  
to tell me where the ocean  
will begin.

First the air is blue and the  
it is bluer and then green and the  
black I am blacking out and yet  
my mask is powerful  
it pumps my blood with power  
the sea is another story  
the sea is not a question of power  
I have to learn alone  
to turn my body without force

in the deep element.

And now it is easy to forget  
what I came for  
among so many who have always  
lived here  
swaying their crenellated fans  
between the reefs  
and besides  
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.  
I stroke the beam of my lamp  
slowly along the flank  
of something more permanent than fish or weed

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth  
the drowned face always staring  
toward the sun  
the evidence of damage  
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty  
the ribs of the disaster

curving their assertion  
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.

and I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
streams black, the merman in his armored body.

We circle silently  
about the wreck  
we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes  
whose breasts still bear the stress  
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies  
obscurely inside barrels  
half-wedged and left to rot  
we are the half-destroyed instruments  
that once held to a course  
the water-eaten log  
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way  
Back to this scene  
carrying a knife, a camera  
A book of myths  
in which

our names do not appear.

Adrienne Rich (1972)

The Akedda- Genesis 22:1-15

The time came when God put Abraham to the test.

*Abraham.*

*Here I am.*

*Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the hills which I will show you.*

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass, and he took with him two of his men and his son, Isaac; and he split the firewood for the sacrifice, and he set out for the place of



which God had spoken. On the third day God looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his men,

*You stay here with the ass while the boy and I go over there; and when we have worshipped we will come back to you.*

So Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and he laid it on his son's shoulder; and he, himself carried the fire and the knife, and the two of them went on together.

*Father.*

*What is it my son?*

*Here are the fire and the wood but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?*

*God will provide for the sacrifice my son, God will provide.*

And the two of them went on together and came to the place.

There Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He

bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and picked up the knife to kill his son; but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven.

*Abraham, Abraham.*

*Here I am.*

*Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you fear God for you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*

Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He went and took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice instead of his beloved son. So he named the place Jehova-jireh. To this day people still say:

*On the mountain, God will provide.*

## And as Far as Abu Ghosh

And as far as Abu Ghosh we were silent  
and as far as old age I will love you  
at the foot of the hill of horrors,  
in the den of the winds. And in Sha'ar He-Gai  
the angels of the three religions stepped down into  
the road. Faith in one God is still heavy. And with words  
of pain I must describe the fig trees  
and what happened to me, which wasn't my fault. Sand  
was blown into my eyes and became tears. And in Ramla  
small planes were parked, and large nameless dead. The scent  
of orange groves touched my blood. My blood looked  
over its shoulder to see who touched. Wind, like actors, began  
to put on their costumes again so that they could act before us,  
their masks of house and mountain and woods,  
makeup of sunset and night.

From there the other roads began.

And my heart was covered with dreams, like my shiny  
shoes, which were covered with dust.

For dreams too are a long road  
whose end I will never reach.

Yehuda Amichai