

Stories of the Hebrew Bible

Lesson 4: Abraham and Isaac

2.28.21

Objectives: Debate the story of Abraham and Isaac as a story of tested faith.

Materials: Teachers should download lesson plan and attachments onto their desktop.

Time allotment: Suggested for 60 minute online class.

1. Zoom Welcome (as youth arrive into the breakout classroom)

- Teachers and youth are expected to log on to zoom at 11:15am (15 min before class begins at 11:30am) so that everyone can be organized into correct breakout classrooms. We want to make sure there is an attentive adult in each breakout classroom with youth.
- Greet youth and ask everyone to correct their display name as needed. Ask everyone to select “gallery view” to see everyone else.
- Staff will take attendance.

2. Zoom Icebreaker: “What would you take?” (5 minutes, begin while waiting for everyone to arrive)

Taking turns, have each youth respond to the following scenario: “You have been exiled to a deserted island for a year. In addition to survival essentials, you may take one piece of music, one book, and one luxury item you can carry with you. What would you take and why?” Everyone takes a moment to think before sharing their choices with others in the group.

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “*We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.*”

Teacher reads: (from Mohandas Gandhi, teacher of nonviolence and leader of the Indian independence movement in British-ruled India)

“Faith must be enforced by reason... when faith becomes blind it dies.”

(from Carol Gilligan, feminist ethicist)

“The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life.”

4. Brief Check-in (5 minutes)

Continue weekly ritual/check-in (e.g. sharing a joy or sorrow so that everyone feels present in class).

5. Story: Abraham and Isaac (15 minutes)

(a) Teacher introduces: The covenant made with God will be a recurring theme in the stories of the Hebrew Bible. It is this covenant – this special promise of love and trust – that will define Abraham and his descendants as God’s people. And how well they stay true to the covenant will determine whether they will be blessed as a people.

(b) Invitation to wonder: Before reading the story, prompt youth to consider a longstanding question from the rabbis and Jewish teachers: *Is God testing Abraham, or is Abraham testing God... or are they testing each other?*

(c) Screen share lesson attachment 4a (The Hardest Test of All) and invite volunteers to read portions aloud.

(d) Questions for Discussion:

- So the big question: How many youth think that Abraham was actually going to sacrifice his son Isaac? How many think he would not have? Why or why not?
- Is this a story that celebrates unwavering faith? Or warns about the dangers of blind faith?
- What are we to learn from this story about being faithful? Is it blind faith? Or is having faith/trust in someone something to be questioned, doubted, reconsidered again and again?
- We may frown on ancient practices of human and child sacrifice, but can modern people be seen as sacrificing our children and young, out of blind faith to “patriotism” or “success” or other causes/ideologies? What might be examples?

6. Midrash on the Story (20 minutes)

Teacher Summarizes: In the rabbinic tradition, one of the longstanding questions about this story has been “Who is testing whom?” *Midrash* is the Hebrew term for rabbinic literature that contains interpretations and commentaries on scripture. The purpose of *midrash* is to debate and resolve problems posed by difficult passages of the Hebrew Bible. So, let’s have a debate!

Midrash Debate: As a group, we are going to spend **seven minutes** defending each side of the argument: “*God is testing Abraham*” and “*Abraham is testing God.*” At the end, we will vote to see which argument is more convincing!

- (a) **Screen share** lesson attachment 4b (Abraham and Isaac: A Midrash Debate).
- (b) On the attachment write down the main argument, textual evidence, and (if time) closing remarks for argument 1. After seven minutes save and scroll down to argument 2.

Note: More important than fully flushing out each argument is getting to explore both perspectives.

Examples of evidence to help youth brainstorm:

God is testing Abraham

- i. Opening sentence says God is testing Abraham.
- ii. As for Abraham, he is described not as testing God but determined to obey God's command, "no matter what it cost."
- iii. Abraham doesn't challenge God. He actually binds Isaac, draws the knife and holds it up above his head, ready to strike.
- iv. God literally says God was testing Abraham!

Abraham is testing God

- i. Abraham tells servants that "**We** will make our sacrifice and come back to you."
- ii. Abraham tells Isaac that GOD will provide the lamb.
- iii. Yes, Abraham binds Isaac, draws the knife and holds it above his head. But why hold the knife above his head instead of just killing him immediately? Doesn't it seem like Abraham is waiting and trusting that God will intervene?!
- iv. At the end, Abraham says to Isaac that God, indeed, provided the lamb (just as he predicted)!

- (c) Once the time is up, pause for a moment. Invite youth to reflect on which argument they think is more convincing.
- (d) **Vote!** Ask youth to raise their hands if they believe "God is testing Abraham." Ask youth to raise their hands then if they believe "Abraham is testing God."
- (e) **Question for Discussion:** Beyond the winning argument, what can we learn from this debate? *Who is testing whom?*

(Hint: Many rabbinic interpretations argue that they were testing each other, pushing each other to see the very limits of their trust and fidelity to the covenant made.)

7. Retelling the Story (15 minutes)

Teacher summarizes: the following critical background information to provide further perspective on this disturbing and difficult story:

- As modern people, we have difficulty comprehending that human sacrifice was a fact of life in the ancient Near East. Israel's rejection of this practice took place over a long period of time, *but no biblical story better depicts this transformation in the religion of the early Hebrews than the story of Abraham's non-sacrifice of Isaac.*
- The story contains the **ambiguity** of all historical moments when transformation is occurring, shifting from one worldview to another worldview not yet entirely clear. So the story (1) seems like any other story of human sacrifice of its time, but (2) it twists and bends in very new directions: It ends with rejecting child sacrifice in the name of God! God is the very one who intervenes and stops it.
- For us modern people, we are appalled that Abraham almost did what he didn't do. But for ancient hearers of the story, they would have been *stunned* that Abraham did **not** do what he almost did!

Teacher introduces: Interpreting scripture is hard work! It involves reading between the lines, understanding the historical context, and getting a sense of how the story would have been heard by the early Hebrews. Only then can we moderns begin to accurately hear what the story may be trying to say to the modern world.

Following the rabbinic tradition that suggests Abraham and God are testing each other's faith/trust, let's creatively think about how we could rewrite this story not as a story of blind faith but faith that welcomes questioning, doubting, reconsidering.

Questions for Discussion:

- How might Abraham have behaved differently?
- What if he had thought differently about God?
- What if he had talked this over with Sarah, Isaac's mother? (That faith experiences – like hearing the “voice of God” – may be private but can be shared?)
- What if Isaac had protested?

8. Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

9. Leave zoom breakout classroom: wait until all youth have left, click “Leave” then “Leave Meeting.”