

L'shanah tovah.

Ooof. What a parsha. It's one of those parts of the Torah that hurts. I really don't think there is a good answer to the Akedah, a commentary or a midrash that ties it up in a bow, without any pain. What do we do with the painful, scary sacred texts?

Oof. What a year. I got through this spring and summer with the hope of September. In September, maybe, vaccines for children would come. By September, enough people would be vaccinated, and the world would return to normal. Well, it's September, and my unvaccinated kid is home with her dad instead of here with me at services. She hasn't met many of our family, still. She doesn't remember restaurants or grocery stores. She doesn't remember shabbos dinners indoors with loved ones. She knows she needs to wear a mask inside but is not as clear on why it's ok to not wear it indoors with Ima and Papa.

What has this year brought for you? Have you lost loved ones? Are you grieving missed simchas, or young children who grew up when you couldn't see them?

Perhaps you missed funerals of loved ones, or sat shiva comforted only via Zoom.

Perhaps it's the continued isolation that's getting to you. I know for me, the delta variant and the news that vaccines for children would not be coming this fall brought a wave of heaviness, as I watched the light at the end of the tunnel move from so close, to out of sight.

The u'nataneh tokef, which we will recite at musaf, feels so real. Who will live and who will die? Who will perish by fire, the largest wildfires California has ever seen and who by water, the hurricane and flooding that wracks the east. Why by plague? Who will be at peace, and who will be troubled? We don't know, and it's terrifying.

What do we do with this painful, scary sacred world?

I'd like to read the Akedah out loud, in English, and together sit with the painful parts. Then, I'll suggest an approach of how we can hold these painful texts, and this hard world.

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It was after these things that G'd put Avraham to the test. G'd said to him, "Avraham", and he answered "Hineni, here I am". And G'd said "Take your son, your favored one, Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

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So Avraham sets off with his servants and Yitzchak. When they get a few days from the mountains, they leave the servants behind....

Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son, Yitzchak. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.

Then Yitzchak said to his father Avraham, "Aba!" and he answered "Hineni, bni. Here I am, my son". And he said "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

And Avraham said "G!d will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son" and the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which G!d had told him. Avraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood. He bound his son Yitzchak; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

And Avraham picked up the knife to slay his son.

Then an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: "Avraham! Avraham!" And he answered, "Hineni, here I am."

And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear G!d, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

When Avraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

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And an angel told Avraham that G!d would bless him and his descendents. They went down the mountain separately and Yitzchak and Avraham never spoke to each other again. And Sarah died of a broken heart, hearing what Avraham had gone to do.

Avraham loved Yitzchak. It's the pshat.

I have a daughter I love. Liora is a toddler, and she is sweet and funny, and silly, strong, and determined. She loves books and water and dancing and owls. If the big kids at daycare scoot, or climb a fence, she will figure out how to do it too, never mind being a year or more younger.

I try to picture Avraham binding Yitzchak on the altar, tying the ropes tight so he doesn't struggle. I can see the terror in Yitzchak's eyes. I can picture Avraham take the knife in his hand, and raise it to Yitzchak's throat. I can just barely see it in my mind's eye. I try to imagine being Avraham. My mind starts to picture my

strong girl lying bound, and my whole soul recoils away, like two positive magnets. I slip sideways away from the image of my terrified child, of considering extinguishing her light forever. I can't even contemplate it.

I adore my daughter, and I know she is a miracle. At no point in my pregnancy did I think, "ok, today, I'm going to make kidneys!". I barely even know how kidneys work. G!d must have handled that. And I certainly didn't make her neshama, her soul. G!d must have handled that one too.

How can it be that the same G!d who helped make my lass could command Avraham to slaughter Yitzchak, the laughing boy that Avraham and Sarah and G!d made?

I learned from two of my teachers, Rabbi Benay Lappe, and R. Menachem Creditor, 3 ways to approach painful texts. They described these approaches differently, but they are similar.

The first approach is to ignore the hurt. To say, Avraham passed the test, and there is nothing wrong here. The world isn't burning, things are fine, and we just need to keep on as we have been. To choose unquestioning faith. Isn't that what Avraham is rewarded for here? Unquestioning faith? There are those of our commentators who say so, certainly. I love my daughter, and I think Avraham loved

Yitzchak, too much to take this path. I refuse. I won't turn away from the pain of this text, the pain of the world.

The second approach is to leave. Whether that is leave the tradition entirely, leave the sacred stories, and maybe even reject G'd. Or leave the painful bits out.

Remove the things you disagree with from the prayerbook. Excise the painful texts and gloss over them. Or perhaps, it's to say, there is no connection between the G'd of love I experience, and the G'd of the Torah, who commands Avraham to offer up his son. Plenty of Jews have taken this path too.

I love Torah too much to take this path. Last shabbos, I had an aliyah, and I wept, to see the words of Torah in the sefer torah for the first time since March 2019. I believe that our tradition is a sacred tradition. I believe these are sacred texts, and there is value and holiness in them.

But... Avraham, take your beloved son, and sacrifice him. What do we DO with that?

The remaining path is what R. Menachem Creditor described as gripping the etz chaim white knuckled and refusing to let go. It's standing up for Leviticus 18:22, and saying "I will not look away from this sacred text, and I will not look away from the harm this verse causes us queer Jews, but especially gay men".

Rabbi Benay Lappe says Option Three is going back to the original spiritual questions, and understanding and retelling our sacred stories in ways that are coherent with what your moral intuition knows. It's holding tight to Torah, even the parts that hurt, and to one's soul, that says, "No! My G!d is not like that".

We are Am Yisrael, the people who wrestle with G!d. When we are uncomfortable, we must keep asking questions. Even, and especially, when they are unanswerable. We question the text. We question the world. How does this make sense? How could this happen? How do we get through? What does it mean? How do we help? We reach out and we grab hold of the Torah, with aching white knuckles if we need, we reach out, and we metaphorically grab hold of G!d, we take hold of our conscience, our morals, our soul. We refuse to let go of any of them. We keep wrestling, keep questioning, keep retelling. Not until we get answers, because these are often unanswerable questions. No, we wrestle our whole lives, because that's what Jews do. The wrestling, and how it changes us, is the point.