We believe that in times of great strife, words of Torah can provide stability and comfort in our lives. We know that you join us in praying for the safety of our soldiers and citizens, and that together we mourn the terrible losses already suffered.

We stand together for a strong and secure Israel.

Reading the Akedah

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Parashah

This year, I need Abraham to have known it was a test and to have tested God right back. This year, I need Isaac to have agreed to it. I need the Akedah to be the conclusion of our beginning, telling the story of child and parent working together to overcome the unthinkable. Perhaps they trusted that God would provide the ram. Perhaps Sarah had shown up after all, bringing everything they had forgotten at home - Abraham's sunglasses, Isaac's water bottle, and a ram to sacrifice in place of her son. And I need this model to continue through the generations - with Rebecca and Isaac conspiring to give each of their sons exactly what they need, and Jacob and Leah believing in the ability of all of Jacob's children to make good choices.

Of course, it is a lot easier to imagine Sarah bringing sunglasses than to find evidence of her sunglass-bringing in the text of the Torah. The best we can do is notice where there are peculiarities in the text - words that seem extraneous, shifts in perspective, gaps in the narrative. We notice things that need to be interpreted, things we need to interpret. The text of the Torah cries out to us to be read and we respond by reading it. We immerse ourselves in the world of the Torah, a text written to make sense of the chaos of the world. When we read the Akedah, we can enter into it, make meaning, and then step away. We can choose what to notice, how to read the story in a way that makes the world make sense for us now.

I need Isaac to have agreed to Abraham's plan. I need Abraham to tell Isaac, to enlist him in his belief that God will provide an answer. The gap to fill, the details to notice, appears in the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac on their journey to the mountain. Translated literally we read:

Abraham took the wood for burnt offering and he put it on Isaac, his son. He took in his hand the fire and the knife. And the two of them went as one. And Isaac said to Abraham, his father, he said, “Dad.” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here is the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for burnt offering?”
What we are told Abraham does and what Isaac notices Abraham doing are different. Abraham takes the wood for burnt offering and puts it on Isaac, as if he binds Isaac to wood as a sacrifice long before they even approach the place where the sacrifice is to happen. We are told that Abraham carries the fire and the knife. Looking through Isaac’s eyes, we see only the fire and the wood. He leaves out the knife. And he replaces himself with a question, a burning hope for a lamb in place of himself. We feel his fear, his suspicion in his omission and his elision.

Abraham answers him with six cryptic words. In this parashah of seeing and appearing, in which God appears to Abraham at Mamre, God goes to see the truth of Sodom and Gomorrah, Sarah sees Ishmael’s truth regarding Isaac, and Hagar, refusing to see the death of her child, instead sees a well, the word see/appear shows up in Abraham’s speech here. He says, “God will appear for it” or perhaps “God will see to it.” At this point, we have established that God shows up when needed. Abraham confirms to Isaac that just as God has shown up for him, God will show up for Isaac too.

Abraham’s words continue: “the lamb for burnt offering my son.” Depending on where you put commas, on how you choose to translate the Hebrew into English, Abraham might be saying, “God will take care of providing a lamb for burnt offering, oh my son.” Abraham might be including Isaac in his deep belief in God. Alternatively, Abraham could be saying, “The lamb for burnt offering is my son.” In this moment, Abraham could be both telling Isaac that he is the sacrifice and sharing with Isaac his belief that God will save him. We continue, “and the two of them went as one.” Reading the Akedah this year, I know Abraham and Isaac are aware of the knife. I feel Isaac’s fear as he carries the wood. And we walk together as one.
Sitting with the Heat of Difficult Emotions
Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein
Insights from Hassidut

Rabbi Daniel Silverstein teaches Hassidut at the CY and directs Applied Jewish Spirituality (www.appliedjewishspirituality.org). In these weekly videos, he shares Hassidic insights on the parashah or calendar.

Click below to watch the video:
Unbearable Sonnet
Ilana Kurshan
White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

“When the water was gone from the skin, Hagar left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, ‘Let me now look on as the child dies.’” (Genesis 21:15-16)

I cannot bear to watch my son’s distress
So wan and wasted, withered from his thirst.
His eyes stare, blank; his lips lick desert dust.
It’s him and me. Why must God take him first?

I cannot bear to watch. I set my son
Beneath the bushes, kissing as I part
And walk away. His bowshot wouldn’t reach
Me. Yet his cries, like arrows, pierce my heart.

I cannot bear and yet I bore this boy,
He wears my master’s features on his face
My mistress shields her laughing boy and sneers,
“Your wild lad will be my son’s disgrace.”

I shall not curse that she know pain of grief.
My prayer instead: May angels bring relief.

*The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.