

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DEVOTION
Introduction to Rosh HaShanah Torah Reading
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This holiday season is filled with rich and multi-layered symbols. Each word and gesture is meant to stir us into action. The words in our *machzor* speak about devotion to God and righting our wrongs. The primal sound of the ram's horn rouses our slumbering souls to attention. The *shofar* reminds us, too, of the ram whose life was sacrificed in place of Isaac, in the passage from Genesis 22 that we are about to read. "*V'HaElohim nisa et Avraham.*" "God tested Abraham," and according to the rabbis, tested his devotion by asking that he offer up his son upon the altar. For Isaac's sake, or maybe Abraham's, an angel interceded at the last second and Isaac's life was spared for that of a ram whose horns were caught in a thicket.

How is the story of a father nearly sacrificing his son somehow a shining example of devotion to the Almighty? Surely a less controversial model of piety exists, one that leaves the listener inspired rather than disturbed.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a major voice in the early modern Orthodox community, upheld the traditional belief that this story is a shining example of righteousness and dedication. The narrative, he believed, had little to do with Isaac's suffering. Hirsch took it one step further when he offered that Isaac willingly subjected himself to the task, displaying his own faith in God and whatever plans God had for him. Rabbi Abraham Geiger, a contemporary of Rabbi Hirsch and one of the earliest Reform thinkers, held quite the opposite view. Abraham had been tested, Rabbi Geiger conceded, but he had failed the test. His devotion had become zealotry and this was dangerous. Despite our Reform prayer book's inclusion of an alternative reading, the Binding of Isaac remains at the heart of today's service in most Reform synagogues around the world.

Rather than find this story inspiring, however, I am disturbed by its images and unconvinced of its supposed message. Each time I revisit this story, I find myself more uncomfortable with each read. I feel greater sympathy towards Isaac and deeper disgust at our patriarch Abraham. What meaning can be found here? What value is there in retelling a tale that makes us so uncomfortable?

In an age when public debates are crowded out by booing and name calling, we are a society greatly in need of a lesson in living with discomfort. This story, uncomfortable though it may be, forces us to publicly acknowledge sensitive matters. In fact, nearly everything about this season is uncomfortable. Apologizing to our family and friends can be uncomfortable. Admitting our mistakes can be uncomfortable. Acknowledging and confronting our imperfections can be deeply uncomfortable. Most of us, perhaps all of us, would choose not to experience discomfort anywhere, much less here in public.

But to live in true community is to make room for what troubles us to be discussed. And if we are to address the subjects in our lives that mean the most to us—conversations about our values, our hopes and our fears—then we must learn to live in the uncomfortable spaces too. If we are to mend the brokenness in our world, if we are to build deep relationships with the people in our lives, then we must learn to live with dissonance and with discomfort. When we read the Binding of Isaac in community and we confess our wrongdoings in community, we are reminded that we are not alone. Not in our concerns and not in our imperfections. When we read this story we are made aware that we are not such fragile human beings that we need to avoid talking about what matters. In community, we can handle anything together.

Like the cries of the *shofar*, this story is meant to stir up the deepest part of our souls. Even when that means stirring up our own discomfort and disagreement. Community is not about being with people who all think and believe the same things, rather it is about finding the respect and integrity within our relationships to deal with things that trouble us and discuss issues that challenge us. When we make space to openly address these issues, we will find that we grow closer to one another, that we strengthen the bonds between us, and that we learn a new kind of devotion for God and all of Creation.