

Abraham: From Strength to Weakness to Strength

Hazak, Strength, Hazak Hazak – from strength to strength. V'nithazek – we strengthen each other. This phrase is said upon the completion of the reading of one of the books of the Torah when reading out of the scroll. You might think that this tradition is thousands of year's old, dating back to the 2nd Temple period when the reading of a public scroll first surfaces. The origins are much later than that, in fact it is first recorded at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century, when Abraham ben Nathan ha-Yarhi described the custom of France, Germany and Spain in "HaManhig." There he wrote that after anyone read from the Torah, the hazzan would say "hazak" in a loud voice. The custom continued for eastern Jews who say "hazak" or "hazak uvaruch," to the Torah reader. The western Ashkenazi custom is not to say, "hazak" but "yashar koach," which we say in this congregation. Koach is another word for strength, yashar being – "straight". Basically both say the same thing. "May what you just did give you strength."

This morning, we may need to say it to our readers because they are going to need strength. They are about to read one of the most difficult passages in all of the Torah. The *Akedah*. In synagogues all over the world this story is being read to the congregation. This story is a dark, disturbing, unbelievable if not unfathomable story about a man who agreed to murder (sacrifice) his son. Now the Midrash and commentators for thousands of years, including the clergy here, have tried to interpret this story to Abraham's benefit. Especially popular is to praise Abraham for his unwavering faith: God told him to sacrifice his son; he quickly gets his things together and goes. We praise his spiritual strength.

Abraham wasn't strong. He was weak. Spiritually fragile. We want him to be strong. We want him to be like he was at Sodom and Gomorrah. There he was a pillar of spiritual strength. He stood up to God, questioned God, challenged God, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?" And here we are chapters later, and he is prepared to kill his son because God asked him to do it. Shall not the father of our nation do right? How could Abraham have fallen so spiritually weak as to accept this request without a murmur?

If you consider his actions after Sodom and Gomorrah, you can see that it was a slow fall. He lied to a king and said Sarah was his sister to save himself, he cast Ishmael, his first born, and Hagar, the boy's mother, out of his life and protection, because Sarah didn't like them around, and now, there he was, accepting a verdict of death for his son without even asking why. Did Sodom and Gomorrah tire him out, did he feel he wasn't successful there and just gave up after that?

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century philosopher and existentialist wrote in *Fear and Trembling* about what happened to Abraham. He called Abraham's actions a teleological suspension of the ethical. In other words, according to Kirkegaard, Abraham rejected the universal ethic in place of another purpose, "Doing it for God." I think that it is safe to say that every one of us here believes that there is no excuse, except perhaps in self-

defense, for killing another human being (some here would say any living being). Imagine a murderer's excuse in court, "God told me to kill my son with a knife to his throat on that desert mountain." "Oh, God made you do it? Why didn't you say so? You are free to go." How absurd that would be. And yet, even today, there are many examples of people who display a teleological suspension of ethics. One who claims s/he kills for God – like suicide bombers, are members of this category. I'm sure that you could find your own examples.

Yes, I have to admit that Abraham is following God's orders to commit this deed. In this way, it does fall under Kierkegaard's assertion. But given Abraham's mindset at the time, was he thinking clearly? Abraham was lost. Abraham was low. Abraham was at a dark place in his life. He had no compass, no purpose. There were promises made to him, and he showed promise to accomplish so much. But he had also given up so much already, and perhaps he was losing confidence that he would ever achieve what had been promised. Consider what had already sacrificed: first his family in Haran, then his family Hagar and Ishmael. Now he would have to give up his favored son, Isaac – and perhaps he knew it would kill Sarah as well. Somehow, for him, the request to sacrifice this family fit previous patterns. When one goes down a dark road, one is convinced that the road is the right path, when it clearly is not.

Going down those roads is why we are here in synagogue. It is simply not possible to live as a human being without experiencing the wrong path. No matter how strong we are, no matter how spiritually connected we are to the universe, we err. Some roads are darker than others, but they all serve the same purpose, to take you away from your value and purpose.

So Abraham is weak, he is sinking deeper down the road to despair, to performing a deed that takes him outside the realm of the ethical. And yet, in the end, he is redeemed. Emmanuel Levinas, the 20th century philosopher believes that Kierkegaard had it wrong, that the most important part of the story is the end, when Abraham stops what he is doing when the angel calls to him. In his book "A propos Kierkegaard Vivant," Levinas writes, "that Abraham obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is essential."

That moment, when the second voice of the angel is heard, is when Abraham's spirituality moves from weak to strong. As Rabbi Bassin mentioned in her sermon on erev rosh Hashanah, Levinas is concerned with relationships with "the other." In this case, Levinas hints at the idea that Abraham looked into Isaac's face, and at that moment, he saw God in Isaac's face. He hears the angel call out, "Abraham," twice. Between the first and second calls of his name, his head clears, and he responds, "hineyni."

The phrase occurs 8 times in the Torah, and three of them are in this story. "Hineyni." A strong statement of presence, "I am here." When God asks him to sacrifice Isaac, he answers "Hineyni." The second time, when Isaac breaks three days of silent walking and asks where the sacrifice is, Abraham responds "Hineyni," but then answers very cryptically. Those first two times do not come from a place of strength. It is only here,

after 3 weeks of consideration, binding Isaac, picking up the knife, looking into Isaac's face, he finally realizes the ethical veracity of the moment, he gains his strength of spirit, and is able to answer the angel with a resounding, "Hineyni," "Here I am."

Perhaps God's test was intended to wake Abraham from his spiritual slumber. Perhaps God knew that three days to think about this irrational request would give him the strength he needed to say "no." Claire Katz of Penn State puts it this way: "One the one hand, God's true desires are hidden. And on the other hand, we must be free to show that we are strong by being able to disobey God's commands."

Can that also be true regarding the times when we experience the dark roads upon which we tread. We are not commanded by God to go there, but we do so for a variety of reasons. Maybe it's for money, or fear, or friendship, or to get ahead, there could be many reasons why we would suspend our ethics. But we need perspective, to be able to recognize that what we are doing is wrong. That perspective can be found during these Holy Days. But it could also be a look into someone's face, a glimpse of the pain we are causing another, the realization that our moral compass has gone adrift, it can cause us to cease the suspension of the ethical and to do what is right, even if it at the last minute. We are free to show that we are spiritually strong by being able to disobey our own actions and desires.

We are not so different than Abraham. There have been times, I'm sure, when each of us has shown incredible spiritual strength. There have also been times when we have been spiritually weak, even feeling like we will never crawl out of the darkness. We must know that the universe is ready for us to gain our strength at any time, even at the last minute, after we have experienced and felt the horror of our actions, the pain we have caused others and ourselves. There is hope that, after a fall, we will be able to get up and live our lives to the fullest potential. The lesson is about moving on, about realizing that life will continue no matter what has happened.

That is not to say that everything is going to be perfect upon regaining our spiritual strength. The damage done during the dark times have a lasting effect. Abraham never sees Hagar or Ishmael again. He doesn't speak to Isaac or Sarah again in the biblical text. His weakness, indeed, caused relationships to be shattered, and his new spiritually strengthened life began again without those closest to him. But Abraham does become the pillar of our ancestry, and his legacy is felt even today. His life continued, with the lessons he took from the darkest and weakest time in his life.

Rabbi David Hartman writes: The *akedah* is thus the will to go on in the midst of the unintelligible. It is the deep impulse that declares: "I am not going to give up in the face of tragedy and suffering. Rather I continue to maintain an open belief in the possibilities of life."

Just as the reader of Torah gains strength from the experience of reading, just as each of us gains strength from our High Holy Day work, Abraham learned to live with what he had done, and gained strength from it for the future.