

When I first felt the call to professional ministry, my older son was in high school and my younger son was in middle school. I had done research and talked to my minister but all the divinity schools in the area were extremely conservative and not appropriate for a Unitarian Universalist minister. After months of searching, I realized that if I were to pursue my call to ministry, I would have to either move my family away from Central Florida including my sons from their school and friends, or I would have to travel away from my family.

Was this some sort of test I was being given? I kept thinking, what kind of universe would ask me to make such a choice. And when I thought that, my mind immediately went to the story of Abraham and Isaac in the book of Genesis. So recognizing our Second Source which Unitarian Universalism draws from, which is “the Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life,” I want to speak today about the Jewish High Holy Days and how this story that it is integral part to the holiday held the clue for my seminary dilemma. So first a little background,

Yesterday was the end of a 10 period known as the Jewish High Holy Days, which starts with The Jewish New Year Rosh Hashanah, and ending with the Day of Atonement Yom Kippur. They are known as the Days of Awe. In very general terms, the Days of Awe are a time for reflection. Reflection of the year just past and the year to come. Celebration of creation, and life and a time to ask forgiveness for the promises we had broken, and to offer forgiveness to others for their broken promises to us.

Having grown up in the Jewish Religion, this time of year holds a particular reverence for me. It is very interesting to think about how we remember things as they actually were versus how we experienced them when they originally happened, and how their meaning changes over time. When I was young, there was of course the positive aspect that school was closed for the first two days of Rosh Hashanah and then for Yom Kippur, if they fell on a weekday. However that this was balanced by the fact that we had to spend the entire three days in the synagogue. As well Yom Kippur requires a full 24 hours of fasting. My memories of this go back to my earliest childhood.

I can't tell you one sermon I remember from that time, but my one searing memory was just the act of sitting through services throughout the required three days. Just the act of doing so, just the expectation of all those around me of the attitude of reverence made me understand the experience was meant to be important. I think that in and of itself is a good lesson. That which we spend more time on should be more important to us. And that which is important to us should we should spend more time on and it should take on an air of reverence.

And then they put on the ultimate behavioral scare tactic to a young child by telling me that God would determine who lived and died in the next year by the time the holiday was over, so I had better behave during service. After a few years, I realized that those who misbehaved didn't die, so I saw the flaw in this theory. Not that I misbehaved after that, but my doubts were raised. So be careful what we tell our children!!

As I became a teen, having been raised to question things I did not understand, one of the questions I had was why during Rosh Hashanah did we always tell the Genesis story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. This story is called the Akedah which means binding. In the case of this story, it meant the binding of Isaac to offer him up as a sacrifice.... What was the point of this story and what did it have to do with the New Year Holiday. Now my parents being rational people understood this story to mean that the wise men at the time this was written wanted to let the people know that they did not have to literally make sacrifices of their children which was a common practice in many middle eastern cultures of that time. This kept me quiet for a few years but didn't answer why we keep repeating the story year after year.

As I entered my early twenties, I became infatuated with existentialism, which in very broad terms is focus of philosophical thinking on the conditions of human existence. This brought me face to face with the writings of Soren Kierkegaard. Now I generally liked Kierkegaard in that in his commitment to a religious life, he vehemently believed in a non dogmatic view of religion. He viewed living an ethical life to be conscious rational choice with equal commitment. But the problem comes up as to what happens when the rational ethical choice and the religious choice do not agree

with each other. His passionate defense of Christianity required for him to take a leap of faith that transcended the rational. In his book *Fear and Trembling* using the example of story of the Akedah he raises the question “Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?” and argues for its existence.

The view of the Akedah at that point for me was a basic question as to whether humans should have complete faith in something greater than ourselves and our own experiences, to a point that we would do something unethical. By looking at Abraham’s actions in this vein, we can see that such a view has led many people to do unspeakable things in the name of religion and thus I rejected this line of existential thinking.

This story does push the envelope regarding the topic of faith, but as I have found with most of my studies the biblical writings leave so much open for interpretation. Maybe that point, in and of itself, is part of the answer. That we must not take everything in life at face value, but we must search deeply between the lines for answers, as they are not always so obvious. So when I entered seminary I looked between the lines of this story very deeply, and what I found fascinated me and gave new meaning to this story that I think has meaning for all Unitarian Universalists

The first basic question that troubled me is what kind of God would create such a test? Did God question Abraham’s commitment in this story? In the Bible Stories what had God asked of Abraham initially? In Genesis 12 he asked very little. “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you”. He basically asked Abraham to follow his advice and he would give him great blessings and later on promised him land. In Chapter 15 there are more specific promises with no other stipulations.

In Chapter 17 there is another covenant between God and Abraham where in exchange for God’s blessings, now Abraham and his descendents had to “Walk in My ways and be blameless” and partake in the act of circumcision. (which was particularly difficult for adult convertees) And then in Chapter 22, he asks for the sacrifice of Abraham’s son. As the bible goes on, as each task is completed, there are more and more requirements added to maintain this blessing. Almost like a video game, once we reach a certain level, we are ready for higher, more difficult levels. One of the messages of The Akedah is that we as human beings need to be constantly challenged to help us evolve to a new higher level of humanity

Another thought provoking aspect of the story is that there is a strong argument that passage had been edited to add in the fact that the angel had prevented Abraham from killing Isaac. If that is true, it changes the whole nature and meaning of the story. Interestingly, and I was shocked by the high number Jewish Biblical Commentaries that said this was an addition and that Abraham actually did kill Isaac. This version of the story is supported by the fact that Isaac doesn’t return down the mountain with Abraham, and Isaac has a minimal role in the rest of the Bible stories. Other Commentaries conjecture that God brought Isaac back to life after Abraham killed him. I would imagine most of these commentaries were written as a way to combat and replace the growing Christian narrative of Jesus’ Resurrection.

But imagine if the opposite is true. Imagine if the part about the angel stopping Abraham was a later addition and Isaac lives. Then the story would then flow as if Abraham himself made the choice not to kill Isaac, and sacrificed the ram he finds in the thicket instead, based on his own free will defying his God and his society’s customs. The message here is that we have free will and due to that we have to make hard choices. Just because we receive an order to do something from an authority, does not mean we have to follow it blindly.

We have an intuitive knowledge of good and evil. We have the ability to choose one over the other, and we have to make those choices wisely with an open mind and an open heart. We are often in life faced with situations where we may be asked to do something unethical. Sometimes it is not so blatant, as in the Enron sort of way, but it is small. We rationalize the net utilitarian benefits to ourselves. We say to ourselves, how can anyone be pure in this world today. And we cant, but it’s a slippery slope...and we must be careful how far we are willing to slide...how far we are willing to compromise....

and then one day we reach that point where we say....enough...we have accepted one too many compromises....and we will stand no more compromises...and we will stand for what we believe in.... If one can stand up to a God, certainly one can stand up to a human being and defy an unethical order. I think biblical scholar Omri Boehm summarizes this well by saying "In disobeying God's manifestly illegal order, it is Abraham, the monotheistic believer, a knight of faith, who is responsible for the determination of Good and Evil, not God. He thus presents us, not with the "suspension of the ethical", but with a preference for it."

This concept is where I found my answer. We must continually strive to achieve an ethical life even if it sometimes requires us to differ from the larger society. This is not an easy thing to do. And in thinking about this, I realized that the theme of reflecting on our choices is the perfect story for a New Years story. This story reiterates the theme of new beginnings throughout the book of Genesis. First with Creation, then Adam and Eve, and Noah. Abraham started anew when he left his family. After this story in the Bible, there is not another story of Abraham talking to God.

Also very telling is that in the original Hebrew, the word used for God at the beginning of the story is different than the word used to describe God at the end of the story. Abraham started anew again with a new conception of what God is based on his experiences in the world as his knowledge of the universe increased. So this story asks us each year to consider what is our conception of God as our knowledge of the universe continues to unfold.

Now some of you may have noticed, and a couple of you have asked me, what are these bracelets that I wear on my left arm. These are friendship bracelets my younger son made for me over the years. The first one he gave me when I traveled on an important business trip, the second one when I went to visit the UUA during the credentialing process, the third one when I left to to serve my internship in Tampa and this last one when I came to serve you here in the Quad Cities. And each time he said roughly the same thing. When you are away from us, just look at these bracelets and know that we are here pulling for you and that we love you. And each time he bound them tight and knotted them, so tight that I cannot take them off without breaking them. This is the kind of binding I think of when I think of the story of Abraham and Isaac

The binding of two people together, the binding of a community of people together, the type of binding that doesn't allow for the suspension of the ethical for there to be an authentic relationship. A binding where the ethical is held up as its highest ideal, A binding where the ethical is identified in community and rewarded by the community and the universe. It may not always work out that way, but it is how I live my life, it is how we should all live our lives together and by doing so we will reward each other, and we reward the universe through the results of our acts of love and compassion.

And in such a way, the universe responded to me. When I had almost given up all hope of attending seminary, when I had almost given up hope that I would be able to pursue my life's passion, when I refused to sacrifice my highest ideals, then a liberal ecumenical seminary opened a campus in Orlando, and it became my ram in the thicket. Even more bizarre, six years later a month after I graduated seminary the school was sold and the Orlando campus was closed. It was as if the universe created what I needed for the time I needed it.

Of course thinking that might require me to suspend my idea of what is rational or else maybe realize I don't understand exactly how the universe works, but that was my experience. So I encourage you to trust your intuition of the good and be committed to an ethical way of life in community and have faith that the universe and all its inhabitants will respond in kind.

Happy New Year, La Shana Tova – May it be so