

Read: Gen. 22:1-3.

Today's Torah message begins with God's commanding voice ordering Abraham to take his only, beloved, son and offer him up to God on top of a distant mountain. Abraham wakes up early the next morning and sets out on the journey. The readings ends with God apparently changing God's mind and decided that the whole thing was a test of Abraham's loyalty.

The Haftarah speaks of Israel escaping from underneath the knife, an allusion to Isaac escaping his sacrificial fate, but sidesteps the difficult theological questions raised by the story of the Binding of Isaac ("Why did God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son?" "Why didn't Abraham argue?" "Why did Isaac agree to this? Why didn't he run away?"). Instead, it focuses on the beautiful, loving, relationship between God and Israel, and the promise of God's redemption.

As Jews, when we read the Bible, we're reading stories about our ancestors and ourselves, stories which describe what our relationship with God is supposed to be. We're reading stories which are designed to help us build a framework for understanding and appreciating our world. God is the architect, the builder, and the framework holding this world view together. The Torah's instructions are meant to instill in us love and loyalty to God for giving us the gift of our lives and a bountiful world to sustain us.

But then we come to our Torah reading. In what way does this story make us love God? In what way does it instill in us loyalty to our traditions? Rather, the story describe a complicated world of difficult decisions and moral ambiguity. We are both Abraham and Isaac in this story. We are the person who obeys and we are the person who suffers the consequences of obedience. But we are also the person who is supposed to figure out what God demands of us even though God's commanding voice is fluid and changes from the beginning of the story to the end. So the story actually raises the most difficult of questions: How do we know what is right? How do we devote our lives to something that might change tomorrow?

The Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai can help us. About 70 years ago, he wrote:

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| <p>The Place Where We Are Right</p> <p>From the place where we are right Flowers will never grow In the spring. The place where we are right Is hard and trampled Like a yard. But doubts and loves Dig up the world Like a mole, a plow. And a whisper will be heard in the place Where the ruined House once stood.</p> | <p>הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּו אָנו צוֹדְקִים מִן הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּו אָנו צוֹדְקִים לֹא יִצְמַחוּ לְעוֹלָם פְּרָחִים בְּאֲבִיב הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּו אָנו צוֹדְקִים הוּא רָמוּס וְקָשָׁה כְּמוֹ חֲצָר אֲבָל סִפְקוֹת וְאַהֲבוֹת עוֹשִׂים אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתַחוּם כְּמוֹ חֲפְרָפֶרֶת, כְּמוֹ חֲרִישׁ וְלִחְיִשָּׁה תִשְׁמַע בַּמָּקוֹם שֶׁבּו הָיָה הַבַּיִת אֲשֶׁר נִחְרַב</p> |
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Our liturgy today speaks of the still, small, voice, the *Kol d'mama daka*. God's voice is not a booming, commanding voice - it is a humble, small voice coming from the midst of a broken world, from the ruins of a Temple, representing certainty and power, once stood tall. God's voice

is not the voice coming from the place where we are right – it is the voice coming from questions, doubt, willingness to admit that we might be wrong.

And this is the core message of our reading this morning. We are supposed to understand God's commanding voice through a filter of humility and uncertainty. We change, the world changes, and God changes. The constant is that we stand as Abraham, journeying throughout our lives to understand our role in the world and evolving relationship with God; and we stand as Isaac, vulnerable, but trusting in God's love and redemption in the end. Our Torah reading reminds us to be both Abraham and Isaac, trusting that we're on the right path, even as the world around us is fraught with danger. Our Torah invites us to be Abraham, finding our way to a safe place, but not knowing when we'll get there. And our Torah invites us to be Isaac, going up the mountain with his father but coming down alone and finding his place in the world in isolation. And we know that the story ends well, Abraham and Isaac eventually reunite and their descendants, 120 generations later, are still telling their story.

The angel of Adonai called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, Adonai declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command." [Genesis 22:15 - 18]