

Every year I find it equal parts amazing and heartbreaking that Abraham is willing to give up his most precious son to God without a hint of an argument. Isaac is old enough to go on a three day hike with his father. Most Jewish traditions understand that he is a mature adult and willingly accepts the ordeal of sacrifice to God. And Sarah - what is she to think when Abraham goes off to worship God with the materials for a sacrifice but no animal? What did she know, when did she know it, and to what extent was she complicit in this most challenging presentation of what it means to be a person of faith?

The Akedah presents the notion, in this shocking, horrible way, that in order to serve God fully, we have to be ready to give up that which is most precious to us. Of course, Torah abhors child sacrifice, which is precisely why the story is so shocking. Of course, in the end, an animal is substituted for Isaac, which raises a different set of questions for many modern Jews, who find the notion of killing animals as a religious ritual to draw us close to God distasteful. We prefer to think of sacrifice in a less violent way, as giving money; we prefer to think of prayer as the way to draw us close to God. But I think we've lost something in the movement away from the bloody, visceral killing of an animal sacrifice. We've lost the notion that for a sacrifice to mean something, it has to hurt. A sacrifice is supposed to be a hard choice. We should feel it in our kishkes. Writing a check, if it is a large enough portion of our income, can hurt. But I have a feeling that for most people, what they give in charitable contributions doesn't replicate the feeling of a sacrifice. I want to move away from the notion of giving money as sacrifice. I'm not here today simply to do a pitch for more funds or for you to give until it hurts. I want to explore the notion of sacrifice more broadly.

I want to explore the question, "What do you sacrifice for being Jewish?"

In 1961, Steven J. Hill won rave reviews on Broadway starring as Sigmund Freud in *A Far Country*. In one dramatic scene, a patient screamed at him, "You are a Jew!" That scene provoked him to explore his Judaism, observing a kosher diet and keeping Shabbat. This effectively ended his stage career and put a damper on his movie career. He was, however, offered the lead in a pilot called *Briggs' Squad*, renamed *IMF* and then *Mission: Impossible*.

While Shabbat may not have been the only issue that cost him the lead role in favor of Peter Graves, the fact that he'd walk off set to get to minyan on time or to get home before Shabbat began was a major factor. He left acting for 10 years, working in real estate and writing. Eventually he did return to acting and have a great career, ultimately returning as Adam Schiff on *Law and Order*. But what did he leave on the table because he made the hard choice, to sacrifice opportunities in favor of being faithful to Shabbat?

I want to invite you think about the question, What do you sacrifice for being Jewish?

Perhaps you have experienced setbacks, anti-semitism, difficulties, for being Jewish in the workplace. Perhaps you have had to give up opportunities at school, in your career, or in secular or civic organizations to which you devote your time.

Many of you here today are giving up a day's work, giving up a vacation day or maybe giving up a certain amount of your salary. But let's make the question more difficult -- If you knew that you were giving up a chance for advancement because you were going to miss an important conference or business trip, would you still be here today? What Jewish practices, holidays or other rituals, or beliefs, do you hold most dear, and what are you willing to sacrifice in order to support those most closely held beliefs?

Can you imagine what it takes for someone who has survived a Nazi concentration camp to come to Grand Rapids, make himself into a successful real estate developer, and make it known to all of his contractors and suppliers that he is dedicating the better part of a year of his life to build a synagogue? Would you have blamed him if he had instead decided to keep a low profile and hide his Jewishness, rather than opening himself up to the potential setbacks and difficulties of coming out as a Jew? Of course, it's not that simple. Henry Pestka, who built this synagogue, knew that back in Nazi Germany and Poland, the Jews who tried to assimilate were sent to the concentration camp along with those who remained visibly Jewish. And he knew that it was his responsibility to build Jewish institutions that he could be proud of, in a world which earlier had stood by while Hitler put the torch to the infrastructure of European Jewish.

Can you imagine what it takes for an individual or a family, knowing the antipathy towards Jews and Israel that exists in some parts of the world, to voluntarily join their fate to that of the Jewish people, following God's Torah?

Can you imagine the courage it take to visit the land of Israel and stand at the center of a country that is the target of missiles from Iran, Lebanon and Gaza? The courage of the parents who send their children to Israel to visit or even make aliyah?

These are examples of people who are willing to make sacrifice because they believe in something, in building synagogues, in living Judaism, in building the state of Israel. Now ask yourself ... what am I doing to live out my faith as a Jew? In what way am I making a sacrifice, putting my life or my career on the line because I am Jewish and proud of it?

I want you to consider how important your fundamental core identity as a Jew is and what life-altering decisions you are willing to make because of it. As I look around the room, I see people who have literally changed their family tree because of their core Jewish convictions. I see people who have raised children with the single-minded focus of producing Jewish grandchildren, and succeeded. I see people who have devoted their lives to making sure that Shabbat and Festivals are celebrated in a building called Congregation Ahavas Israel the same way as they were during the days of their parents and grandparents. I am in awe of the sacrifices that they have made for this community.

What sacrifice do you make because you live your life as a Jew? Anything important enough is not lived only when it is convenient; it takes precedence even when it is inconvenient, even when you'd rather be doing something else. That's what it means to make a sacrifice. That's what Abraham was willing to do. That's the gift he gave to God, and in the end it doesn't matter that he didn't sacrifice his son. He journeyed three days carrying the fire and the wood and the knife, thinking that's what God wanted him to do. He lived with that burden for three days. Can you imagine going to sleep every night wondering if tomorrow would be the day that God would call upon you to make the offering? That's the kind of devotion I'm talking about.

Louis Brandeis was a student at Harvard Law School at a time when there were explicit limits on what Jews could hope to achieve. Quotas were in effect and many law offices were completely closed to Jewish attorneys. When Brandeis was in school, his colleagues would say, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. If you weren't a Jew, you could end up on the Supreme Court. Why don't you convert? Then all of your problems would be solved." Brandeis did not respond to such comments, but on the occasion of his official introduction to an exclusive honor society at the law school, he took the podium and announced, "I am sorry I was born a Jew." His words

were greeted with enthusiastic applause. But when the noise died down he continued. "I'm sorry I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

The initial response of stunned silence slowly gave way to awed applause. Ultimately, his anti-Semitic peers rose and gave him a standing ovation. In 1916, Louis Brandeis became the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

But for every Louis Brandeis whose brilliance allowed him to overcome the handicap of being Jewish, how many more thousands and tens of thousands of people were there like my grandfather Solomon Krishef who worked for Sunkist in Minneapolis, living every day in fear of losing his job because he was Jewish. When he didn't show up for work because he was sitting in shul on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, he was afraid he would lose his job.

So my friends, we all have to make a choice; the choice to be chosen, the choice to make sacrifices that may or may not lead to obvious long term gains. I think God my grandfathers made the choices they did so that my parents could make the choices and sacrifices they did so that I can live the Jewish life that I live today.

Today, as am asking you to imagine yourself as Abraham, willingly sacrificing something dear to you. Today, I am asking you to imagine yourself as Isaac, willingly putting yourself on the line for something that your God demands of you. Today, I am asking you to imagine yourself as Sarah, putting your family on the line because that's what your faith demands. If you have Jewish ancestors, I am asking you to remember what real sacrifices they made so that you have the privilege of sitting in these comfortable seats today. Each of you is part of a culture, a tradition, a religious civilization, that has flourished for 3,500 years because it matters deeply to every generation. I am asking you to remind yourself how and why it matters to you - it might be the beauty of the religious rituals, it might be the power of the ethical system, it might be the nature of God's voice in the ancient texts, it might be the rhythms of the calendar year. I'm asking you to follow in the footsteps of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac and make a sacrifice, commit to some consistent practice that supports the part of your Jewish identity that is most dear to you. I'll give you suggestions:

- Commit to weekly minyan
- Put on tefillin (at home or at the synagogue)
- say kiddush every Friday night
- Light candles every Friday night
- Engage in a serious study of Jewish text of at least an hour a week
- Be here in shul on Shabbat mornings

I'm not suggesting things which are necessarily difficult, but things which demand daily or weekly attention. The Biblical model of sacrifice was based on a regular, daily offerings each morning and afternoon. In general, what I am suggesting are things which ask for a regular, ongoing sacrifice of time.

At the end of the story of the Akedah, two things happen. First, Abraham makes a sacrifice and offers his gratitude to God saying, "On this mountain of Adonai, in this place of God, there is vision." He recognized that at the point at which heaven and earth meeting, human and Divine touch, when we offer something significant of ourselves to God, our reward is expanded vision, seeing the world in broader, more expansive terms. We see connections where previously we might have seen separation. We see wholeness, where previously, we saw fragments. Second, Abraham is blessed by God. It happens that he does not reap the benefits of the blessings in his

lifetime. The fact that we, his descendants, still gather together and read the ancient story of an Abraham, a Sarah, and an Isaac, is proof enough that those blessings are real. If the Torah we have inherited from the children of Israel is powerful enough to have survived these many centuries, then it is worth my making a sacrifice to ensure that it continues for another generation.

May the sacrifices we make be worthy of the sacrifices of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, may our offerings be worthy of those offered by so many of our ancestors in the name of Israel, and may the Torah we preserve and pass along be as powerful as that which we received from the generations before us.