

## Living in Pain: With a Knife in the Heart

Today, as we conclude a horrifying week, we read a biblical tale of terror. It's known as the binding of Isaac:

“There came a time when God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham!,'” God said, and Abraham answered: '*Hineni*, Here I am.' God said: 'Take your son, your precious one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the hills that I will show you.’ Early next morning, Abraham did just that. He saddled his donkey, took his two servants, along with his son Isaac, and set out for the place as God had told him.

On the third day, Abraham looked up, saw the place from afar, and said to his servants: ‘Stay here with the donkey while the boy and I go up to serve God.’ (“the boy and I”... Abraham couldn't even mention Isaac's name!) He then took the wood for the sacrifice, and laid it on Isaac, **his son**. (the biblical author now inserts the name and the relationship, to show how awful this is – it's Isaac, his son!) “Abraham carried the fire stone and the knife; and the two walked on together.”

Then Isaac broke the silence, with what I consider to be the most important line in the entire text. Isaac asks a question that defines terror, when he says, “Father! I see the fire stone and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Meaning, “What's happening here? Am I next?!” **That is to live in terror.**

And Abraham replies: 'God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'  
And they came to the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar, and

carefully stacked the wood. He tied up his son, **Isaac**, laid him down, and reached for the knife to slay his son.

“Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?!”

But the knife kept descending towards him, the knife – I imagine a little four inch knife, a knife that could fit into a modern day shaving kit, quickly piercing the air, until an angel of the Lord called to him and said: 'Abraham, Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy, nor do the least thing to him...for now I know you stand in awe of God... And Abraham looked up, and his eye fell upon a ram.”

**There is the ram for the burnt offering.** And he offered it in place of his son.

This year, the Binding of Isaac sends chills down my spine. Many will read it proudly and say, “you see, in Judaism, God doesn’t want human sacrifice. Life is sacred and should never be destroyed.” But today, I read the tale in terror...Like the rabbi who read it and broke down crying. A small child came up to him and said, “Rabbi, Rabbi, why are you crying? You know that Isaac wasn’t killed. Angels came, they saved the day. Rabbi, angels don’t come late.” And the Rabbi replied, “I know my son, angels don’t come late. But people do.”

This week, everything seemed to come too late. And so, we questioned, “How could this happen?” “Father, Lord, God?...Where is the **ram** for the burnt offering? Let it not be us!” But thousands were killed.

Chaim Gouri, an Israeli poet, wrote of the *Akeda* years ago. I share it with you today. It resonates as though it were written yesterday. It’s called, “*Yerushah*,” “Heritage,” and it reads:

The ram came last of all.

And Abraham did not know that it came to answer the boy's question – first of his strength when his day was on the wane.

The old man raised his head.

Seeing that it was no dream and that the angel stood there – the knife slipped from his hand..."

It continues, "Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed. He lived for many years, saw what pleasure had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring.

They are born with a knife in their hearts.

You see, Isaac didn't get away, unharmed. The knife slipped! It slipped from Abraham's hand and entered Isaac's heart and every person after him. And last Tuesday, September 11, we felt it. That knife, that four inch knife, pierced our heart and stayed there.

"Rabbi, a plane just hit the World Trade Center. You better come watch."

"Rabbi, a second plane; it's horrible; it just hit the other tower."

"Rabbi, it's the Pentagon, and I hear there's another plane out there. This is war, Rabbi."

The news spread as fast as the knife sliced through the air. All US Airports: closed. Amtrak, Boston to Washington corridor: closed. All museums and monuments in Washington, D.C.: closed. Boston Financial District: closed. Mt. Rushmore: closed. The Halls of Congress: closed. The Mall of America: closed. Disney World: closed. The Liberty bell: closed. America, as we knew it: closed.

How do we live in a time of terror, with a knife lodged deep in our hearts? How do we go on, not knowing when the next bomb will blast? Well, today, I do not want to look at Islamic fundamentalism or Israel, Afghanistan or alliances. I want to look at Isaac. He's the first person I know who had a knife in his heart. If you look at the Torah, we're never

told where Isaac goes after the Binding. He suddenly appears a few chapters later, with no mention of his post-trauma whereabouts. The rabbis filled in the missing pieces in the midrash, when they said in typical rabbinic fashion, where did Isaac go following the *akeda*? Where else? the yeshiva... to think, reflect, and try to learn of God and of life, and how to live with a knife permanently stuck in the heart. And even though Isaac's wounded, he studies, and even though he studies, he's wounded. "How can I ever trust and love and work and live again?"

Tuesday, the calls came in with the very same questions .

"Rabbi, I am petrified. I'm taking my child from school?"

"Rabbi, I'm not going back to work, especially in that hi-rise building."

"Rabbi, I'm never flying again."

I'm sure Isaac felt the same way; he had a knife in his heart. But eventually, Isaac's told to get on with life, take a wife and go on living. But he wasn't ready. "Find him a wife," his servants are told, "find him the most "beautiful", most wonderful maiden in the entire land." And according to the Torah, they did. Her name was Rebecca. She was "beautiful," the Torah says, a rare adjective in the holy text. And the two of them are brought together. Rebecca looks up... and sees Isaac. Isaac looks up... and he sees camels. It just wasn't time. There was a knife in his heart.

Recently, a local woman passed away. In 1942, she survived the Coconut Grove fire in Boston. For the last 59 years, she never entered a public building. That's no way to live.

And so Isaac's servants said, you got to live. Look at her, and "all the things that she has done." [24:66] She's beautiful, she's generous, she's loving. Finally, Isaac brought her

into his tent, took her as his wife, and as the Torah says, “loved her.” Finally, he was able to live again.

The call came in at around 1 o’clock. “Rabbi, phone call, line 3.”

“Thanks, I’ll get it in my office. Hello?”

“O my God. Yes, I’ll certainly speak with her. Just don’t leave her alone. Please don’t leave her alone.”

“Hello. I am so sorry to hear of your loss. I am so sorry.”

“How do you tell your five year old?”

[pause] “I want you to tell him the truth. That his daddy’s not coming home, he died. But I want you to make sure that you tell him that **he’s** going to be safe, and his mommy is too. I want you to tell him that... sometimes, people do horrible, terrible things, but the world is still a good place, and he’s going to be OK. And don’t leave him alone.”

It’s times like these, when we not only need to learn how to love again, but we need to affirm that the world’s still a good place, and we’re going to be OK.

“But, Rabbi, how can I bring a child into this world? It’s too dangerous.” But Isaac, only a few verses after the Akeda, makes the greatest statement of faith all, when he says, “God, grant me a child,” Life is worth living.

Isaac’s approach to life is the exact opposite of the terrorist’s approach. The terrorist believes that life is valueless. You can destroy everything, including yourself. In Judaism, we’re told to choose life. *Uvcharta b’chaim*, we read on Yom Kippur.

“Choose life” because the world is still good, despite the knife that rests in our hearts.

Recently, Thomas Friedman of the NY Times, remarked to an Israeli official what

an amazing technological feat it was for the terrorists to hijack the planes and then fly them directly into the most vulnerable spot in each building. Friedman writes, but “the Israeli pooh-pooed me. ‘It’s not that difficult to learn how to fly a plane once it’s up in the air,’ he said, ‘And remember, **they never had to learn how to land.**’ Friedman concludes, the Israeli was right. “They only had to destroy. We, by contrast, have to fight in a way that is effective without destroying the very open society we are trying to protect. We have to fight hard *and* land safely.”<sup>1</sup> We have to choose life....and continue to affirm that the world is still good.... And that people are too.

There was once a teacher who asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. She then told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates... and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish the assignment and, as the students left the room, each one handed in the papers. That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday, she gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" she heard whispered. "I never knew that I meant anything to anyone!" "I didn't know others liked me so much." No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. She never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another.

That group of students moved on. Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam and his teacher attended the funeral. She had never seen a serviceman in a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Friedman, Thursday, September 13, 2001, “World War III” p. A27.

military coffin before. He looked so handsome, so mature. The church was packed with his friends. One by one, those who loved him took a last walk by the coffin. The teacher was the last one to bless the coffin. As she stood there, one of the soldiers, who acted as pallbearer, came up to her. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" She nodded: "Yes."

"Mark, talked about you a lot." After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates went out to lunch. Mark's mother and father were there too, obviously waiting to speak with his teacher. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." And opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notepaper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew, without looking, that the papers were the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it." All of Mark's former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Then Vickie, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," she said, "I think we all saved our lists." That's when the teacher finally sat down and cried. She cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again. She cried for the times when we don't tell people how good they are.

And so Isaac called his sons together. And he said, I want to speak with you, I want to tell you how much you mean to me. I want to bless you. And Isaac, with a knife in his heart, offered blessing. The world's still good and you are too. Go forth, my sons, go forth.

This has been a difficult week, but we are a resolute people. We have known pain and heartache, but we have also known how to care and love and live again. Following the Kennedy Assassination, Mary McGrory said to Patrick Moynihan, "Oh Pat, we'll never laugh again." And Patrick Moynihan replied, "Mary, surely we'll laugh again. But we will never be young again." Recently, the Jewish columnist and social activist, Leonard Fein mentioned, they were both wrong. America laughed and America was young again. And so too will we. Eventually, we'll get back on the planes, and work will resume, and the football games will too. America will be strong, and one day, God willing, there will stand two big towers in the heart of Manhattan, calling out our commitment to love, to life and to blessing.

And so... in a week when it has been so difficult to find appropriate speech, I leave you with the words of Brian Sweeney of Barnstable, MA, who was a passenger on Flight 175, and called home on his cell phone, to say: "Hey Jules, it's Brian. I'm on a plane and it's hijacked and it doesn't look good. I just wanted to let you know that I love you and I hope to see you again. If I don't, please have fun in life, and live your life the best you can."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> NY Times, Sunday Sept. 16, 2001, "Voices from Above: 'I Love You, Mommy, Goodbye.' Week in Review, p. 7

*Cain y'hi ratzon.* May it be God's will.