

Rabbinic Intern Elli Pripas
Rosh HaShanah Day Two

On the second day of Rosh HaShanah, we read about the binding of Isaac, or the Akeidah in Hebrew. The story goes like this. God calls to Abraham one day, and Abraham responds with perfect humility. He says, “hinneni”, I am here. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son at Mount Moriah. And Abraham does so. He binds Isaac upon the altar and raises his hand, and then an angel rushes down and tells him he should not kill his son, for this was (only) a test. Now God knows that Abraham is faithful to him above all else.

Throughout this, Isaac is bound.

This story confounds me, and I know I am not alone in this. Simply thinking about it can make me uneasy, angry, and grief-stricken, all in one. I am scared by Abraham’s actions and that I am meant to find them righteous, and even more so, I am scared of God’s actions, and that I am meant to trust the God in this story. That God would test someone by asking them if they would commit violence, and violence against a beloved child, horrifies me. That the act was not completed hardly matters to me. Isaac had no choice in this matter. That Abraham would simply agree is also terrifying

In the aftermath of the Akeidah, the Torah tells us that Abraham goes down Mount Moriah, but it does not mention Isaac. In fact, Isaac himself is absent for another several years of the narrative. Where does Isaac go?

The rabbis tell so many stories to make sense of the Akeidah and its aftermath because, as in much of the Torah, there are gaps. For me, it’s hard not to look at one particular gap. What is Isaac’s experience of this event? It’s clearly potentially traumatic. Isaac is bound, and his father hovers over him with a knife to kill him. Shalom Spiegel, in his book *The Last Trial*, says that scripture regards Isaac as though he had died, his ashes laid upon the altar for eternity.

I personally like to call Isaac the forgotten founding father. He isn’t positioned as a protagonist in Torah in the way that either Abraham or Jacob is. In fact, one reading of why Isaac is not

mentioned as having gone down the mountain is that Isaac does not need to be mentioned, as Abraham is the central and primary figure.

Unlike both his father and his son, Isaac does not undergo a name change. It is also unclear if Isaac has a direct encounter with the divine, again, like both his father and his son.

Where did Isaac go?

One midrash says he went to study Torah at the great house of Shem and Ever for three years. Another midrash says that Abraham sent him home to Hebron, to bring Sarah the good news that he was still alive.

There are three midrashim that fascinate me. The first says this: Isaac stayed on Mount Moriah for three years.

Where did Isaac go? Isaac did not leave the place where he was nearly killed. He did not go anywhere at all.

I've worked with survivors of domestic and sexual violence for years, and I've had my own experiences with hardship and loss. This version of Isaac resonates with me. He stays where he is. There is a shock that comes when other people, especially those who love us or claim to love us, hurt us. Sometimes, it is best not to move from that place of pain too quickly.

There are other possible answers to this question, though. Where did Isaac go?

Another midrash says that God brought Isaac, the dead man walking, to the Garden of Eden for three years.

This idea is powerful to me. God brings Isaac, to heal, to a place of miracles. This fantasy is comforting and reassuring. It also speaks of the deep needs and wounds of trauma. Isaac is

allowed to go where humans are no longer welcome, in a place where his needs are met. Isaac can heal.

And a third answer: Isaac lagged behind. He was injured because he had been bound. Of course, Isaac was injured on this day. This source is the most explicit about this fact. Perhaps his arms were cut as he was bound to the altar. Perhaps his legs were harmed. And clearly, his soul was.

And what of Isaac telling his own story? There is even less midrash on this. I turn instead, to a poem by Myra Sklarew.

Isaac

I want to transcend what is said
about me, to let you see another
way that it might have gone. You stand
in your own age and judge me,
my passivity before my father
before the blade and the fire.

And you wonder why I did not return
home that day with my father Abraham
and his two young men. There are some
mysteries that are lost, some contexts
that cannot be given. You must
imagine where I went that day.

For one who has escaped for the moment
death's journey to the unknown, no matter
the righteous cause, it is no ordinary path
this return. It would not do to come home
and act as I had before, act
as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps I went to the Dead Sea, to wash
from myself the shadow that passed over me
at Moriah. Perhaps I lay back in those waters
and counted the days of my life
that were left to me then.
Or considered what was asked of me.

This year and last, I've found myself fascinated with Isaac, his voice lost in the narrative. As a feminist, I always look for characters whose voices are silenced, especially voices of those who experience harm in our world. And as myself, I too want to think through these questions.

Where have I been hurt?

Who am I now?

Where do I go?

How do I heal?

Where did Isaac go? We don't know, but we can choose where we go next.

Whether we heal in the place of pain, the place of magic, or on our way to the next stop, I am wishing that all of us who need healing, in spirit or in body, can figure out where we need to go next.

Shanah tovah!