**“Abraham’s Three Mistakes”**

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Thank you for being here this morning. I didn’t know where the ideas for this sermon should go, how they should be framed and who should hear it. In many ways, I wrote these thoughts for myself but I pray everyone will find something to consider as we begin a new year.

Let’s start with the Torah today (Genesis 22). It is one of the most well-known narratives in the Hebrew Bible; Abraham being asked by G-d to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah. His willingness to do so, to suppress his own desires for G-d is the quintessential story of learning to bend one’s desires to fulfill the wishes of our Creator.

In the days leading up to Rosh Hashana, I have read this story repeatedly every morning at services and have found it helpful not in learning about sacrifice but how to make decisions that are tough, that are necessary, and that will inexorably change your life. Because as I read and re-read the story, I realized that Abraham made three critical mistakes on the road to Mt. Moriah this morning. These are the same mistakes we all make when life requires us to make tough choices. Often, the worst part in deciding is not the outcome but how we got to that decision. I have heard it said that life is often about choosing between making a bad choice or a worse one. That may be true but getting to a decision is equally tough and there are ways to get there; ways Abraham did not choose.

And I think the Torah this morning, through the story of Abraham, helps frame that for us.

Let look at that this morning as we begin a new year which will be another year of choosing paths down the road of life we all take.

First, when G-d asked Abraham this morning to offer his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah, Abraham did not make his decision and act impulsively. The Torah talks about him saddling up his donkey early in the next morning but this difficult task was never presented to him with a time limit; G-d never demanded that he go there right away and, indeed, this act took take time. Mt. Moriah, at least according to the narrative, was a three-day journey.

And that was Abraham’s first mistake. He had time to decide on what to do and yet, never talked to anyone about the decision he had to make nor share what was going on in his mind. We know that because from the narrative, he chose to lie to his trusted aides who went with him, telling them as he went up the mountain days later that he and Isaac would return from the mountain. He didn’t tell his most loyal friends what G-d wanted him to do. Nor did he tell Isaac who was also clueless as to what was happening until they got to the top of the mountain. Isaac asked on the way up: “Dad, I see the wood and the fire, where is the sacrifice?” His wife Sarah never knew. One Midrash tells us that Sarah died immediately after she got word that her husband almost sacrificed her son on the mountain; hence, why the next chapter in the Torah opens with her passing.

Abraham didn’t reach out to a single person who was close to him on this most difficult decision. He shared nothing of what was happening in his life with the people he loved and the people who would be most affected. He decided not to open his heart and bear his burdens with the people he trusted the most.

How many of us can relate to that? You have a difficult decision to make, an awful burden you are carrying and you don’t want to share this problem even with those who walk with you on the path of life. You hide your true feelings. Maybe because you are afraid that by opening up you expose yourself, showing weakness; it may be because you are unsure of what to do and you don’t want to burden anyone else.

So, what do we do? We walk alone; all while in the presence of others who could be there for you, deserve to know and could help.

I suspect if I was Abraham, I would have done the same thing. This decision was his and his alone; he was asked to choose his son or his life’s work (his devotion to G-d) and no one else could make that decision for him. And I’m sure he felt that depending on who he asked, he wouldn’t get good advice. His family and friends would say the choice is easy: choose Isaac; his followers and disciples would say the choice is easy: choose G-d.

Still, maybe, one or two friends could have helped him get to the right place by just putting their arms around him, have no answer, but would be there for him regardless.

And by not seeking out those friends and loved ones, not looking for people who had no interest except their love for him, Abraham became the lonely man on the road to Mt. Moriah. He didn’t know what Sarah, Isaac, Ishmael, Eliezer, and others would say but he chose not to reach out and find the right person who could help; that one person who would not take the burden from him but maybe partially lift it off his shoulders, carry it with him, and stand with him no matter what.

Instead, he chose to share it with no one and walked alone.

As a martyr.

I find it interesting that after the “Akeidah” (the binding of Isaac), nothing remarkable happens to Abraham again. He is a tiny player now on the Biblical scene. He gives out gifts and inheritance to family, he buries his wife, he designates Eliezer to find a wife for his son and he dies. He fades from the scene as the story of Isaac begins. A man who spoke to G-d, who challenged G-d, who fought nations and walked with kings, escaped Egypt unscathed and wealthy, and established tribes and drew people everywhere to G-d.

His life ends in solitude.

My first point is that when you don’t share your life, your hopes, your dreams with people you trust, when you don’t open up honestly and with a sense of vulnerability, you will ultimately lose the trust of those you value the most.

As I have shared with you in the past, some rabbis notice, quite keenly, that neither Sarah nor Isaac ever speak to Abraham again after this morning’s dramatic event. We never read about any further encounter between Isaac and Abraham. Not even a farewell blessing like Isaac and Jacob did for their children. Abraham had so shattered Isaac’s trust. And notice: while Eliezer helped him find a wife for Isaac, where were his others trusted servants, followers, and disciples? He had so many followers; others came with him on his journey to Moriah. Where did they all go? Or did they feel left out of his life, made to look like fools following him on this pivotal journey.

When you close yourself to others, you leave yourself wide open to loneliness, the most devastating of existences.

Abraham’s first mistake and, often, ours.

But, at least, he had G-d.

Right?

G-d never speaks to him again.

It was because of Abraham’s second mistake.

For some reason, the Torah doesn’t tell us, Abraham doesn’t argue with G-d when G-d requests he sacrifice Isaac. Why not? Abraham had the voice of a prophet. He was comfortable talking to G-d. Why did he hesitate now? Why did he avoid talking to G-d at this pivotal moment?

How many times do we pray to G-d for the silliest of requests? I say silly only in the context of asking G-d for things we realize that were G-d to fulfill them, G-d becomes nothing more than, as one theologian put it, “the Cosmic Bellhop”. G-d is not a genie; G-d strengthens resolve. G-d is not wish fulfiller; G-d empowers. And yet, we often reach out looking for “Santa G-d”.

We know the role G-d should play in our lives; we reach out to G-d not to solve our problems but help us in our resolve; giving us the courage to take the next step forward. G-d is about the realization that when you are lonely, when you have a challenge and there is no one to turn to, there is always G-d.

I think Abraham forgot that. I can, perhaps, see why Abraham decided to go it alone and not reach out to family and friends. I can relate; it is hard to open yourself up to others. But to G-d? When you close the door to dialogue with G-d, you lose the one other opportunity to face the pain and struggles of life in G-d’s company. Maybe Abraham thought like most of us: what can G-d do for me here? Yet, as Abraham himself had learned, it is good to trust in G-d, to be with G-d. Abraham grew every time he reached out to G-d.

And yet, Abraham did not do that here when he needed G-d the most. And he paid the price. He not only walked up to Mt. Moriah alone, with no friends or family to share his struggle, but he walked down the mountain alone, without the grace, love, and support of G-d. It is no coincidence that from that day forward, Abraham never heard directly from G-d.

He never heard the voice of G-d again.

When decisions are difficult to make, G-d does not help us make those decisions but helps us by walking with us, next to us and telling us it is going to be okay. And when we don’t appreciate that Divine Resource, we have made a tragic mistake.

Abraham’s third mistake?

He wasn’t true to himself.

At pivotal moments in his life, we hear from Abraham through the Torah what was going on in his head. Yesterday, when we saw the tension between Hagar and Sarah, we get a window into what Abraham is thinking when the Torah tells us how much the family tension bothered him. We get Abraham’s thinking at Sodom and Gomorrah; we get his thoughts when he and Sarah travel down to Egypt.

Here, we do not know what Abraham was thinking when G-d asked him to sacrifice his son. Was he enthusiastic about serving G-d? Was he worried about what his family would say? His disciples? Did he struggle with his decision? We can guess but we have no idea because at no time does Abraham, through the Narrative, tell us. All we know is he did as he was told.

And maybe that is a lesson in and of itself.

To thine own self be true.

If we have decisions that are difficult to make, when we have moments in our lives that are pivotal, the worst thing we can do is to be dishonest with ourselves. What was Abraham thinking here? I don’t know but if he wasn’t honest to his family and friends, if he wasn’t honest to G-d, maybe it was because he wasn’t honest to himself.

We all stumble along the way; that’s natural. I know I do. And I realize now, looking back, the worst mistakes I have ever made were committed when I didn’t seek out the thoughts of others, when I didn’t reach out to G-d, and when I wasn’t honest with myself. When I didn’t hug all the right people in my life and ask them to just listen to me and let them know what I was thinking, when I didn’t cry out to G-d and ask, not for sympathy, but empathy and when I wasn’t able to speak honestly even to myself.

When I wasn’t true to myself, that is when I fell the hardest.

What do I want to do this year? I want to promise myself that I will let people close to me and who love me know what I am thinking, even when I am afraid it might expose my “feet of clay” and my humanity. I want to promise myself to be willing to show my vulnerability more to the G-d who created me and is always there for me, not just praise Him and thank Him but cry and reach out to Him. And I promise to be true to myself, to be honest with myself. Because whenever I haven’t done that, I have fallen down badly and scraped my knees on the way down… and it hurt.

And yet, also looking back, whenever I have been true to who I am, what I feel, and what I believe, I have soared on the wings of eagles.

I intend to soar this year and I pray for that for all of you, as well.

Amen