

# **Saying No to G-d**

(A High Holiday sermon based on Genesis chapter 22:1-19)

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Let me ask you a question today. You are Abraham, you have devoted the last several decades year of your life advancing a belief in a G-d who makes covenants, who makes promises and keeps them. G-d has told you that He will make a great nation out of your seed. However, not only has He asked you to expel Ishmael, your first born son, but now He demands that you sacrifice you only other child, Isaac. Would you do it?

How many would do what Abraham did, prepare yourself to sacrifice your only child? Raise you hand. And now how many of you would have say no to G-d? {Editor's note: These two questions were asked and virtually the entire congregation that morning said they would not have sacrificed their child.}

I thought so. I'm with the no's here, as well. However, I do understand those who agree with Abraham. After all, this is G-d asking this of him, and Abraham might have thought: "If I am a true follower of G-d, it is time to

'fish or cut bait'. If I believe, I have to trust G-d on this. Otherwise, what kind of believer am I?" And while I hear that, as a believer, I could easily argue the other way. Abraham could have said: "Maybe G-d is testing me to see if I will argue with him like I did at Sodom! Maybe He wants me to argue and say that believers of the one true G-d do not offer human sacrifices. Could this not be a test to see if my moral antenna has developed?" So, maybe the test was whether Abraham would say "no" to G-d regarding human sacrifice.

Abraham, however, did not think long about what G-d asked him to do. The Torah says he got up early the next day to start on the journey to Mt. Moriah. You know the rest. Abraham is about to offer up his son when an angel of the L-rd stays his hand and declares: "Now, I know that you believe in Me, since you were not going to withhold your son, your only son from Me." And G-d blesses Abraham. End of story.

Well...not really. It is a funny thing what happens next according to rabbinical tradition. Some say Sarah dies of shock shortly after hearing of what almost happened to her son. In addition, Isaac becomes estranged from Abraham because of what his father almost did to him. And more than one commentator points out how Abraham never again hears the voice of G-d. It is as if saying "yes" to G-d came with a steep price.

So my question is: what if Abraham would have said...“No.” What if he would have argued with G-d as he had done before at Sodom? Using the words and manner employed he earlier, Abraham could have said: “If G-d will permit me, I will open my mouth though I am mere flesh and blood. But did not G-d say that He will make a great nation out of my son, Isaac? How can I sacrifice Isaac and prevent G-d’s destiny from being fulfilled? Will the Trustworthy One, not act trustworthy?”

Abraham could have argued that way. He could have at least said, like he said after G-d promised to make him a great nation but before Isaac and Ishmael were even born: “What good is this covenant seeing that I do not have a son to fulfill the words of the covenant?” So Abraham could have given many possible arguments to save his son. Why didn’t he?

Honestly, I don’t know.

Now in fairness to Abraham, maybe we are too far removed from his society and culture. Maybe, just maybe, the idea of offering a child, a human sacrifice, was not a strange request from G-d. Sacrifices were the highest form of giving, and the human variety was the ultimate sacrifice. So, maybe Abraham didn’t argue because this didn’t seem to be an odd request, difficult perhaps, but not odd.

So, here's a radical thought to consider. What if G-d was hoping Abraham would say no? What if it was a test and Abraham actually failed it. That would explain why G-d never speaks to him again. What if Abraham was going to receive a blessing from G-d, regardless of his answer, but G-d was perhaps hoping that Abraham would say "no" to Him.

And what if sometimes the greatest thing you can do in life is say "no" to G-d.

You know, I never realized it before, but many of the stories in the Torah have a very interesting motif for a religion and that is, we have an obligation, a mitzvah, to argue and to contend with G-d. Abraham does it and so does his grandson Jacob. No one argues with G-d better than Moses. One time, G-d tells Moses that He is about to destroy Israel and begin the nation again with just Moses. Moses not only tells G-d "no" but declares, "Wipe out my name out of your Book but do not destroy this people." Moses even gives G-d reasons why He cannot destroy Israel. Moses said "no" to G-d all the time.

And you know, I think we are often faced with the prospect of saying "no" to G-d. I think it happens all the time to us, as well. And sometimes, "no" may be the right answer.

This past winter, I had to make a choice on whether to travel on Shabbat or be with a family who were waiting for me to perform a wedding. Here is the Reader's Digest version of this story for those who don't already know. I was flying out Friday morning to officiate at a wedding to be held in Jamaica on Saturday night. My flight to Charlotte was abruptly cancelled but by some creative re-routing, I was able to get as far as Miami before sundown. However, the only way to get to Jamaica was to fly out the next morning. What should I do? The Shabbat is sacred and I do not travel on the Sabbath and yet, I had to be in Jamaica on Saturday night to do the wedding. Do I "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" or do I say "no" to G-d?

You see, this wasn't a situation where I could say: "Well, it's an emergency and Jewish law allows exceptions in life or death situations." True, but that didn't apply in that situation. Granted the wedding party needed me, and yes, with destination weddings the way they are, they couldn't postpone it until Sunday. However, a wedding can take place without a rabbi and a wedding is not a life and death situation, the only exception to violating the Shabbat. So what do I do? Fly on Shabbat, or not?

I had a similar situation several years ago when my mother-in-law, of blessed memory, came to live with us in Charleston. She was on dialysis and her regular

appointments were Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings. Do I drive her on the Shabbat for her dialysis? Now, before you say: “Well, that’s different. That is a life and death situation.” Not really. We could have arranged for alternative transportation for her on Saturdays. People offered to drive her and there were services and programs available. Our problem was that while it was not a life and death situation, we knew Marilyn’s mom and we knew the comfort level she had with me taking her at 5:30 AM and with Marilyn picking her up. It wasn’t life and death but it was a situation where it would be more comfortable for her if we took her. What do I do? Drive on Shabbat, or not?

And then there was our “kosher” dilemma. When we first came to Charleston in 1986, we kept a strictly kosher lifestyle, both in our home and out in public. We never ate out because, of course, there are no kosher restaurants in the area. When the kids were old enough, however, to start being invited to eat out with their friends and when they could appreciate how others would eat out as a family, we had to decide whether to maintain this strict level of observance of the dietary laws or whether we should adopt a more “Conservative Judaism” approach. We had to decide whether to continue the lifestyle we had maintained or whether we would we would keep kosher at home but begin to eat vegetable, pasta and fish meals out, restricting ourselves only in meat. Here again, we know

the dietary laws are to be strictly kept and only for a life and death situation must they be set aside. This wasn't a life and death situation, either. If we began to eat out, it would be out of "convenience", a way to keep our kids from, perhaps, one day resenting growing up as observant Jews in a small community. What do I do? Keep strictly kosher or not?

Do I say "yes" or "no" to G-d?

I think that there are times when one can say "no" to G-d. I think Elie Wiesel has got it right when he said: You can love G-d, you can hate G-d, but what you must never do is ignore G-d. Saying "no" is not ignoring G-d; it declares that you are struggling with G-d and that is a religious experience. And saying "no" to G-d can sometimes be just as religiously affirming as saying "yes".

I did take that plane on Saturday to make it to the wedding this year, I picked up my mother-in-law for dialysis before Shabbat morning services, and we as a family do eat out now. I do not deny the sanctity of the Sabbath or the importance of Kashrut nor am not ignoring G-d or His law. I believe in these laws and try to keep them on a daily basis. But I am also prepared to say "no" when it violates the things I have also been taught to value and hold dear.

If I may, let me suggest that a problem with religion and religious fanaticism is this refusal to argue with G-d, this inability to say “no” to G-d when it violates the very underpinnings of one’s faith. I don’t have a problem with religious fervor. What I do have a problem is the very idea that one must completely “surrender” to G-d. I find that very dangerous. I find it frightening to think that to be religious, one must submit to the will of G-d. When a human mind is denied the ability of independent thought or told that rational thought must be suppressed, that is dangerous religion. Religion is dangerous when it creates a world where a follower is not allowed to argue, to think, to question and to say “no”.

I think saying “no” to G-d may be the greatest, most liberating theological statement a serious believer of G-d can declare. Saying no to G-d is not, “Oh, I know the Sabbath is holy, but my team is on television!” or “There is a 50% off sale at Kohls this Saturday. I’ve got to go!” That is not struggling with G-d. Neither is: “Oh, I know shellfish are not kosher but I love them anyway.”

Saying “no” to G-d is when you are seriously committed to living a Jewish life, when you recognize and keep traditions but are, at times, willing say “G-d, I know what may be expected of me here but, I’m sorry, in this situation I cannot do it. It is not because of inconvenience or a

materialistic whim but it directly violates everything I stand for and believe in."

I could not have lived with myself if I did not get to that wedding. People were depending on me to be there, and whether they would understand or not was not the issue. Nor were my mother-in law's needs on Saturday. Marilyn's mother would have understood if we didn't come, but I wouldn't understand my behavior. And my kids never insisted on eating out but it was a decision we made for them. And we did it as parents who believe in keeping kosher but cannot dismiss the need to have our children live good and interactive lives in this small Jewish community.

Please do not come up after this sermon and agree with me using the cliché, "You did the right thing. G-d will understand." You are missing my point. I am not asking G-d for understanding or hoping for His forgiveness. I don't think that is what is at stake. I do these things to remain true to who I am, what I believe about G-d and religion and I do so without apologies.

I once had a man come to me for advice. He was gay. He has lived with guilt and anguish because he is a serious believer in G-d, believes in the words of G-d found in the Torah, and strives to be a serious Jew. He came to me because he knows what the Torah says of homosexuality. His problem is he believes the words of

the Torah were given to us by G-d. And yet, he couldn't live any longer suppressing his needs as a gay man who, like everyone, desires affection, love and intimacy with another. He was stuck between being gay and the words in Leviticus (18: 22): "A man shall not lie down with another man. It is an abomination."

I told him, "Why not say 'no'... not to your urges or the divinity of the text, but to G-d. Why not say, 'G-d, I am sorry but I cannot keep this law. I understand that this is what you expect of me, but I cannot do it. You know my heart, you know that my sexuality is not a "choice" and you, as my Creator, know the way I am 'hard wired'. I do this to be true to myself."

[I also told the man: "And you know, if you are keeping 612 out of 613 commandments, that would make you a pretty darn good Jew!]

I think saying 'no' to G-d can be the greatest challenge one can ever undertake upon oneself. I believe ignoring G-d and His laws, saying "it is all a bunch of nonsense, anyway" is just an excuse to be non-serious about religion. And to accept His teachings unhesitatingly, despite the moral or ethical difficulties, seems foolish to me. But to acknowledge the wisdom of G-d, to accept His laws and teaching and yet be able to say "no" at times, is to engage in a serious dialogue with G-d, a dialogue

where one struggles with G-d. And let us never forget that the very word “Israel” means “to struggle with G-d”.

Abraham was asked to do something that was the complete opposite of everything he believed in and stood for. I think he should have said “no”. I think Abraham should have argued as he did in the past; I think he should have wrestled with G-d as his grandson Jacob did and as Moses did centuries later. And our challenge, this year and every year, is be true to G-d and true to ourselves. It means embracing the beauty of a Jewish life, making it a huge part of our existence, but at the same time recognizing who we are, what we can and cannot do and be willing to say ‘no’ at times. Saying ‘no’ to G-d is not a denial of Him but an affirmation of being created in His divine image.

AMEN