

Intoxicated Faith is Not Really Faith
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5777
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It is shocking how some people understand religious faith. As our country becomes more polarized, we seem to define authentic belief very narrowly. The best Catholic is obviously the Pope. Some say that the best Protestants are the ones who can quote chapter and verse, living their lives with a certainty about what the scripture teaches. And the best Jew is the one who looks the most orthodox, with the *peyos*, black hat or *kippah*, and *tzitzit*. Our sense of authentic religion is defined as most rituals known and practiced. When we have had a Jewish gathering in the community, many people will consider it more legitimate when, and I'm quoting here, "even the Orthodox came." Even though we frequently have no idea whether someone is a good and moral person, we are impressed at the piety that is exhibited through the practice of ritual and the total devotion where the most pious surround themselves with each other.

Each year when we read the *Rosh Hashanah* morning Torah portion in *Genesis* where Abraham is commanded to grab Isaac, some wood, rope, and a knife and go to the place that God will show him in order to create an offering, we see that Isaac is likely the sacrificial lamb. With our new prayer book this year, I know some of you were wondering whether Isaac actually dies this time, but lo—some things did not change; Isaac will be spared for 40 more years, at least.

Many have real problems with the story. While some see this as the impressive blind faith by the first adherent of supernatural monotheism, others explain that there are signs in the text showing that Abraham knew that Isaac would never have

been sacrificed. Abraham has his hand on the knife, waving it over his bound son, and just when we thought the story was going to get gruesome, the voice calls Abraham back. What we don't know, is whether Abraham would have said, "Really, You (God) really think I'm going to do this just because You told me to?" Really?"

Most in the traditional world would argue that Abraham is the best example of true piety. Rabbi Donniel Hartman, a modern Orthodox Israeli thinker says that Abraham's behavior, at least on the surface is an example of God Intoxication. He says,

"What is so striking about this moment is the lack of hesitation: the moment Abraham hears the voice of God; it is as if his capacity for critical thought shuts down. He does not consider his moral responsibility to his son, nor does he debate whether to adhere to the divine commandment not to commit murder... God Intoxication has already compromised his faculties. The moment he hears God's commanding voice, he ceases to see the boy standing next to him. (*Putting God Second*, p. 47).

Hartman further explains that without delving deeper, this story is held up as a model of religious piety worthy of emulation. (ibid) And with all we see of the world, we know this to still be true today.

To me, and I suspect to many of you who have taken a few minutes to consider your own belief and the way we interact with this and other stories, Abraham's behavior is really not the point. The point

here is what does God really expect? To look at Abraham here, and only in this passage, is to not really get the whole picture.

It was also Abraham who was so afraid of the Pharaoh and his entourage, that he compromised Sarah to keep himself safe—not so great for a patriarch. It was also Abraham who, with full *chutzpah* flowing, bargained with God at Sodom and Gomorrah. Back in chapter 18 of *Genesis*, God decides to take out Sodom and Gomorrah because of their evil ways. God determines that it is a good idea to share God’s intentions with Abraham, since God has chosen Abraham for greatness. The *chutzpah* comes when Abraham questions whether God should take out the righteous with the wicked, and bargains about how many righteous, and thereby, how many innocent people can be killed to justify getting rid of the evil.

The God-Intoxicated Abraham who blindly follows God just a few chapters later is the justice-seeking Abraham who is willing to look past divine decree in order to do what is right. So while some find great inspiration in Abraham simply dutifully following the explicit directions of God, it is unlikely Abraham is so God Intoxicated.

Abraham is a brave and pious man. He determines how to evolve from idol worship. He takes a wife, he protects himself, he fathers a child with the concubine that his wife encourages, even though she freaks out later, he bargains with God for God’s righteous behavior, and more. It is difficult to imagine that Abraham would be willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Fear of God is one thing, but fear of his wife Sarah—that is a different story. Aside from that, it just isn’t consistent with what we know about Abraham’s ability to reason, adapt to a situation, and move from one place to the place that God will show him.

We see this idea of God Intoxication throughout the world. Certainly the Muslims who most people fear are the ones who view their faith so very narrowly, that they are intoxicated with an ideology that clouds the ability to see how perverse and dangerous this narrow read of Islam really is. Not all Muslims are God Intoxicated.

Our Mitzvah Corps Middle School program took a trip to the Mosque in West Chester last spring. This came just a few days after Ashley Schlaeger and others of our Youth Group convened a dialogue with Muslim teens to gain better understanding of each other. Stereotypes were addressed, questions were asked, understanding was improved, and the community became safer because more understanding and friendship replaced ignorance and fear of the unknown.

Some folks who are God Intoxicated get into the ritual and religious competition with others about who can out religion another. Once blinded by this faith, these people can lose the forest through the trees. How many Jewish families have been destroyed by the ridiculous idea that marrying a non-Jew requires a parent to say *Kaddish* for their intermarried child? How many Catholics who couldn’t or shouldn’t remain married have been either forced to remain in an abusive relationship, or been alienated from the church because the way the doctrines are interpreted allows for these casualties.

However, many religious and pious people function with strong and deep-seeded faith without being so intoxicated. I have a serious and strong faith in God. I have a profound love of our history and our tradition. And I happily live in the world God created, and in a country that people created. I am grateful that my ancestors found their way here, even though I frequently find it challenging to embrace Judaism and Jewish values as often as I can, even when the secular society, or the society

that embraces the religion of the majority creates roadblocks for the easy observance of my faith.

I don't feel compromised when I exclude a ritual I no longer find meaningful. I feel compromised when there is a ritual I feel commanded to fulfill, and I allow other temptations to divert my actions. I have three children, all of whom blessed our home with their presence for this holiday. I am 91% certain that if God came out of the heavens and commanded me to put them on an altar:

- a. they wouldn't go willingly; and
- b. even if I could get them on the altar, I wouldn't do it.

This is not because I don't believe in God enough. On the contrary, I believe in God so much, that I would not participate in a crime that is forbidden precisely because of all I know about God.

Donniel Hartman's book warns of the problem of God Intoxication because it can create single-mindedness at the expense of others. Our tradition makes it a point to remind us to consider the bigger picture—especially when we act in God's name. My belief in God only allows me support to hurt others for self-defense. I generally define that danger to self as clear and imminent. I also interpret the Bible in a way that a commandment which requires the pain and suffering of others to combat idolatry, or other biblical transgressions was either isolated for a time that is long gone, or is not a commandment that I can respect. The message we Jews grapple with every week when we read the Torah, and every year with this Torah portion is how we balance our faith with our mission to do good. Good cannot only be defined by ancient texts, it can also incorporate the wealth of knowledge we gain when we see the world and the way the best people operate in it—no matter what their faith tradition or political background.

I have never been inspired by the faith of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. I've been inspired by Abraham because he was willing to go down the road for a while, knowing that God was teaching the world to bargain with God for a moral high ground, but, most importantly, to not sacrifice a loved one for faith. Furthermore, the story continues to inspire me that even though some are inspired to blind faith by the story, I am intoxicated with the idea that God would never expect the sacrifice of any person in order to show our faith.

In America it is easy to have all kinds of faith: blind faith, reasoned faith, and even no faith. My prayer is that as we reflect on the year just ended, we also consider our faith and values. Whether religion or any other of the doctrines that vie for our adherence, I pray that we remember that good religious people do what's right—universally right, and are guided by their faith, rather than sacrificed on the altar by it.

L'shanah Tovah

Source

Hartman, Donniel. *Putting God Second How to Save Religion From Itself*. Beacon Press: Boston, 2016.