More than forty years ago, I took time off from college and was faced with an extraordinary opportunity — I could do more or less whatever I wanted. One of the possibilities I considered was learning Hebrew. And, in thinking this through, I had a kind of mantra: I told myself that it would be worth learning the language just so I could read the akedah in the original.

People learn Greek for *The Odyssey*, Latin for *The Aeneid*. For me, Hebrew meant the akedah. It's no coincidence that I mention it in the company of great works of literature. Even in translation, I was struck by the artistry of this terse tale; the power packed into so few words.

As a kid, I loved the High Holidays. Our services were held in a gigantic old church; the crosses draped over, to the extent possible. There were exotic nooks and crannies to explore; heavy, dark woodwork. My friends and I roamed the building. We crept through the choir loft commando-style. Needless to say, we weren't over-supervised.

But even back then I had a sense that something important was going on in the big room where the adults sat. And as I got older I came to associate that feeling with reading the akedah; a text so jarring and disturbing that it never loses its charge. I was drawn to the unvarnished, honest, portrayal of a world where things are not easy, where people are forced to make tough choices, where service to G-d requires real sacrifice, where G-d is not necessarily the same as good.

All these years later, the story remains no less potent, but also feels problematic, especially on Rosh Hashanah.

Yes, I understand why we read it during the Yamim Noraim. It's a thriller, inspiring a sure-fire sense of awe — a regular *yirah-machine* — guaranteed to get a reaction out of even the most jaded congregant. The akedah plays on our emotions quite effectively — though, like most shows on Netflix, the violence could be ratcheted down at least twenty percent.

It's a tale of superhuman stoicism and obedience — Avraham's love of G-d overrides his love for his own son — and this is seen, both in the text and by our tradition, as a supreme act of devotion.

But today, on Rosh Hashanah, as we subject ourselves to scrutiny and ask how we might make better use of our lives, can we look to this story for guidance? What kind of an example is Avraham?

It's striking that the son Avraham offers up is named Yitzhak, "he will laugh," and that he is referred to as "the one you love" – the first time the word "love" occurs in Torah. Avraham is lauded for rising above normal human concerns — in effect, giving up laughter and love.

Is this what **we're** supposed to do?

Shouldn't we be trying to become ***more*** human, not less so?

Avraham's submission to the Divine will is doubtless intended to inspire us to act selflessly — it might challenge us to give up petty and self-centered personal concerns in favor of loftier goals. It might spur us to rededicate ourselves on Rosh Hashanah to a higher purpose.

But we normally understand our role as emulating godly virtues. The Talmud teaches: "Just as [G-d] is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful." [Shab. 133b] So why showcase a story where core values are ignored?

On Rosh Hashanah we repeatedly invoke the image of a compassionate, merciful G-d – the *El rachum v'chanun* we include in recounting G-d's attributes, for example – but the akedah portrays G-d as lacking in compassion. And Avraham mirrors that heartlessness in his treatment of Yitzhak.

The Mahzor engages in some high-flying liturgical gymnastics to reconcile the akedah with Rosh Hashanah. We pray at the end of the *Zichronot* section in Musaf: "...as Avraham overcame his compassion in order to obey [G-d's] command... so [G-d] should allow [G-d's] compassion to overcome [G-d's] anger toward us."

Since Avraham did x not y, then G-d should do y not x. The logic is unconvincing.

I think there is another way of looking at the akedah that is more aligned with the themes of Rosh Hashanah and might help enrich our experience today.

Erich Auerbach, a German emigree philologist, draws a classic distinction between ancient Greek and biblical literature. In Greek works character remains constant – so much so that Homer can repeatedly describe characters using the same epithets. It is always: “cunning Odysseus” or “Agamemnon, lord of men.”

But biblical figures are different. They develop over time. Think of Yaakov growing from young trickster to bereaved patriarch or Yosef from self-absorbed favorite child to insightful leader and forgiving brother.

What about Avraham? Does he change?

Based on the evidence of the akedah the answer seems to be no. He receives two commands, one at the beginning of the story and another towards the end. In each case he responds in precisely the same way: he says *hineini* – here I am – and then does what he is told.

Perhaps this consistency is a good thing. There's a midrashic understanding of the word *nisayon* – which we usually translate as “test” – that says it derives from the root *nes*, meaning “flag” or “banner.” Thus the point of "testing” Avraham is not to see how he will act. G-d knows he is a faithful servant who will perform as instructed. Rather, the intent is to lift him up like a

flag, to let others see what he can do; perhaps also to allow Avraham himself to recognize what he is capable of.

We're all well-acquainted with test-taking. I'm sure I'm not the only one who still occasionally wakes up in a sweat terrified that I've neglected to prepare for a high school exam. And we understand the dual nature of tests: a good result can serve as a golden key that opens doors and a bad one — well, I'll never forget how on the President's Physical Fitness test in middle school I managed to score a negative 20 by kicking a football backwards over my head. Even my coach, who was a very nice guy, couldn't help laughing at me.

Tests, imperfect though they may be, act as a reality check. They demonstrate what we are capable of. But if Avraham responds to the commands at the beginning and the end of the story in exactly the same way, what have we learned about him?

Emmanuel Levinas, the French Jewish philosopher offers an answer[1]. Perhaps the point is not ***how*** Avraham responds but what he is able to hear. Levinas notes that what is truly remarkable about the akedah is that Avraham, having heard the first command to sacrifice Yitzhak is nonetheless able to also hear the second command telling him not to.

While the first command still rings in his ears Avraham is able to hear a second, different voice.

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[1] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Proper Names*, p.76

Midrashim emphasize the whole-heartedness with which Avraham obeyed the initial command. Some say he was joyful — so confident that he was fulfilling G-d's will. There's something monstrous about this behavior, but also familiar. How often are we so determined to follow a particular path that we don't recognize alternatives?

And yet — somehow — at the critical moment, Avraham is able to hear the call to change course. Admittedly, the angel has to call his name twice to get his attention, so focused is he on fulfilling his mission.

The hasidic commentator Mei HaShiloach[2], writing in the mid-nineteenth century, takes the idea of Avraham's remarkable ability to hear a different message even further. Avraham, he says, didn't receive two different commands. He was actually given the **exact same command** twice. However, the first time Avraham didn't get the meaning quite right. The message was indistinct – as if seen through a "darkened mirror," אַסְפָּקָלַרְיָא דְּלָא נָהֲרָא . Only on a second hearing was he able to interpret the message accurately and realize that G-d's request was the opposite of what he had previously thought it was. He was able to hear differently.

I'm struck by the idea that our interpretation of the messages we receive is the crucial thing. We walk through the word as receptors, taking in so much, and how well do we process it all? Do we respond with defensiveness and

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[2] Mei HaShiloach, Volume I, Genesis, Vayera 8

fear or are we open to learning? Can we accept evidence that contradicts our assumptions or are we ossified by understandings that have become rote?

Rosh Hashanah doesn't call on us to examine our specific deeds and misdeeds. We'll go through lists of particulars later, on Yom Kippur. Rather, today we should be focused on fundamentals. What are the longings and fears that drive us? Do we truly understand our motivations? What assumptions do we make about how our lives must play out? How might we be open to hearing differently when we listen to others? What might we discover?

When we assume we must continue on our usual paths, when we foreclose possibilities — are we truly hearing our hearts?

Of course, you could knock on any door in the East Bay and find someone who will tell you to listen to your heart. This listening is only the beginning of the conversion. Often we need to challenge our hearts to expand, to embrace a humanity based on more than our narrow self-interest.

One odd thing about the traditional view of the akedah is that it's so heavily weighted towards praising the willingness of Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak while the reprieve at the end of the story barely registers. This approach begins in the Torah itself when the angel, immediately after preventing him from killing Yitzhak, praises Avraham because "you have not withheld your son." It continues throughout Jewish history, even embracing martyrs who

felt that by actually sacrificing their children in times of persecution they surpassed Avraham.

But, especially in these dark days, I think we need to reclaim the redemptive end of the story. We need to lift Avraham up as an example of being open to change; a model of perceiving a new, more humane, path.

If I could speak to Avraham — just one crazy old man to another — I'd ask him how he felt when the command to sacrifice Yitzhak was undone.

Did the sudden change in marching orders feel wrenching?

Was he too torn apart by the ordeal to feel anything at that point?

Or was it like his vision came into focus — the dim mirror brightened — and he saw a new reality unfolding: a religion of kindness and compassion, not grim duty. A faith that didn't demand that he shut down his heart but rather urged him to expand it.

Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5786, Lee Bearson