Imagine that you are attending a national convention. Delegates gather to be inspired and set the course for the coming year. It is a familiar event, in a familiar venue. Expected and calendared, attended by many if not most each year. Certain elements change from year-to-year, but after the decades much of the convention is choreographed down to the last detail. Veteran participants—having not seen each other since the last time—look for one another, and are introduced to newer delegates.

You are there to reestablish the bonds of communal commitment, to restate and reaffirm ideology (however broad and varied), and finally to chart a successful vision for the future.

The words offered, the speakers invited, even the music that will be performed, have been chosen with care and consideration. The organizers and participants are all hoping for a significant post-convention bounce, and the commitments and contributions that typically follow.

A central event at this gathering, is a time hallowed ritual, much awaited at previous conventions, but today increasing viewed
as a paean to the outmoded ideology of earlier generations.  
Rather than serving as a touchstone or inspiration for those gathered,  
many of today’s delegates tolerate it or just tune it out.  
A few even conveniently absent the convention hall.  
Some, struggle valiantly to justify the retention of this custom,  
while others simply acquiesce.  
In truth, even the organizers find this particular element dissonant.

I am referring of course,  
not to the nomination procedures  
of the Republican or Democratic National Conventions,  
but rather to the public recitation of Akedat Yitzhak – the Binding of Isaac,  
the central text of our Jewish communal gathering on Rosh Hashana,  
which we will hear chanted and translated tomorrow morning.

Here’s a synopsis:

Once upon a time, God tested Abraham.  
God said to him,  
“Take your beloved son Isaac and go to the land of Moriah,  
and on a mountain top that I’ll show you,  
kill him and offer him as a burnt offering.  
First thing the very next morning,  
Abraham saddled his ass and took supplies, servants and Isaac  
and set out for the place.  
Three days later they arrive.
Abraham tells the servants to remain at the base camp.
Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain.
Isaac asks if his dad has forgotten the sacrificial lamb.
Abraham tells him that God will take care of it.
"God will see to the sheep, for a burnt offering my son."
They continue on together.
When they arrive, Abraham builds an altar;
he lays out the wood; ties up Isaac, lays him on the altar, on top of the wood
and then picks up the knife to kill his son.
In that moment, an Angel calls out:
"Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.
For now I know that you fear God,
since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."
Abraham then notices a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.
So he takes the ram, and offers it up as a burnt offering in place of Isaac.
The angel calls out a second time
in a sort of inter-textual commentary on what has just occurred.
"By Myself I swear, the Eternal declares:
Because you have done THIS
and have not withheld your son, your favored one,
I will bestow My blessing upon you
and make your descendants
as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore;
and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.
All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants,
because you have obeyed My command."
A decade ago, I received a letter from a longstanding BHS member. It complimented the warmth and embrace of our Rosh Hashana service but continued with an impassioned missive railing against us continuing the almost universal Jewish practice of reading aloud this story on Rosh Hashana morning.

‘How can we as honest, modern and psychologically self-aware Jews continue to read aloud, as an illustrative or demonstrative narrative, this tale of a father’s willingness to murder his child at God’s command?’

Even if we accept the story’s own excuse—that this is a trial of Abraham’s loyalty, that God didn’t want the actual sacrifice—it doesn’t solve the real dilemma.

The problem isn’t so much that God makes this impossible demand, as it is that Abraham responds immediately and affirmatively without question or protest.

Yes, ‘what sort of God would ask for this?’, but what SORT of human being would follow through to the point that an angel is dispatched to hold back Abraham’s enthusiastic hand.

How can we possibly hold up Abraham’s behavior as a paradigm we—
or anyone—

should emulate?

I have had a long and simmering struggle with this narrative. Inclined as I am toward tradition, the notion of eliminating and replacing this touchstone reading never really crossed my mind in the early years of my rabbinate.

But today

as the Reform Rabbinate is busily engaged in creating a new Machzor, a new High Holy Day prayerbook, the question of which reading(s) from the Torah will be printed and available in the new edition has challenged me to reconsider the meaning and merit of continuing to place THIS tale at the very center of our New Year gathering.

It doesn’t come as any surprise, but it’s worth repeating, that the custom of weekly, Shabbat and Festival Torah readings were not given to Moses at Mt Sinai. The Torah’s only command in regard to its own reading is that the Israel’s citizenry gather once every seven years to hear the King read it aloud.

Weekly public reading from the Torah is ascribed to Ezra upon his return to Israel from Babylon with Scroll in hand at the end of the Exile.
The custom of fixed selections from the Torah, assigned for Shabbat and Festivals, arose even later.

Originally, the Mishna, (Megillah 3:5) the earliest layer of rabbinic writing, assigned Leviticus, Chapter 23, the priestly holy day calendar, as the Rosh Hashana Torah reading, specifically because it includes the commandment to sound the shofar:

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the Eternal.

That's what the Torah has to say in its entirety about this day, and it doesn't even actually call it Rosh Hashana, the New Year.

That's probably because this day wasn't such a big deal back then. It was a day largely intended for the priesthood and their preparation of the Jerusalem Temple for the largest national holy day, coming up two weeks later: Sukkot, when thousands upon thousands of pilgrims would flood into Jerusalem to bring their required offerings.

Leviticus 23 calls this first day of the seventh month, shabbaton zichron t’ruah/a day of rest commemorated with loud blasts.
One might think it’s to remind us of the ram caught by its horns in the Akedah, but that’s a later midrashic connection.

Elsewhere in the Bible it’s clear that the shofar was originally used to announce every new moon or month, not just the seventh month.

The Mishnah, which details the customs of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashana, never once mentions the Akedah as a basis, or even in connection to, the sounding of the ram's horn on the New Year.

Moreover, the Akedah is ACTUALLY the assigned reading for the SECOND day of Rosh Hashana. And this second day is a Diaspora custom, added on centuries later. The Torah, indeed the entire Bible, knows of only one single day of Rosh Hashana, NOT two.

Today, the reading for this first day of the Jewish New Year, in both Israel and most of the Diaspora, is a birth narrative, Genesis Chapter 21, the story of the conception and birth of Isaac. It is paralleled in the haftarah (taken from the book of Judges)
by the birth story of the prophet Samuel.

Birthdays are one of the themes of this day:

HaYom Harat HaOlam, this is the Day of the World’s birth.

The Akedah became the choice of reading
in those communities that developed the custom
of a second day of Rosh Hashana.

Why?
In large part, because the story is conveniently located,
found in the very next chapter, Genesis 22, and easy to roll to;
and because it focused on Isaac’s later life;
and finally and coincidentally,
because it includes the imagery of a ram caught by its HORNS in a thicket.

The early Reform Movement,
a movement founded in large part by German Jewish MEN,
found the traditional first day reading
involving a narrative of infertility, conception and birth,
too messy.
They were a generation far more intrigued by Soren Kierekegaard’s concept
of the teleological suspension of the ethical —
that is faith overriding reason and morality.

And it didn’t hurt either that this Biblical tale
also conveniently focuses on MEN:
specifically a man and his son
(thereby justifying all sorts of bad paternal parenting
over the centuries.)

Our machzor, the Gates of Repentance, therefore,
doesn’t even offer the traditional first day reading about Isaac’s birth.
Instead, the Akedah is the assigned Torah reading in service #1,
followed by the Genesis Creation story
as a contemporary selection in service #2.

If the story of the Akedah neither characterizes
nor explains how we should observe the New Year (It does not)
and it’s not even originally associated with the Autumn season (It is not.
It was originally connected with Passover)--
If there is NEITHER a Divine nor practical mandate—
then why have Jews been reading THIS tale
on THIS particular day
for so many centuries?

Maimonides writes
that the Akedah demonstrates
the depth and intensity of Abraham's commitment to God.
God demands the most impossible sacrifice possible of any human being—
not the person him/herself,
but their child.
A childless man
who profoundly desires a child of his own,
who is called to sire a new nation,
who after giving up hope finally has a child with his own wife,
and who has unbounded love and attachment to this child,
is tested, in order to discover
that his devotion to God outweighs his attachment to his own child.”

Abraham’s willingness to murder his child
has become confused and conflated
with the traditional Jewish value of Kiddush HaShem,
the willingness to suffer a martyr’s death, thereby sanctifying God.

Clearly however, being willing to suffer death at the hands of a persecutor—
rather than violate one's religious principles—
is something FAR different
than being willing to kill yourself, or worse, murder another person
because you believe you have been directed to by God.

Yet over centuries
the Akedah has been twisted into the benchmark
of a Jew's willingness to suffer and even die in order to hallow God's name.

Why has the Akedah been so widely accepted and endorsed by past generations
as the touchstone reading for this holy day?
I think it's because the story reflects a spiritual affirmation of sorts:
It's hard to be a Jew. It's dangerous to be a Jew.
Our own lives are never secure as Jews, and neither are our own children's.

Built upon the scars of Roman persecution, Crusader martyrdoms,
and most recently the Holocaust,
the Akedah came to be seen by many Jews
as more than MERELY ONE story among many about Abraham.
It became a defining theological and philosophical affirmation:
that to be a Jew is to suffer and be rarely or barely saved by God.

Jewish history
has been marked by our persecution
and identification as God's suffering servants.
The Akedah in some perverse way
offered those who suffered as Jews, a badge of honor.
It confirmed that they were indeed fulfilling God's appointed role in this world.
They were still God's chosen.
Reading the Akedah at the New Year is almost—dare I say it—
an opportunity to stick it in God's face.
"Yes, we know you've chosen us to suffer, yet here we are, again."

At the heart of this approach, is the belief that God is unfathomable,
demanding our absolute and unquestioning loyalty.
We can only submit. We must only comply.
The God of this theology is a dictatorial father
with little regard for the individuality or aspirations of His children.
Human beings can only obey God’s commands;
trying to do so with enthusiasm
no matter how repugnant or absurd the command,
thereby demonstrating the depth of our faith and loyalty.

A corollary to this theology,
is that Abraham’s willingness to comply created a repository of such vast merit,
that we imperfect descendants—incapable of such faith and loyalty—
need merely remind God aloud
in our prayers and Torah reading of Abraham’s actions—
and God will be moved to forgive all our failings
as inheritors of the covenantal promise.

Prayers and commentaries reflecting this theology
fill the traditional daily, Shabbat and Holy Day prayerbooks.
Even our own Gates of Repentance contains such a theological affirmation,
found on page 146, but softened in the English translation:

“Our God and God of all generations,
remember us with favor and grant us Your compassionate deliverance.
Remember Your love for us,
the covenant You made with Abraham on Mount Moriah.
Remember his boundless love for You,
his willingness to offer You all that was his.
Show us Your compassion, then,
and in Your goodness look with favor upon Your people and Your loved ones.”

The Hebrew that precedes that English translation is more explicit:

“Let there appear before You the Binding
by which Abraham our Ancestor bound Isaac his son upon the altar,
overriding his own compassion to do Your will with perfect mindfulness.
In like manner, may Your compassion override Your anger from falling upon us,
and in Your great goodness turn Your wrath away from Your people, Your city,
and from Your dwelling place.”

Tonight, we need to ask,
is this story, this particular and single episode
in the life of our people’s founding father,
is it sufficiently compelling and meaningful
that we would wish to emulate Abraham’s behavior
or find positive inspiration in reciting this particular incident?

Will we concur with, and endorse a theology
that views Abraham’s willingness to murder his son
as a laudable response to an outrageous command?

Would we present, much less practice, Judaism
as yet another faith
in which a Divine Voice trumps both logic
and our own inner gift of moral conscience.
Are we yet another religion
that sees a God who would command killing and murder
as a reasonable or acceptable feature of our faith.

The great modern-orthodox teacher and philosopher
Rabbi David Hartman
derides such a theology as a faith of self-denial, self-abnegation
and even self-defeat.

He poses the question:
Shall we continue to present Abraham's behavior in the Akedah
which demonstrates such utter negation of the self, of the individual,
as the “peak of religious consciousness?”
Will we continue to profess a Judaism
that abdicates our role and responsibility as individual moral agents?

The choice of what we read on Rosh Hashana is no small matter.
It is a choice between which philosophy of Judaism we embrace,
which vision of Judaism we affirm.
It is a choice of how we wish to represent ourselves.
Of how we understand ourselves.

Are there not other superior choices from the Torah
with which to restate our purpose and vision as a people
as we begin the New Year?
Why not Jacob wrestling the Angel and being renamed Israel- the Godwrestler.

Or as Hartman himself offers,
why not an earlier story, found in Genesis chapter 18,
the story of Abraham arguing with God
about the destruction of the city of Sodom.

In that story
we have a paradigm for authentic Jewish self-questioning and self-critique.
Jews are not called to be blind followers of tradition
when it conflicts with our individual ability “to appropriate reality.”
i.e. to establish meaning.
Abraham’s arguing with God shows that the Torah is meant to be a catalyst,
not a set of handcuffs.

Abraham’s argument with God was consensual
— indeed actually invited by God, writes Hartman.
“I imagine God is saying to Abraham,
‘I love you for challenging Me. I want to hear you challenge Me more.
Don’t give in too quickly!’”

Abraham is God's first covenantal partner.
So we read in the story of Sodom:
Now the Eternal said,
“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,
since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation
and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?
For I have singled him out,
that he may instruct his children and his posterity
to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right . . ."

In other words, God expects Abraham, as a covenantal partner,
to hold God accountable for God’s actions.
As Hartman writes;
“because of the covenant established with Abraham,
God can no longer act unilaterally.”

As partners in this covenant,
we humans are elevated beyond being mere creatures,
even beyond stewards of creation.
We have become full partners with God,
and in the fullness of that partnership
we are able, even obliged,
to question and assess God’s demands and behavior
by the standard of what is 'just and right.'

The text proves the point describing an Abraham who asks God:
“Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”
“Far be it from You to do such a thing,
to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty,
so that innocent and guilty fare alike.
Far be it from You!"

The justice that Abraham demands of God
is a justice infused with mercy and compassion.
Abraham not only asks God to spare
whatever righteous individuals might reside in Sodom,
but to spare the ENTIRE city based on the merit of a tiny number,
a minuscule fraction, of citizens who are decent and behave rightly.
This is compassionate justice.

This is the Abraham we must engage
as the model for our own relationship with God and tradition

Not because Abraham succeeded — certainly he did not,
(and success will not be guaranteed to us either)
but because his endeavor was just and compassionate
and ultimately moral.
So tonight, on the eve of this New Year,
I ask all of you to consider:
Which of these two dichotomous narratives
better reflects Judaism's message and meaning:
“the narrative of sacrificial self-surrender,
or the narrative of assertive moral challenge”?

The Abraham of the Akedah
who doesn't utter a single word of protest
against a God who commands him to murder.  
The Abraham that swallows his own voice,  
who silences his own conscience?  
IS this the Abraham that embodies our most deeply held Jewish values?  

To maintain the Akedah  
as the central and definitional reading at the beginning of the Jewish year,  
is to endorse “a theology of submissive unconditional surrender  
in which sacrifice is seen as the highest spiritual achievement.”  
A path which can lead us to "celebrate pain, suffering and death  
as though it were an expression of our deepest faith."  

Though tragedy and suffering  
may be inescapable from our human experience,  
an authentic Jewish theology  
does not elevate tragedy and suffering  
as the definitional experience or proof of our faith.  

The Akedah is the record of a single moment  
in Abraham's encounters with the Divine  
but it is not the totality.  
"It is not the organizing framework of how to live.  
It is not constitutive,  
not a foundational or essential experience, of Judaism!"  

At its best, the Akedah may instruct us
that after experiencing the tragic and irrational,
all we can only endeavor to resume or rebuild our lives.
Such events become scars,
sealed off units that sit apart from the rest of our lives.
Recorded and recounted
but not definitional or even necessarily integrated.

Or even more simply, perhaps the Akedah is an instance,
a painful memory of Abraham in a moment of failure?

Chassidic masters
such as the Gerer and the Izbicer Rebbes
argue that Abraham actually failed God’s test.

Perhaps God was looking to offer Abraham
a rematch he could have won.
A second round,
following Abraham’s compelling argument with God
in the previous Chapter regarding Sodom and Gomorrah.
Where was that Abraham?
One willing to argue on behalf of strangers,
but not his own flesh and blood?

At Rabbi Hartman’s urging,
let us rather, consider
adopting that story of Abraham arguing with God at Sodom
as next New Year's reading and paradigm
and thereby affirm a theology of covenantal empowerment
based on that Narrative,
asserting that God,
having established a covenant with Abraham,
and later the entire Jewish people,
has likewise conferred upon us
the same covenantal rights granted to Abraham.
That covenant writes Rabbi Hartman
“endows us [like Abraham,]
with the ability [and responsibility]
to trust our own moral intuition,
our own moral sensibility.”

The Torah is the great first diary of the Jewish people,
recording our encounters with both God and the world.

In our choice of public readings from this diary
we are making an active choice;
a statement of identity, vision and faith—
by giving weight to the particular events and narratives we select.
What we choose to read on this day—
most especially at this grand annual gathering
and convention of the Jewish people—
ultimately
defines who we think we are,
and who we should be.

Now let the delegates weigh in before next year’s convention!

Shana Tovah Tikateivu!