

“Hood” – Violence at Fort Hood
VaYera 2009

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In a strange confluence of events we mark Veterans Day this week, a soldier has gone on a shooting rampage against fellow soldiers on an army base, and it is the Sabbath we read the Torah portion known as Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac.

There are several times a year when we Americans have the opportunity to acknowledge the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform and to recognize the importance of their contribution to protecting and safeguarding of the freedom we take for granted. These include Veterans’ Day and Memorial Day, as well as to some extent, July 4th. Truth be told, most of us do not give these days their proper respect, nor for that matter, do we give the brave men and women of the armed forces enough recognition for their service.

But this Veterans’ Day our attention is focused on the army base in Ft. Hood, Texas where Nidal Hassan shot and killed 13 and whose other victims lie in hospital beds. Although his motives are not yet known, by now we all know that he is a psychiatrist, that he was not happy about an upcoming deployment overseas, and that he is a Muslim American of Palestinian descent. In the coming days, we will surely learn more about his motives, and what triggered his actions. The underlying root causes will be debated and we will be correctly reminded that not all Muslims commit crimes of jihad. While emphasizing it is important not to jump to conclusions, and there may be any of a number of factors involved in leading him to do what he did, it is not a stretch to recognize that based on the information currently available, there is a connection of some sort between his religious beliefs and his actions.

As a religious leader, I always shudder when an act of violence or revenge has a religious component, regardless of what religion it is, for it gives all religions a bad name. Such acts eclipse the true message of Scriptures, distort what it is that God demands of us, pervert the teachings of monotheism and of what it means to be a religious person of faith. And it is this week’s Torah portion that teaches us all these lessons.

Jewish tradition has many interpretations of God’s test of Abraham, when he tells him to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah. One midrash portrays God as angry with Abraham for misunderstanding and misinterpreting the call to bring him up to the mountain. “I didn’t mean for you to sacrifice your son,” God tells Abraham in this midrashic interpretative reading.

More often than not, the story is seen as a test between competing voices. On the one hand, God demands faith and that faith should lead to action. On the other hand, God demands that we act justly, as well as with mercy and compassion. On the one hand, we

should trust and submit to a loving God, while on the other hand is the question of what to do when the request is to do something which seems to violate the essence of that God's message. On the one hand, we should willingly follow the call of the Almighty and do what is asked of us, but on the other hand, we should follow our conscience and not perform an unjust act. On the one hand, we have an obligation to listen to the voice of God, yet on the other hand, how should one respond when it may entail an act that will result in the cutting off of any future offspring to carry out that will in the future. On the one hand, one heeds a request of the Almighty, on the other, one has to live in this world, and be able to face one's own child.

All of these tensions are in the story, and more.

It is a story of Abraham willingly following the demands of God and complying with this unusual request to slay his son. Isaac is equally willing to submit. One midrash says that Isaac tells his father, "Father, I am a vigorous young man and you are old. I fear that when I see the slaughtering knife in your hand I will instinctively jerk and may injure either you or myself, and thus become unfit for the sacrifice. Therefore, bind me well, so that I will be able to fulfill the commandment properly."

It is the ultimate story of faith. Abraham treks out on his three day journey, in silence, causing Soren Kierkegaard to call him the "lonely man of faith."

Yet the most important aspect of the story is what happens at the end. We usually focus our attention on the strange demand and overlook what happened once Isaac was bound on the altar. But it is what happens on the mountain that is significant, for here is where we learn what God truly wants. At the last moment, just as Abraham is about to raise his hand to slay his son an angel calls out emphatically from heaven Avraham's name twice and tells him not to lay a hand on the child.

I have often felt it is as if God and Abraham are playing a game of chicken. Abraham never flinched.

While there are many commentaries on each and every word in the narrative, and they offer variant perspectives, the understanding of the conclusion is clear. Judaism teaches that the message of God and the angel is: we are not to murder in the name of God. The story is the response of monotheism to paganism, to the peoples who practiced child sacrifice and human sacrifice without any sense there was anything wrong with what they were doing. It is a clear rejection of this practice.

Some of our rabbis teach that the ending shows that we should not suspend the ethical in the service of God. The late Milton Steinberg explained, "the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances, and not for anyone, not even for God. Especially not for God...every act wherein the Good is put aside is more than a breach of His will; it is in effect a denial of His existence."

We Jews seek to sanctify God through Kiddush hashem, actions that reflect positively on God. We say the kaddish several times in each service, "*Yitgadal yetikadash shmeh rabbah:*

May His name be made great and holy.” We achieve this sanctification of God and make His name great through our actions. This is the meaning from our perspective of *allah akhbar*, “God is great.” Judaism teaches that we make God great when we act justly and with compassion, not when we commit murder in the name of God.

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