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A Tale of Two Abrahams

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Oh, God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son”

Abe says, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on”

God say, “No.” Abe say, “What?”

God say, “You can do what you want Abe, but

The next time you see me comin’ you better run”

Well Abe said, “Where do you want this killin’ done?”

God said, “Out on Highway 61”¹

Like most *midrash*, Bob Dylan’s version of *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, takes some breathtaking liberties with the text, not least of which is to transpose the *Akedah* from Mount Moriah (now the Temple Mount in Jerusalem below which the *Kotel*, the Western Wall still stands) to Highway 61, the great American “Blues Highway” that runs north-south from the Duluth of Dylan’s childhood down through New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta.

¹ Bob Dylan, “Highway 61 Revisited,” *Highway 61 Revisited*. © 1965 by Warner Bros. Inc., renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music.

But the real kicker is how, when God says to Abraham, “*Kill me a son,*” Abe says, “*Man, you must be puttin’ me on.*”

If only. If only Abraham had said, “*Man, you must be puttin’ me on.*”

Abraham, like most Biblical figures, is a complicated fellow. He exhibits a kind of split personality: equal parts moral hero and militant zealot; prophet on the one hand, extremist on the other.

Consider Abraham’s virtues: God calls unto him, *Lech Lecha*, “Go forth,” and he leaves his home by the Persian Gulf to settle a land of promise, a Holy Land.² He rescues Lot, his *schlemazel* of a nephew, first when he’s taken hostage in a Canaanite tribal war,³ and again, when Abraham advocates on behalf of the innocent in the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” Abraham demands.⁴ He models Jewish hospitality, welcoming wayfarers to his tent, offering them food and drink, stooping before them to wash their feet.⁵ He fathers a multitude of nations, progeny “as numerous as the stars

² Genesis 11:31-12:7.

³ *Ibid*, 14:1-17.

⁴ *Ibid*, 18:25.

⁵ *Ibid*, 18:1-5.

in the sky and the sand upon the seashore.”⁶ In *midrash* he emerges the original iconoclast, smashing his father’s idols in the name of the one true God.⁷

Taken together, Abraham becomes the paradigmatic moral hero of the Jewish tradition. His legacy is embedded in Judaism’s demand for justice and compassion, humility and integrity.

Which is all well and good, unless you happen to be Abraham’s wife or child.

Behind the closed door of his tent, Abraham comes across a different man—rough, intolerant, fanatical, even. At the first sight of visitors, he barks orders at Sarah, “Quick! Knead bread and bake cakes!”⁸ He passes off his wife as his sister in the Egyptian court in order to save his own hide—all but giving his blessing to the Pharaoh and his lackeys to molest Sarah.⁹ He casts out his son Ishmael, and the mother of his child, the concubine Hagar, to the wilderness, empty-handed save a loaf of bread and a skin of water.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid*, 22:17.

⁷ See *Bereshit Rabbah* §38, and *Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu*, among others.

⁸ Genesis 18:6.

⁹ *Ibid*, 12:10-20. For a parallel narrative, see also Genesis 20:1-16.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 21:14.

And today, Rosh Ha-Shanah, we meet once again this strange and strident Abraham, who hears a mysterious voice and willingly complies with its outrageous demand: who gets up early in the morning so as not to wake Sarah, drags their sweet, sleepy boy out of bed, leaves the servants behind, journeys three days on foot, makes Isaac carry the firewood for his own sacrifice up the mountain, ties him to the altar, raises the knife without flinching, and refuses to lay it down until the angel of God implores: *“Abraham! Abraham! Lay not your hand against the boy.”*¹¹

Imagine living with **this** Abraham. After the *Akedah*, Abraham returns home alone; Sarah dies in the first verse of the next chapter, a broken woman with a broken heart; his castaway son Ishmael forever estranged; and Isaac, poor Isaac, fated to toil until the end of his days in the shadow of his father.

But unlike his father, Isaac will have no great deeds associated with his name. Isaac will be remembered, chiefly, for growing old and blind and—either willingly or unwittingly—participating in his son Jacob’s theft of a birthright and blessing owed to Esau, his twin brother and Isaac’s firstborn son.¹²

¹¹ Genesis 22:1-12.

¹² See Genesis Chapter 27.

All this, too, is the heritage of Abraham: a legacy of family trauma inflicted by a man intoxicated with grandiose visions while staggeringly inattentive to the anguish of the women and children who share his tent, a toxic narcissist whose actions reverberated through successive generations.

I think of this Abraham—these *two* Abrahams, really—the *tzadik* on the one hand and the tyrant on the other, and how hard it is to reconcile the two—and I can't help but observe how uncannily they resemble the Israel of today, a split-personality Israel, an Israel that inspires me on the one hand and vexes me on the other, an Israel that stirs in me great admiration, as well as grave concern.

I share with you these thoughts about Israel at a fraught time. Recall the violence that erupted in May: a two-week period marked by protests and police riot control, thousands of rockets fired on Israel by Hamas, Israeli counterstrikes targeting the Gaza Strip, and, most alarmingly, violent attacks carried out by Arab rioters and Jewish mobs, with beatings and looting and arson and even outright murder in the streets of Acco and Ramle and Lod

and Haifa where Jews and Arabs have lived peaceably, if uncomfortably, together, for generations.

Recall the international outcry, the vast majority of it castigating Israel. Recall the 24/7 news cycle that kept this story front and center while other headlines—like the May 16th terrorist bombing of a school in Kabul which claimed the lives of 90 and injured another 240, most of them girls between the ages of 11 and 15—barely registered.

It's been four months and I remain shaken, despondent, angry.

I'm not alone.

Six days into the conflict, we heard from a college student who had traveled to Israel in February 2018 with her high school senior class, and with Cantor Kleinman and me, as the culminating experience of WRT's "Packing for College" program, a trip we plan to restore in the next year.

"I am reaching out to express my deep concern for Israel," she wrote, and "how I am... processing the... misinformation on my social media pages."

Let me say here how heartened we are by college students writing to their rabbis and cantors, aware that a crisis in Israel is a matter of spiritual urgency for all Jews, wherever we are.

You remind us why WRT exists: to infuse lives with joy, purpose, and impact through the Jewish tradition, and to carry that tradition proudly forward. I hope you, our students, know that WRT will always be there for you to help you navigate the complexities and opportunities of Jewish life, no matter how far you may go, no matter what paths you may take.

So this was, all in all, the kind of email that we clergy appreciate receiving. Still, we find it alarming that so many of our young people are caught in the crossfire of a debate characterized by a surplus of moral outrage and a shortage of reason or understanding.

This spring, our students were pummeled with a steady stream of social media, public demonstrations, and quads festooned with posters accusing Israel and Zionism of “Racism,” “Apartheid,” “Colonialism,” “Ethnic Cleansing,” and even “Genocide”—words

that have become part and parcel of the daily conversation about the world's only Jewish state.

In such an emotionally charged milieu, with such hysterical rhetoric framing the public conversation around Israel, is it any wonder that our students feel worried and confused?

With a quarter of American Jews agreeing with the statement, “Israel is an apartheid state”—appropriating the term once used to describe the racist and draconian South African regime in which a ten-percent minority of Whites ruled over a ninety-percent Black majority—and with nearly as many American Jews affirming that, quote, “Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians,” and even as many as one in five under the age of forty declaring that “Israel doesn’t have a right to exist,”¹³ we should **all** feel worried and confused. I know I do.

The words I speak today are intended to reboot the conversation around Israel. I am doubling down on my commitment to educate the Jewish community about the **real** Israel: the real, messy, beleaguered, beautiful, bewildering, singular, Israel. I am

¹³ Statistics from “Jewish Americans in 2020,” Pew Research Center, May 11, 2020.

determined to do my part to demand an end to the delegitimization of the world’s only Jewish State. I am determined that we embrace complexity and reject one-dimensional narratives about Israel—both reflexive demonization **and** reflexive defensiveness.

We must understand there are, today, **two** Israels, which like the two Abrahams, coexist uncomfortably within the same body: the Israel of moral greatness and the Israel of dangerous fanaticism.

These past months have given me the opportunity to refine my thinking about Israel which has been honed through years of teaching the “Packing for College” course for our eleventh and twelfth graders and leading numerous trips to Israel for students, congregants, and rabbinic colleagues.¹⁴

Those of you who have traveled to Israel with WRT know that we do not sugarcoat the reality on the ground, nor shy away from difficult conversations.

On the one hand, you will encounter a country of pioneering possibility; a country that welcomes the stranger, the immigrant,

¹⁴ I have had the honor of serving as a rabbinic peer leader on multiple trips with the American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF), the educational arm of AIPAC.

and the refugee; a country that has allowed the Jew not only to reclaim Jewish history but also to secure Jewish destiny; a country that has saved millions of Jewish refugees from peril and poverty, giving full citizenship to Black Jews from Ethiopia and Arabic-speaking Jews from across the Middle East and North Africa; a country that embraces the Jewish story, that clothes Jewish faith and observance, language and values, in the mantle of statehood; a “start-up nation” that leads the world in technological innovation; a humanitarian nation that rushes in when disaster strikes—for instance, sending rescue workers to Miami after this summer’s devastating condo collapse. And you’ll meet a nation which has, in recent months, freely elected and installed a new unity government that has pledged to bolster Israel’s democratic norms, and which brings together voices from the left and the right—including [Israel’s first Arab party to join such a coalition](#), and [the first Reform Rabbi to sit in the Knesset](#)—no small feat, these.

And, on the other hand, you will encounter a country that continues to deny non-Orthodox Jews their full share of the rights and privileges—not only spiritual but legal—of living in the Jewish State. You will encounter a country where [women have to fight](#) for their right to pray at the *Kotel*, to sit at the front of a

public bus driving through religious neighborhoods, to live free from being barraged with obscenities or even spit on for wearing short sleeves; a nation lauded, among all Middle Eastern countries, for its inclusive attitudes toward the LGBTQ community and which [still denies](#) gay couples the right to marry, adopt, or bring a child into their families through surrogacy; a state that has eroded its democratic credibility by [passing laws of dubious necessity](#) that chauvinistically privilege Jewish culture and Hebrew language, while disregarding the cultural sensitivities of the more than one in five Israeli citizens who are not Jewish; a nation that has left tens of thousands of [Eritrean and Sudanese refugees](#) in a state of limbo, perpetually ineligible for citizenship but unable to go back to the war-torn countries from which they have fled; a country that continues to encroach on Bedouin and Palestinian lands with ever-expanding development projects and settlements, further marginalizing and [aggravating already underprivileged populations](#); a country that has empowered some of its most fanatical religious and ultra-nationalistic voices, in the name of national security, to the long-term detriment of security, much less peace.

About *this* Israel—the Israel that resembles the second Abraham, the Abraham whose religious fervor nearly led to the sacrifice of

his own child—we must unflinchingly speak the truth, because we are Jews, and that’s what we do. The Torah regards it an act of love and a moral obligation to offer reproof when one’s fellow goes astray.¹⁵ We do not prevaricate. We do not dismiss uncomfortable truths such as these:

- In the Israel of today, you are disproportionately likely to be racially profiled if you happen to be black or brown. Over fifteen years ago, a new term entered the Israeli lexicon: “DWA,” or “Driving While Arab.” It means that minorities (including Jews with black and brown skin) are far more likely to be pulled over by police without any traffic violation.
- In the Israel of today, thirty-six percent of Palestinian-Israeli citizens live below the poverty line. While the figures are better for Palestinians living alongside Jews in mixed-population cities (such as those where violence erupted this spring), still, [Israel’s minorities](#) generally experience poor access to quality education, jobs, and social services, and continue to be underrepresented in political leadership.

¹⁵ Lev. 19:17.

- In the Israel of today, extremists, cynical political officials, and wealthy patrons have co-opted the [54-year long military occupation](#) of the West Bank for their own ideological purposes: a grandiose vision of Jewish totalitarianism in the Biblical Holy Land. What began as a necessity for Israel's security has become a moral and political morass with no end in sight.

“But Rabbi,” I can hear some of you saying, “No country is perfect, including our own. *Many* countries struggle with inequality, violence, poverty, entrenched racism—including our own.” I agree.

“And Rabbi,” others may say, “Palestinian leadership has proved feckless and corrupt, passing up every opportunity to make peace, preferring terror, preferring BDS, preferring griping to the United Nations, preferring the status of perpetual victims over negotiating a real solution that would ameliorate the misery of their people.” Again, I agree.

Yes: there is much the Palestinians could and should do. And that does not negate the fact that we are *Jews*, with a shared stake in the *Jewish* state, and *our* work is not done.

Even as Rosh Ha-Shanah forces our reckoning with the two Abrahams—one, a paragon of moral restraint, arguing before God to spare the innocent, the other, stubbornly clutching the knife above the throat of his child—so too may this Rosh Ha-Shanah bring about in us a reckoning with the reality of the two Israels.

Dr. Brad Artson, a Conservative Rabbi and Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, frames the task before us this way:

When we teach about Israel, we can endeavor to tell the messy truth of a persecuted people searching for safety, going to a land full of meaning for the Jewish people, full of meaning for so many other peoples, and also full of human beings who didn't ask for new neighbors.

When we vote, we can vote for leaders who won't continue paying lip service to peace while funding violence. We can use our position as citizens of Israel's

biggest benefactor to push to regulate and redirect funds in equitable ways that promote a peaceful and just future.

When we pool our philanthropy and direct our giving, we can pay attention: Is our tzedakah supporting those who build peace or those who sow hate and violence disguised in the name of justice and Jewish continuity? Is it supporting those who plant trees with their neighbors or those who are planting over their neighbors' homes?¹⁶

Ultimately, the task before us—"to tell the messy truth," as Rabbi Artson artfully puts it—requires that we come to terms with Jewish power, and Israel's power, specifically.

The question is not, "How can Israel become a moral entity by **relinquishing** power?" but rather, "How can Israel **exercise** its significant power, **morally**?"

¹⁶ Bradley S. Artson, "The Letter Some of My Rabbinical Students Wrote Shows a Lack of Empathy--With Jews," *Forward*, May 19, 2021. <https://forward.com/scribe/469900/my-rabbinical-students-letter-shows-imbalance-and-a-lack-of-empathy-for/>

“There has always been an allure to powerlessness,” wrote Bret Stephens earlier this summer. “It means freedom from the personal and political burdens of responsibility, the moral dilemmas of choice. In an age in which victimhood is often conflated with virtue, it has social cachet. To be powerless is to be pure. To be pure is to be innocent.”

But innocence comes at a price, one that has been particularly terrible for Jews. Nineteen centuries of expulsions, ostracism, massacres, blood libels, torture, and systemic discrimination led to Zionism, which was, very simply, a movement and demand for sovereign Jewish power in the Land of Israel... That the State of Israel was born, raised, and remains under fire isn't a sign of the failure of Zionism. It's a reminder of its necessity.¹⁷

I believe in the necessity of Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, the declaration that we deserve to live free from terror and violence in our national homeland.

¹⁷ Bret Stephens, “The Necessity of Jewish Power,” *Sapir: A Journal of Jewish Conversations*, Volume 2, Summer 2021. <https://sapirjournal.org/power/2021/07/the-necessity-of-jewish-power/>

But I believe in more than just the **necessity** of Zionism. I also believe in Zionism **as a moral imperative** that rectifies millennia of injustice and suffering.

And therein lies the great moral dilemma of our time: **how to execute this imperative, morally?**

To do so requires both boldness and restraint. It requires that we differentiate between empathy and moral clarity, that we acknowledge a Palestinian as a fellow child of God—indeed, a fellow child of Abraham—while doing everything in our power to ensure that no child of Israel is consigned to days and nights of terror, hunkered down in a bomb shelter.

Moral restraint does **not** mean standing idly by while Hamas indiscriminately fires rockets targeting kindergartens and kibbutzim, homes and hospitals. Moral restraint **does** mean thinking twice before confronting Palestinian demonstrators with riot police, particularly during Ramadan, at the El Aqsa Mosque which Muslims venerate—as but one painful example from recent experience.

Ultimately, the moral exercise of power rests on the ability to discern when it's time to raise the knife and when it's time to lower the knife.

For this very reason does the Angel call out, *Avraham! Avraham!*, addressing **both** Abrahams in the moment of decision: calling on Abraham to summon his own better angels, to embrace the Abraham of moral vision and reject the Abraham of intolerance, to put down the knife and redirect his gaze.

Only then can Abraham see a different way forward—a ram in the thicket—God's way of telling us never to give up hope in the possibility for a better future, no matter how bleak the current situation may seem.

God's real presence in the story of the *Akedah* was never the voice in Abraham's head to begin with. God was there all along, in the shadows, off to the side, redirecting his perspective, calling to him: Put down the knife and see things a different way.

To that end, I want us to see Israel with new eyes—up close and personal—whether for the first time or the fiftieth—by joining a congregational trip to Israel to celebrate WRT's upcoming 70th

anniversary year, in 2023 (that's two years from now, or, in other words, sooner than you think). We hope to travel to Israel with you, our WRT family, joining all ages and stages of life, together with our clergy team and gifted educators. We hope to announce details in the coming months.

It's Rosh Ha-Shanah. A new day in a new year. Our connection to Israel may be old as Abraham, but—with vision and commitment—we will create it and strengthen it anew.

Shanah tovah.