For the philosopher Levinas, “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal” (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 200).

Torah Portion, Rosh Hashanah (Second Day)

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. 7 Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" 8 And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "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."

To read this through Levinas’s words is to see Isaac’s words and the angel’s words calling out to Abraham as being appeals marked by utter destitution and nudity, as he says. The question Isaac asks is then loaded, not with curiosity and neutrality, but a deeper apprehension for what they are doing. He sees the essentials, the flint and the kindling, and the absence of the sacrificial lamb. The framing of his question begins when he walks off with his father, the person he calls out as Father, and it ends as they continue to walk on. Abraham answered his son as best he could, reassuring him that he was indeed a father who answered a son, and who knew what they were doing, was very sure of it. But behind the son’s appeal and father’s answer lay an unasked question and unanswered response, namely, what are we doing, and, it will be ok.

If this moment is to be the key moment for our religion, it can only be if that question doesn’t come easily or the response as a dodge, but rather a total listening and speaking. Abraham is not just saying, yes, it is I, your father; or, to the angel, yes, I am here, but, I am completely here, I am completely ready. In asking his question, Isaac becomes vulnerable, but remains a son, and thus not alone. The son and the father will complete the act together, or make a passage through total vulnerability together. And in doing so, will enable the second encounter with the angel to occur.

As the angel calls, Abraham, Abraham, Isaac is there, too, listening also to the angel, like his father. Both are included in Abraham’s answer, Hinaini, and the angel’s first words, at the cliffhanging moment when Abraham’s hand was about to be raised, is stop. Twice the words to stop are iterated, like the call to Abraham: Don’t raise your hand, don’t do anything to him.

If we can stop at this moment, pause before reading on and ending the trial of the father and son, then we are stationed at the point where destitution and nudity, prefigured in Isaac’s question and Abraham’s response, are now brought to the fore and become visible to us. They are caught in a moment the artist is fascinated by, the philosopher is fascinated by, the first perhaps because it is ultimate drama, and the second, at least for Kierkegaard, is because it delineates the contours of faith as supreme, as higher than knowledge.

But we might want to ask more of it than that and say, what does this moment of destitution and nudity mean for us as Jews. I want to imagine that the only way to have an answer is for us to enter into the space of the hakkidah, into the person of the actors, the one who appeals and the other who responds.

When I was young, probably around 10 or 12, I asked my father if I could go with a bunch of kids into the city: we lived in Mt Vernon, and there was a train that went directly to grand central station. My father thought about it for a while, and then said, no. I was so disappointed, I told him I hated him. The next day he didn’t want to come home from work, in the city, he was so unhappy. And I, who had adored my father and called him poppy when I was little, felt ashamed. As it turned out, none of the kids went, although the request would have been less outrageous then in 1955, then now, almost 60 years later. I remember my father carrying me on his shoulders, and my mother telling me my father was the most handsome man ever, and that all the women would fall over him. Later, when it was the night before I defended my ph d dissertation, we spent the night in a hotel close to nyu, and went over my manuscript, correcting the errors. My father had been a brilliant student, but life and the times led him to become a mere businessman, not the mathematician he would have wanted to be.

My relationship with my father was complex, but only because the closeness was very close and the breaks were relatively painful. I can try to remember what he looked like; how he aged; how parts of my own body began to resemble his, especially in age, in shape and form. How his values got into me, even as I rebelled deeply against the NY suburban life and values, how I scorned it, as he strove all his life to buy that house in Scarsdale.

What could I have asked my father as the one question I should have asked, where is the sheep for the sacrifice? What could I have done to make restitution for my childish hurtful words? I couldn’t have turned them back once they were out; and when I became a father, even as someone who was very different from the suburban bourgeoisie I imagined my parents as being, I played the same bach and chopin on the piano as my mother, played chess with my kids as my father taught me to play, and entered a world that was familiar to them.

When they set out, Abraham took the knife, and even though Isaac didn’t mention it, he had to have seen it too. And when the angel said, do not raise your hand against the boy, he meant, do not kill him with the knife. A father and a son live with trust and love, but with a suppressed violence that can destroy either of them, and this moment in the torah gives us the privilege of glimpsing it, so that we can confront what is the most painful part of ourselves, the ability to render the ones closest to us denuded and destitute.

When our relatives were enclosed in concentration camps, and petty rulers from among the inmates were set over them as capos, sometimes ordered to designate who would be chosen to die, we were reduced to a state of total destitution. I can imagine one of the capos was named Abraham, why not. Another of the inmates Isaac.

Isaac has to say to Abraham, in that space in Dachau and Auschwitz, father, and Abraham, yes, my son. And whatever then would happen, they would have to remember what came next as they became actors in the pas-de-deux between the angel and them. Their challenge was not to believe that God would create a miracle, but that they would be able to remain father and son, despite the shadow of the knife hovering over them, and that one day Isaac would be able to remember that when another son would come to him and ask for his blessing. At that moment, for both, for us, they became Jews.

Hag Samayach.

**Rosh Hashanah (Second Day)**

**Genesis 22:1-24 & Numbers 29:1-6**

*This translation was taken from the JPS Tanakh*

**Chapter 22**  
1 Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." 2 And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." 3 So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. 7 Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" 8 And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

9 They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. 11 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "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." 13 When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. 14 And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, 17 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. 18 All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command." 19 Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

20 Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: 21 Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; 22 and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel" — 23 Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. 24 And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

**Numbers 29**  
1 In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. 2 You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord: one bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish. 3 The meal offering with them — choice flour with oil mixed in — shall be: three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram, 4 and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs. 5 And there shall be one goat for a sin offering, to make expiation in your behalf — 6 in addition to the burnt offering of the new moon with its meal offering and the regular burnt offering with its meal offering, each with its libation as prescribed, offerings by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

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