

That Torah portion again! Abraham – summoned by God to take his son Isaac to Mount Moriah. During the past 7 days, I have returned regularly to that story. Some of you must think “he’s just going to keep doing it until he gets it right!!”

It is, of course, a troubling story. I am not sure which is more troubling, that God bids Abraham to slay his only son or that Abraham agrees to do so. What saves the day for God, I suppose, is that it was only a test. We know that, but did Abraham? My own reading of this story is yes, Abraham knew. At least, Abraham had faith that God did not intend to go through with it.

Here’s the clue: when Abraham and Isaac reached a certain point in their trek up the mountain, Abraham says to his attendants: “You wait here. I and the lad will go further and make an offering and we will return here.” “We.” “I and the lad” will return here! Abraham knew, or at least had faith, that it was only a test. Abraham showed his faith in God by taking the journey up the mountain with his son. And God kept faith with Abraham ultimately by not requiring that sacrifice.

The other day it dawned on me that this interpretation of the Torah says as much about me and [if you accept it] about you as it does about God and Abraham. We are modern Jewish persons. We believe our dignity involves the power to question authority, to challenge and to interpret, rather than follow blindly even a command that purports to come from God – especially if it conflicts with our sense of what is good for us and our dear ones.

We know only too well how some awfully bad deeds have been justified by saying: “God told me to do it.” Our faith as Reform Jews requires that we listen to an inner voice and use our reason before deciding what we are commanded to do.

Such is the modern sensibility. Much that is good in our world comes from this questioning, probing, and demanding that we be free to re-evaluate some of the traditions that have come down to us. That’s the good news. The sad news is that the freedom to choose what will be a commandment for us has a darker

side. Since this is the season of judgment, let us also confront the darker side of our modern temper. There is first the danger that we may come to believe whatever we choose is good because we choose it. We may no longer listen for or heed any commandments, any standards beyond ourselves.

Abraham was prepared to say "No!" to God at Mount Moriah if it came to that. He had already challenged God to spare the innocent inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. But when Abraham challenged God, he did so in the name of God's teachings. He asked: "Will the Judge of all the Earth not act justly?" Abraham did not say: "What I choose to do is right because I choose it." He did not say: "There is no better or worse choice; there are no standards beyond me."

The darker side of modernity is our temptation to collapse all sense of commandment beyond what we feel like doing or what feels good. Yet now, as always, there is an order of life which should not be violated. Some choices are more in keeping with the way we are intended to live.

As modern Jewish parents and teachers, we must remain ready to say that all coercive, exploitive, manipulative relationships are wrong because they violate the image of God within each person. We also must be prepared to say that some consensual relationships are better than others. A relationship in which I meet strictly my sexual need with a consenting partner is not as good as one in which there is also demonstrable concern for the total well-being of the other person. That, in turn, is not as good a relationship as where there is commitment to the other person beyond this day -- commitment symbolized by those promises embodied in the ceremony of marriage.

Another danger of the modern temper is that focusing only on my freedom of choice and the loss of a sense of real commandment can lead to the erosion of all boundaries and limits. Our Reform Judaism is not immune to that danger. Take the Sabbath, for example. Contrary to some beliefs, the founders of our movement respected the Sabbath commandment as vital to Judaism. They realized that some persons need to work on the Sabbath, and they rejected the rigorosity with which Orthodoxy defined precisely what is permitted and what is not permitted. And they ask: "How can I fulfill the intent of the Sabbath commandment under the conditions of this time and place?"

But if we Reform Jews focus only on the right to choose what the Sabbath will be for us, if we do not consciously ask what boundaries must we respect,

what ought we do and to refrain from doing if we are to take the Sabbath commandment seriously – if we don't ask such a question, we will end up as many of us have, letting the Sabbath pass without there being any recognizably Jewish sense that it is the Sabbath. And I may not even feel uncomfortable that a value so basic to Judaism [one of the Ten Commandments] is totally ignored by me and my children. That was not the intention of the founders of modern Reform Judaism, but it is what happens when the freedom to choose erodes all sense of boundaries.

We especially must guard against boundaries in the realm of ethics – not only in personal relationships but also in the marketplace. The profit motive has blessed our capitalistic society. It has brought more abundance to more people than any other alternative in human history. But there is danger if the pursuit of profit is the only bottom line – if it becomes the equivalent of self-fulfillment without boundaries in my personal relationships. That need not be so.

In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Hugh Aron tells us of his father's upholstery business. "I grew up knowing how easily a vender could cheat the customer. The customer could not possibly know until years later the quality of materials hidden beneath the cover of an overstuffed chair..." He admired his father for not cheating.

Hugh Aron went into business for himself and discovered "how rife were the opportunities to be dishonest not only with customers but also with vendors, employees and the government." Aron takes pride in running a successful company that honors ethical norms, observes boundaries, and insists its employees do so also.

I remember a man telling me about a certain deal he tuned down because, as he put it, "It did not pass the smell test." With all life's ambiguities and the grays of the marketplace and profit as the bottom line, much is at stake in knowing, as our religion teaches us, that there is an order of life. There are boundaries which ought not to be ignored.

Another potential casualty of the modern temper is the loss of personal accountability. We want so much to feel good about ourselves that we are reluctant to use the world sin. Instead, we more comfortably say, "I'm sick" or

“I act as I do because of what so and so did to me” or “I was on medication” or even, “It’s the food I ate.” To be sure, we are at times subject to forces beyond our control. We can be victims of others. Children can be bruised by their parents’ behavior. There are rape victims, child abuse victims; and it is to The credit of modernity that we have come to understand and address these phenomena. But we must avoid a life perspective that forfeits all accountability; for if we do, we will not be able to hold to account those who have wronged us. If everyone is simply the victim of someone else, there is no accountability in this world. If I am only a victim, then I will never assume responsibility for my acts and my life.

There is great Jewish wisdom, I believe, in the twelve-step programs. These programs recognize the reality of addiction, of overpowering forces impinging on our lives. But I am still called on to accept responsibility for the harm I have caused others in my condition and to ask their forgiveness. From here on **I**, not those who harmed me, am responsible for what **I** do with my life and how **I** treat others.

The prayers this very night remind us there is an order to life we ought not, but sometimes to do, violate. **Sin is real; accountability is real; judgment is real. And so are the words: “I am sorry for what I did or failed to do. I need your forgiveness.”**

There is still one other potential casualty of our modern temper. If I make my right to choose and my self-fulfillment the only cornerstones of my life, I may impair all deep commitment. In my experience, even couples who have lived together before deciding to get married come to the marriage ceremony with a palpable nervousness. Why? They know each other in so many ways by now. So why the nervousness?

Because when you live together, on some level you know that if you wake up tomorrow and it is no longer fun, you can walk out. That’s quite different from living with a person to whom you have vowed before family and friends: “I promise to be there for you in good times and in bad times, to share the joys and burdens of life.” It is understandably nervous making the move from a relationship that is tentative to one that in its sacred symbolism and its public

testimony binds us to a shared future. There are, of course, couples who embark upon marriage and pretend that nothing has changed.

Some years ago, I encountered a couple who was disturbed by the question I intended to ask them at the marriage ceremony: "Do you promise to love, honor and cherish him/her throughout your days?" They explained: "We cannot really promise that. We love and enjoy each other now, but we cannot know the future." They found their honesty cool and chic [shēk], I found it ominous.

When a marriage works, it is more like a family bond than a business contract. In a business contract, the commitment is null and void when has failed to live up to any of its terms. Marriage at best involves a deeper level of commitment, more than a simple cost benefit calculation. There is an element of unconditional love. We are family. We are enmeshed.

Yet, at times, even a family relationship must be dissolved. We have known parents who needed to banish children from the home and grown children who needed to sever all relations with their parents. Some marriages so violate the dignity and well-being of the partner they need to be dissolved in spite of the promises. But in a marriage of deep commitment, divorce will be a last resort, always undertaken with a measure of regret, sadness as well as hope for the future. Both partners will have sought help to see if their marriage can be sustained. Couples in successful marriages who have survived their share of stressful times discover this great truth: Only when there is genuine commitment to the other and to the relationship do, we experience the deepest kind of love.

Like you, I cherish the gifts of modernity. I cherish my freedom, my autonomy, my self-fulfillment, my power to resist blind obedience to the commandments of another, even if that command is credited to God.

But the greater danger for us moderns is not that we will blindly obey a command to take our children to Mount Moriah; it is that we may too easily regard whatever we are inclined to do, what we feel is self-fulfilling as the only standard in our life.

Let us delight in the broad range of choices in our life but let us remember not all choices are equal simply because we choose them. Some choices are better than others because they are more in keeping with the sacred order of life and with our intended destiny as children of God.

Let us distinguish between autonomy and irresponsibility. Let us be judged not only by what we permit ourselves but also by the boundaries and limits we respect in our life.

Let us appreciate modern insight on the complexity of human behavior but let us not forfeit that hallmark of our humanity: personal responsibility for the good and the harm I do to myself or others.

In our relationships, let us insist on respect for our personal dignity and well-being, but let us also strive for and cherish that genuine commitment to the other and to the relationship for which we can experience the deepest kind of love.

Now, as in the time of Abraham and Sarah, life is to be understood as covenant. And fulfilling my covenant with my Creator means responding to a "horizon of significance," beyond the borders of my personal whim. Yes, I must freely choose; but, in my choices, I must be guided by the cumulative wisdom of my heritage and I must listen ever more intently for that fundamental commandment of life – God's word to Abraham and Sarah and to us.

**Heyeh Bracha "Be thou a blessing."**