



High Holy Days: Questions Asked But Not Answered?

For many Jews, particularly those of us who come to High Holy Day services struggling with difficult life decisions, the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services often raise more questions than they answer.

It's not unusual to leave High Holy Day services confirmed in the conviction that we will not be given answers to our mundane questions about our self, our family, our job, or our community—never mind the spiritual and religious questions about our purpose in life, our crisis of faith, or our imaginings of suffering and death.



The Torah reading (Genesis 22) for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the akedah or "binding of Isaac," offers us some insight into this experience of unanswered questions.

We learn from this particular Torah reading that God tests us through various

aspects of the creation—some of which we ourselves co-produce—to believe that our worst evil inclination is God's own truth.

We can imagine that God was testing Abraham to see if he would believe that his worst evil inclination, the idea that God wanted him to sacrifice his son, was in fact the Divine will.

We also learn from this reading that we have been endowed with the capacity to choose to stifle the voice of our conscience, our good inclination, so that we can carry on a conversation with our evil inclination, which is what Abraham was doing.

It's hard not to ask, how far would Abraham have gone if the angel of God had not intervened? Some say he would have slain his son. But that hardly seems probable considering the confidence he had that *his* God would *never* demand human sacrifice.

So he was confronted with a crucial question: Was

the voice of this god the same as his One God—and how could he be sure one way or the other?



The simple answer, of course, would be "no"—this could not be the voice of the One God, since his God abhorred human sacrifice.

But suppose Abraham decided to consider the question "as if" the voice was that of his One God: What would he—or any one of us—be likely to imagine it would mean that this God, who abhorred sacrifice, would ask that he sacrifice his son?—not command, mind you, but *ask*.

(Continued on page 3.)

Save the Dates: September 7 & 21— Shabbat Evening Now Begins at 6:30 p.m.

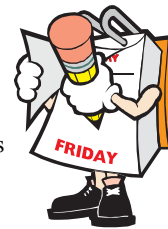
Kehillat Kharakim will offer Friday evening egalitarian services and Shabbat dinners on September 7 and 21 at the home of Rabbi Moshe and Khulda.

Services begin at a new time, 6:30 p.m., and include English and Hebrew prayers and singing.

After services there is a

blessing of the children and a sit-down dinner.

Dinner is followed by readers' theatre Torah-drama, and zemirot (table songs).



Everyone who comes is invited to bring a contribution to the tisch (table) in the form of a short story, a song, or a brief reading that's related to Shabbat generally or the Torah parsha (portion) for the week.

Call (323) 934-2925 for information, location, and to hold a place.

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Otzar—Treasure

Rabbi Menahem Mendl of Kotzk said: I dearly love Rabbi Shlomo Leib of Lentashna, but why does he cry out the whole day to the Holy One, Blessed be He, to send the Messiah? It would be better for him to cry out to the Jews to repent, and then the Messiah will come on his own. That is what God told Moses: Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them go forward.

—Rabbi Menahem Hacohen

Atonement: Training Children for Life

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, presents to us a sublime opportunity. It is a day that is calculated and crafted in all of its features to stimulate and support us in turning away from death and toward life. For that is precisely what it means to be at one with God: we become allied to all the divine efforts to create and sustain life. So on Yom Kippur we turn our lives to the cause of life, to join that cause with all of our energy and spirit.

But is it possible that we can join the cause of life if we, either actively or by passive acquiescence, are training our children to kill?

“Exaggeration,” you say?

Consider the case drawn together by Lt. Col. David Grossman, a retired Army Ranger and psychologist, author of *On Killing*:

Grossman cites a variety of evidence to make the point that “*killing is unnatural*,” it must be taught, because there is “a built-in aversion to killing one’s own kind.” In fact, he notes, military historians have repeatedly reported that until relatively recently, most soldiers *avoided* killing their enemies, as far-fetched as that may sound. For instance, most of the muskets found after the Battle of Gettysburg were still loaded; even more surprising, half had multiple loads in the barrel. World War II studies revealed that only 15 to 20 percent of all U.S. Army riflemen could bring themselves to fire at an exposed enemy soldier.

When the military became aware of this phenomenon, they began to develop policies and procedures that would reverse it. By the Korean War, 55 percent of our soldiers were willing to shoot to kill; by Vietnam the percentage had risen to 90.

How was this aversion to killing achieved? Grossman describes the three main methods that were used:

Desensitization was accomplished by the “boot camp” experience, which subjected soldiers to intense physical and verbal abuse. Desensitization is what our children today experience, starting not at 18 years of age but 18 months, through exposure to violence in the media. The most recent and egregious example is the association of *food* with violence in TV commercials. At the early stages of psychological development, children are rarely able to discriminate between the “pretend” they see on TV and real life—and these media experiences of murder and mayhem are repeated thousands of times in their young lives.

Classical conditioning was used by the Japanese to train their soldiers early in

World War II. A large contingent of soldiers would be required to observe and cheer as a handful of their comrades bayoneted Chinese prisoners who had been placed in a ditch with their hands tied behind their backs. Afterwards the soldiers who had observed were given sake, the best meal they had had in months, and access to so-called “recreation.”

As Grossman points out, “Our children watch vivid pictures of human suffering and death, and they learn to associate it with their favorite soft drink and candy bar, or their girlfriend’s perfume.” After the Jonesboro school shootings, school teachers reported that many students (attending other schools) reacted with laughter when told what had happened—not unlike the reaction of children that many of us have witnessed in movie theaters when bloody violence is shown on the screen. As Grossman concludes, “We have raised a generation [that has] . . . learned to associate violence with pleasure. . . .”

Operant conditioning of soldiers by the military uses a powerful, repetitive procedure—stimulus-response, stimulus-response, stimulus-response—to train them to act automatically despite whatever pressure or chaotic circumstances they may experience. Pilots, for example, are trained to react automatically in emergencies. Military and police training use similar techniques—for example, linking the stimulus of pop-up targets with human forms to the requirement of a split-second response of firing at the target. The process teaches one to shoot to kill, reflexively.

Virtually all video games in this genre have the same effect. There is, however, one important difference: in military and police training, personnel learn that under certain circumstances the correct response is *not* to shoot; but with violence-laden video games there is only one correct response—shoot to kill. Thus it should come as no surprise that youthful, *inexperienced* shooters who are veteran video gamers often demonstrate remarkable accuracy when they pick up real weapons.

As Yom Kippur approaches, every one of us—whether parent or not, whether our children are still living at home or not—should engage in self-examination about the role we play in the exposure of children and youth to massive doses of violence in

the media and through video games.

Most of us have allowed ourselves to be overcome by the momentum that has been generated by corporate greed. We should make no mistake: they are peddling violence and death for massive profits. And too many of us have allowed ourselves to become voiceless and powerless in the face of these death merchants. What parent has not said or thought with frustration and a sense of futility, “There’s no way to keep the kids from watching violent TV and movies, and the violent video games are everywhere.”

If we want to train our children for life rather than death, there is a way . . . but it requires, first, that we turn our own lives. We cannot help them turn away from violence and death without our own inner conviction and commitment to no longer be complicit in their training to be killers. Without that change in us, nothing will change for them—and Yom Kippur is the time to finally make that decision.

If the complicit among us are willing to acknowledge our failure to resist; if we are willing to express remorse to our children, who may not fully understand our confession; if we are willing to dedicate ourselves completely, without reservation, to training our children for life—if we are willing to do these things, then there will be power in our acts and hope that we can reverse this deadly heading, because we shall have allied ourselves with the Creator’s plan for life.

ברכות העונה Blessings of the Season

לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכְתְּבוּ
May you be inscribed for a good year.

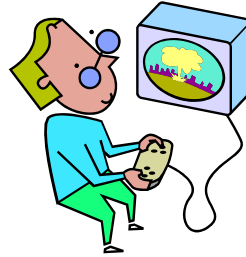
(Appropriate for Erev Rosh Hashanah and the two days of Rosh Hashanah.)

כְּתִיבָה וְחִתְּימָה טוֹבָה
A good inscription and sealing (to you).

(Appropriate for the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.)

גִּמְרֵה חִתְּימָה טוֹבָה
A favorable final sealing (to you).

(Appropriate for Yom Kippur.)



High Holy Days (con't.)

One conclusion would be that it was a test; God was tempting Abraham to do what was forbidden, to test his faith.

Now what might Abraham imagine that God would require of him to pass or fail the test? If, on the one hand, he was in fear and reluctant to offer up his son, that would seemingly indicate a failure of his faith in the One God, because it would indicate a fear that his son was *actually* going to be taken. If, on the other hand, he had absolute faith in his God, and a conviction that no other god or gods had any power over him, might he not go to the very moment of taking his son's life, confident that his God would not require the ultimate act? And wouldn't he also be confident that if such an abomination were asked of him, it would not be *his* God who would be making the request—and thus he could refuse the request?

Did Abraham have questions about God and his mitzvot, his commandments? Absolutely! Who wouldn't under such circum-

stances? Can there be any more serious questions than about the life and death of our children?

There's a story about a man who abandoned his Judaism because of his questions. The man was asked by an old friend who was still a practicing Jew, "Why did you give it up?" The man replied, "I had a lot of questions." The friend then asked, "Were they questions or were they answers?" "What do you mean?" the man replied. "Well," said the friend, "maybe they were really the excuses you used to explain away why you abandoned your heritage. If so, such questions are really answers already—and so, of course, they can't be answered."

One cannot live a Jewish life—or a life based on *any* moral vision and law—without questions. Human life is full of contradictions, which prompt endless questions.

But the more we study the Torah—here we mean all of the sacred Jewish literature—the more answers we find. Inevitably,

with each new set of answers comes new understanding, intellectual and spiritual growth, and new questions. And so in Jewish life, "We live from question to question."



Abraham certainly had questions, compelling questions, but he didn't use them as excuses to abandon his God. He had faith that the answers to his questions would emerge in time. In this

context, "faith" means that he was committed to God's goodness, regardless of his immediate experience and reason. That is, he was willing to act on the assumption that goodness would emerge and increase in the world, even if at any particular moment that possibility seemed contradicted by his reason and experience.

Imagine where we would be—in fact, we wouldn't be—if Abraham had not struggled faithfully with his questions.

For young People: Why Goats Are Special

Do you know what part the goat plays in our Yom Kippur services?

Remember, it's the day we decide whether or not we're going to be at one or atoned with God—whether we're going to do what God wants us to do in the coming year—so it's called the Day of Atonement. It's the holiest day of the year because, for most Jews, we come closer to being at one with God, prepared to do what God wants of us, than at any other time in the year.

At Yom Kippur services we read (Leviticus 16) from the Torah that two goats were to be used as "offerings" to



God. One was sent directly to the Temple as a sacrifice; the other was sent out into the wilderness to help the people become close to God again.

One of our great rabbis (Samson Rafael Hirsch) taught that what we can learn from this is that we get to choose between living a good life based on what we learn in the Temple or a bad life wandering confused in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:10)

Did you know that the goat has a number of Hebrew names? One name for the she-goat is *aiz* (אֵיז), which is probably related to the word *oz*, meaning strength; a name for a he-goat is *sa'ir* (שְׂעִיר), which means hairy; another name for a he-goat is *atoad* (עֵתָד), which comes from the word *atad*, meaning "to be ready."

In the bible it says "you shall not boil a kid in the milk of its mother." (Exodus 23:19) Why wouldn't we want to take milk from a mother goat and then boil her kid in the milk? How would the *mother* feel? How would *you* feel watching such a thing?

The Rabbis taught that this mitzvah, this commandment, meant that we should not mix dairy and meat products when we cook and eat, which is one of the rules of keeping kosher. What's the reason for the rule to not mix dairy and meat products? One possibility is to remind us whenever we eat that if we are going to consider the feelings of animals, all the more so we should take care of the feelings of other *people*.

There's another reason why goats are special. Do you know what parts of the goat were used in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem? Here's a hint: It's something *not* below their neck. Give up? The shofar sounded on Rosh Hashanah was made from the horns of a wild goat.

That reminds you, it's time for the goat quiz! 1. What are some of the important things we get from goats? 2. How much does a full-grown goat weigh? 3. How is it possible for goats to eat and digest tin cans and other trash? 4. What do we call male goats (in English)? 5. What do we call young goats (in English)? 6. How big is the typical goat herd?

With all that we know about goats, what are some of the things that make them like-

able? We like them because their meat is good to eat and their milk is good to drink, they're kosher, and they're not vicious.

On the other hand, there are some things we don't especially like about goats. They can make a lot of mischief and be very destructive, damaging the land and killing plants, and they smell bad!

But what about "sea-goats"? (What, you've never heard of sea-goats?)

According to the Talmud (Baba Batra 74a), Rabbi Safra told this story: "Once we were traveling aboard ship and we saw a fish that raised its head out of the sea. It had horns on which were engraved the words: I am only a small creature of the sea. I am three hundred parsahs long, and I am now going into the mouth of Leviathan [a huge sea monster that is the enemy of God]." Rabbi Ashi said: "That fish is a sea-goat that searches for its food [by digging in the sea bed] with its horns."

So maybe there's a lesson here: As we go about our lives every day, getting our food and the other things we need, we should try to stay away from places where we're likely to be hurt by very powerful people who are the enemies of God!



(Answers to the goat quiz: 1. Milk, cheese, meat, wool, leathers, and of course horns. 2. About 100 to 120 pounds. 3. They can't, so they don't. 4. Rams, billies, or bucks. 5. Kids. 6. Five to 20 members.)

OPENINGS

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על קהלת חרקים—ABOUT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM

- Kehillat Kharakim—a community of *openings*—meets twice-monthly for Shabbat services.
 - Kehillat Kharakim Friday-evening services regularly include a devar Torah (“sermon”) in the form of a readers’ theatre Torah-drama.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s formation is being sponsored by Gather the People (GTP), a nonprofit organization founded by a Sponsor Committee of rabbis from virtually all the major branches and movements of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s rabbinic leadership is provided by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, formerly the “Rabbi Team” for Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is to create a community of *openings*, or “kharakim,” through which family members of all ages can draw upon Judaism and congregational life to increase meaning and fulfillment in their own lives.
- The goal is a community that, regardless of where one begins or ends in Jewish knowledge or commitment, encourages greater exploration, acquisition, and expression of Judaism—and regardless of where one fits religiously, treats each person with kindness and respect.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is that, apart from our capacity as individuals, we also have a role as a *kehilla*, a *community*. Following the example of Nehemiah, who gathered the people to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we assume that we too can reduce the pressures and realize the hopes that will uplift our families. By doing mitzvot *collectively*, we can bring about change for the good in our day to day lives.
 - Kehillat Kharakim is independent, not affiliated with any of the movements or branches of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim has the following kashrut policy: all food must be dairy or parve, unless special arrangements have been made, and must be prepared according to kosher guidelines; packaged goods must be certified as kosher; fresh baked goods must be purchased from kosher bakeries; and home-baked goods must contain only vegetable shortening. Non-kosher food shall not be served.

Kehillat Kharakim is a project of
Gather the People
An Education & Training Resource
for Congregational Community Development
<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>

PASTORAL COUNSELING AVAILABLE

Rabbi Moshe offers pastoral counseling without charge to any Kehillat Kharakim individual, couple, or family. Pastoral counseling addresses religious and spiritual as well as psychological and emotional needs. Moshe has a Ph.D. in Social Work, was a staff member of the Adirondack Samaritan Counseling Center of Glens Falls, NY, and was trained at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information or an appointment.

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