

Rabbi Rosaliin Mandelberg  
Ohef Sholom Temple  
Introduction to the Akeida  
September 5, 2013

Good Yontif. In this morning's Torah reading, Abraham hears the voice of God command him to take his beloved son, Isaac, to a mountain and offer him there as an *'olah'* – a sacrifice. He does and, at the moment of truth, an angel of God prevents his hands from harming the boy. As we wrestle with this story year after year, we too are compelled to consider what we might do if forced to choose between two loves, two values, two ideals.

For several thousand years, our sages have suggested two classical responses as to why Abraham heeded God's call. One is that Abraham is the perfect man of faith. He hears God's voice and runs to fulfill God's command unquestioningly. The other is that Abraham is really a reluctant man who is torn between his love for God and his love for his son.

This is the most difficult test, our rabbis say, which Abraham will ever face. During the three-day-journey he took to Mt. Moriah, Abraham must have agonized over many of the same questions we do today: How can a loving God, who is the moral exemplar and guide for all of humanity, possibly want me to commit this terrible act? And, on the other hand, who am I to argue with the One who has chosen me to be the family through which His ethical precepts will guide a thousand generations to come? Abraham's dilemma is an impossible one because, his morality and his conscience dictate that he has an obligation to honor both God and the life of his son; they are equal in weight and, in making a choice, he ultimately cannot honor either one.

\* \* \*

Today, we as a country, and as individuals, face a similar challenge. You are all acutely aware that as we sit this morning in our beautiful sanctuary, surrounded by our loved ones and friends, praying for peace, Congress is debating whether or not to support military action against Syria. On the one hand, to do so would most certainly invite Assad to retaliate either against his own people or neighboring countries, Israel included, causing more suffering. But if the US does nothing, then not only will other countries, dictators and terrorists groups, like Iran, be emboldened to use weapons of mass destruction, but we will shamefully remain silent in the face of injustice . . . and this, as Americans and Jews, we cannot do either.

Did Abraham do right when he held the knife above his son? The question cannot be answered without raising many more questions and a satisfying response will elude us, as it has generations before us, for the next 2000 years. Like Abraham, the moral dilemma that faces us, is an impossible one for no matter what choice we make, we, too, will ultimately be both right and wrong. And yet, we must choose.

We are marking the beginning of a New Year; the evil we confront is real and the choices we are forced to make are complex, terrifying and painfully difficult. As He did for Abraham, may God send an angel to guide our hands and our hearts. Amen.