of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death." According to St. Augustine, Isaac represents Jesus in his willingness to go to the slaughter, in his bearing the wood for the pyre in the same way that Jesus bears his cross, and in the expectation, attributed to Abraham, of his resurrection. The ram, caught in the thicket like the crown of thorns, also prefigures Jesus, actually undergoing sacrifice.

Is there any convergence or even some closing of the gap between the Jewish and Christian readings? The late Rabbi Louis Jacobs reminds us that various Jewish interpretations of the Akedah do not necessarily reduce its lesson to the argument that God abhors human sacrifice. And more than that, Shalom Spiegel, one of the 20th century's leading scholars of medieval Jewish literature, argues that the Akedah's protestations constitute a "partial admission of the vitality of pagan ways" among Israelites. He even investigates ways in which Jewish tradition toyed with the idea of Isaac's metaphorical, partial, or even complete sacrifice.

However, when Jews have taken the sacrificial motif beyond the limits of the text, they have done so as a consolation for their own persecution. That is, they read the Akedah to justify their martyrdom as a *negation*, as a way to fend off catastrophe and blasphemy, rather than affirmatively, as a propitious act of divine grace.

Thus, Christianity *has* inflected Jewish textual interpretation, but it did not penetrate its DNA. Ultimately, Jacobs is right: Jewish interpreters do not necessarily argue that the Akedah's sole purpose is simply to prove that God rejects human sacrifice. Rather more pointedly, they understand the text to take that fact for granted. Christianity, meanwhile, offers a new, promising view of divine sacrifice. This difference resides, together with other factors, at the very core of the two religions' historical divorce from one another.

Faith and Ethics: A Roundtable on the Akedah

Jeff Helmreich: Can you imagine God commanding you to do something terrible? Traditional Judaic sources may, at times, offend us morally. For example, we might take offense at the biblical treatment of homosexuals or civilian Amalekites. How do you reconcile these morally challenging sources with continued reverence for tradition and Torah — if you do revere Torah?

Josh Kornbluth: I'm more of a neophyte, just beginning to study Judaism. I am just starting to engage and grapple with Judaism's commandments and laws. I find this commandment, to do the worst possible thing that I can imagine, so bracing. But it activates me, and that's important.

Dov Linzer: Grappling with it is the first show of reverence. Josh, you're not dismissing it but engaging with something that horrifies you. Contextually, the key to the question is: Which part of the story do we emphasize — the beginning or the end? I emphasize the end — that God makes it clear that God did not want Isaac to be sacrificed. Part of what we learn is that God's commands and commandments will be fully respectful of the sanctity of human life. The other part is Avraham's willingness to or ability to hear the angel telling him to stay his hand. Avraham could have said, "Well, an angel is an angel. God trumps the angel." But Avraham was able to hear the angel, which speaks to the human role in hearing God's voice. We never just listen. We are always choosing how to listen, how to interpret what we heard. Avraham chose to hear the angel's voice not as a contradictory one to be dismissed, but as a voice that could allow for a deeper understanding of God's will. This points to the idea of the oral Torah, the role that humans play in hearing and interpreting and applying God's voice. We have to take responsibility to hear the angel's voice and to understand how to interpret God's words. In a beautiful midrash, Rashi relates that when God said to Avraham, "Put him up" ("*Ha'alehu l'ohlah*"), God meant only to put him up and not to slaughter him. In this midrash, God — not the angel — is (re-)interpreting God's own words, but regardless, it shows the central role that interpretation plays in our tradition. This, in the end, is what the oral tradition is about: interpretation and our role in that process.

Josh Kornbluth: It feels as though there's something else going on. Is it a creation of civilization to identify beyond my family, beyond my loved ones, in this case as a Jew, as a member of a larger group? This seems like a lesson about going beyond our cave. It seems like this story engages the strongest bonds we have, challenging me to consider a larger bond, a bond that would appear artificial to me, and yet to consecrate it through the willingness to sacrifice.

Rabbi **Sharon Brous** is the founder of IKAR, a Los Angeles community that makes manifest the connection between political and social engagement in the world and religious life. **Josh Kornbluth** is a comic monologist living in Berkeley, Calif. His most recent performance piece is called "Andy Warhol: Good for the Jews?" Rabbi **Dov Linzer** is Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in New York. **Jeffrey Helmreich** moderated the conversation. He is completing a doctorate in philosophy and law at the University of California at Los Angeles, and spending this year as a research fellow in Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation.

Jeff Helmreich: Where does the talk of grappling with God leave the virtue of faith? Couldn't we say, instead: "Wow, what an incredible display of* emunah*, of faith"? Here is a biblical hero acting against all reason and all values that he might personally have. Isn't there something to admire in that, too, and don't we have a tradition of celebrating it?

Sharon Brous: I'm so fundamentally opposed to that notion. The Avraham I celebrate is the Avraham of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Avraham of "*Lech L'cha.*" It's one thing to act with pure faith and do something that's completely counter to reason, which is the "*Lech L'cha*" Avraham, when that action doesn't hurt anybody else. But I can't accept acting with pure faith when it means taking the life of an innocent person. Killing an innocent because God says so is not a religious value. The text comes to teach us that there is value in seeing failure in Avraham, and in trying to build lives in which we don't make the same mistakes that he made. I think this kind of blind faith-brutality is presented to teach us to resist it, defy it, cry out against it, to teach us how not to behave.

Josh Kornbluth: Are you saying the story is meant to teach us not to have blind faith? Yet it seems, intuitively, to be teaching at the very least both lessons: first, the lesson that you abhor, and second, the lesson that you are drawing. It seems as if the original teaching was to say, "Bow down and do whatever it is that God tells you to do because God is a big deal."

Sharon Brous: We have to contend with the fact that God disappears at the end of the story and an angel takes the place of God. If one were to look at the story without the benefit of thousands of years of commentary, what is that ending about? If God is actually proud of Avraham for his faith, for stepping forward and being willing to sacrifice his child, why wouldn't God say at the end, "I bless you for this"? Why is an angel sent instead? That's the hint that Avraham doesn't pass the test in the end, that this is a story of failure on all fronts.

Of course people have walked away from this story reading exactly the opposite of what I'm suggesting. That's what's beautiful about being engaged in an interpretative tradition, that people will read it differently over the course of time and they'll read it through the lens of their own experiences as parents or as children. They'll read it through the lens of whatever is happening socially and politically in their world. This is part of what it means to be a part of the rabbinic tradition. The fact that it need not be read that way does not mean that it cannot be.

Dov Linzer: The question is: What do we mean by ultimate acts of faith? Do we mean acts that trump morality, which is how Kierkegaard has read this, or do we mean acts that demand we give up the things that are most dear to us, which is what the Torah is saying. For us today, the Akedah reads as a question of morality versus faith, but in the time of Avraham, who knows? Giving a child as an offering to God might not have seemed a moral issue at all — an act of murder, as Kierkegaad would have it. It might rather have been exactly as the text frames it, a question about giving what is most dear. That's certainly how it is commemorated in the liturgy and in Jewish memory. In Jewish memory we never say, "From Avraham, we learn that listening to God trumps morality." We say, "From Avraham, we learn about giving up everything for the sake of God." What we say in our prayers is: "The same way Avraham was willing to give up what is most dear to him, you, God, should transcend your own sense of justice and do kindness to us."

Martyrdom is an application of this. If we're asked to convert and deny our faith, deny God, deny our relationship with God, we are enjoined to give up our life, give up what is most dear to us for God. Here, however, is also the danger of the story. In a very troubling historical footnote to martyrdom, we must acknowledge that in the Middle Ages, in Ashkenazi communities, there are a few recorded incidents of Jews who were afraid that they and their children were going to be converted, and who slaughtered their own children before taking their own lives. In doing so, they invoked the memory of the Akedah. This is the danger that the story presents — that some may read only the first half of the story, which can lead to those types of actions. This is a very rare exception, but we should think about how the story has been read and interpreted traditionally.

Jeff Helmreich: Even if there are ways to reinterpret Abraham — or other biblical figures — sooner or later will we not come to stories that can't be presented in a positive, moral light? Are there not aspects of tradition — commandments to slaughter every man, woman, and child of certain Canaanite nations or more contemporary issues such as that of the* agunot*, or chained women — where we seem to be presented with a version of Abraham's test? How do you manage that

Upcoming in *Sh'ma*

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confrontation?

Dov Linzer: Sometimes people refer to those types of confrontations as "my personal Akedah." Here's a case where I am being asked to follow my sense of obedience to tradition and God even though it goes against my morality. There are many examples — for instance, how do we understand that a Kohen can't marry the person he loves if she is a *grusha*, a divorced woman? While we can say, "The mitzvah to kill Amalek or other such mitzvot have been traditionally understood in ways to minimize such moral conflicts," there are cases when we have to say, "This act, although counter to my sense of morality, is what is demanded from us, or from me." Of course, I would also offer that we have done much to counter what seems abhorrent, and that our mandate is to hear God's voice through the lens of the end of the story. And yet, there will be a few cases that ask for our own personal *akedot.*

Jeff Helmreich: I want to return to something that Sharon had said earlier — suggesting that maybe we don't have a personal Akedah because part of our engagement with tradition is to resist the parts of it that challenge our morality — that in such cases, engagement requires that we not abide by what's being commanded. Is that a heretical response, or is it an acceptable way to address these cases?

Dov Linzer: While I definitely understand that response, it is not a response that I, from my traditional standpoint, can say is ever condoned. There is one theoretical exception. There is a passage in the *Gemarah* with a discussion about the concept, *gedolah aveira lish'ma*: "Great is a sin done for the right purpose." Because of the antinomian nature of this statement, and the potential for abuse, it understandably was never incorporated into our legal literature. It should also be noted that the context here is not about resisting an immoral demand, but rather suggesting that sometimes circumstances require the performance of an *aveirah*, of a local sin, so that a much greater benefit can be realized. That is, that sometimes the ends might justify the means.

We are asked why Avraham argues on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah but he does not argue with God when told to sacrifice Isaac. With Isaac, he's making his own sacrifice, and to resist would have a self-serving element to it. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, other people are suffering, and his resistance is more obviously of a selfless nature. From the traditional standpoint, there is the idea of resistance, but a resistance that works within the process of the oral tradition to find the best way possible to understand and apply the law; but to resist the law, that's not within the traditional context.

Josh Kornbluth: Sharon's comments about the duty to resist the things that aren't right are very compelling. That's the only kind of Judaism with which I could engage. I'm also reminded when you speak, Dov, that although I act according to my life, according to my morality, there are other people who are acting according to their morality and they may be different, so their morality may be different. This is an important corrective.

Sharon Brous: Dov, I am moved by the way you read the text, and yet I read it very differently. In our tradition, I read an imperative to object, to decide, to cry out against what is unjust — whether it is happening on the street or in the law, from the legislature and courts or from the word of God. All over rabbinic literature, the rabbis identify elements of the law that do not reflect the kind of world that they would want to live in. They make it their work to dedicate every ounce of intellectual and spiritual power to move those laws out of the practice, to make them utterly impossible. They work so hard at this because their moral intuition would render it impossible to say to parents, "If your child defies you, you bring him to the center of town where your neighbors will come and kill him." We can't live in that kind of world — and yet this is precisely what the Torah instructs us to do. The only way to respond is to act in defiance of God's will and God's word to make it a legal impossibility that such a thing could ever occur. These acts of defiance are deeply rooted in the tradition. The rabbis don't read Torah as the authoritative word of God that must be obeyed literally and unquestionably, nor do they say that the law is immoral and unethical and therefore we should obliterate or ignore it. We learn, rather, to wrestle, to use every ounce of the strength that God has given us in order make this reflect the reality that we believe is the reality that God wants for us in this world — even if it directly contradicts what the text says, because we hold God and Torah to a higher standard.

Dov Linzer: Sharon, that was extremely eloquent and actually exactly what I was trying to say. The oral tradition is about how we hear God's voice — that is, how we hear God's voice based on the end of the story. I was responding to the question, "Is there ever a place for civil

disobedience beyond our role in interpreting and applying the Torah?" At the end of the story, Avraham hears the voice of the angel. We have a firm understanding of what God demands of us and how we are to interpret and apply and listen to the word of God. But there are times when we can't do that, when we're left with a contradiction. We're left with God/Torah demanding from us something that we feel is unconscionable. Then, what do we do? Do we resist? Do we engage in civil disobedience or do we, in the end, submit? That's the question I was responding to, but I fully agree with how you've eloquently expressed the divine-human partnership and our role in objecting and raising the voice of conscience and in hearing and grappling with God's words and interpreting and applying them.

Sharon Brous: What is clear from the text is what would have happened had the angel come one moment late. The reality is: the Avraham of Sodom and Gomorrah is not the Avraham of the Akedah. This is not a man who is driven by a sense of moral purpose, who feels bound by the good and the right. If it's not enough that Avraham nearly murdered his own child, I wonder how we'd feel toward him if his faith sent him up that mountain to kill someone else's innocent child — because God said so. Why are we reluctant to see a fundamental flaw in the character of a person so willing to commit murder to demonstrate love and faith?

Dov Linzer: I focus not on how unconscionable it was that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac but, rather, in the end we've learned that God will never ask this and we always have to hear the angel's voice. Rather than take the lesson from the beginning of this road, we should take the lesson from the end: what God will demand from us and what we will be able to hear in God's command. You can say that that's not fair, that I am looking at the end of the story and not the beginning. But that's my role as an interpreter of the story — deciding what I choose to hear as the message of the story.

Josh Kornbluth: To me, your reactions to this story are like the voices of angels. Hearing you, I feel that if the angel hadn't come at that time, you would have come up with a different way to save the boy.

Sharon Brous: I can only hope I would not have brought my son up the mountain in the first place (but as my friend, Rabbi Brad Artson suggests, there's a reason God didn't ask Sarah…). I have been arguing for a posture of defiance when confronting morally compromising commands. But a critical point here is that Torah was the central organizing principle of the rabbis' lives when they wrestled with an eye-for-an-eye and the stubborn and rebellious child. Challenging from within the tradition is very different from challenging from outside it. Humility is built into the system; we know that we don't ultimately know the deepest truth, so we fight for what we believe to be true, knowing that we may not be correct.

I want to go back to something Dov said earlier — that you give more weight to the end of the story than the beginning because the story comes to teach that God won't ask that of us again. But part of the challenge here is that God has asked that of people of faith again. How many people blow up cafes because they believe that God is asking them to kill innocents as an expression of their faith? This is why we must grapple with what it means to resist what we perceive to be the call of God. In the end, it's not enough to say the angel will stop the faithful before the knife goes into the child's heart or before the explosive belt detonates. As Jeff asked, mustn't we differentiate between blind faith that calls us to deny ourselves or make ourselves profoundly uncomfortable — like sitting in a dark room on Shabbat because we forgot to put the timer on — and blind faith that calls us to murder innocent people? Religion is not about ease or comfort or convenience and I actually like that there are elements of my religious life that don't feel good.

Dov Linzer: Part of our religious responsibility and part of what makes religion important is not convenience but rather what religion demands of us. We approach sacrifices differently when they are personal inconveniences or when they raise moral questions that affect others.

I did want to comment on Sharon's point about people who kill innocents in the name of God. David Shatz, a philosopher and friend of mine, said that we have to be careful that the Akedah doesn't become Al Qaeda. On the one hand, that is exactly how Judaism is different from some other faith traditions — that we listen and interpret the word of God, bringing a moral sense to it as opposed to a message of blind obedience. I know that many Muslims are not fundamentalists, but I think that one important way that Judaism differs from Islam is on the centrality of interpretation and the divine-human partnership. Complete obedience and submission are a central part of the message of Islam. In contrast, we have a strong oral

tradition where humans are partners who bring their moral sensibilities to God's word. It is much harder to be fundamentalist and to call for the death of innocents when humans are enjoined to bring their moral sensibilities into the conversation.

Jeff Helmreich: Can you offer an example from your own life where you find yourself feeling some tension about having to do something, but you do it anyway because that is what Jewish tradition seems to dictate?

Josh Kornbluth: I'm new to all this. I haven't, for the most part, been faced with that tension. I've largely inhabited the secular world; I was raised by atheists. But one of the biggest things that I'm grappling with, as I prepare to go with my family to Israel for my bar mitzvah, is that I do not want to be separated from my wife — who is not Jewish — or my son, who technically isn't Jewish either. I do not feel nor do I want to convey in any way that because I'm studying Judaism, I am pulling myself away from them or suggesting that there are qualities, a certain humanness, that I have and they don't have. As I study and become more Jewishly attuned, I don't want to sacrifice the relationships with the people dearest to me. God shouldn't even think about asking me to bind my son. I'm clinging to my humanity, and generally it supersedes my Jewishness.

Dov Linzer: As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has said, "You know, I don't have any problems with the tradition. I'm a white male Kohen rabbi, heterosexual." Of course, he meant that ironically, and he went on to address the challenges that everybody who does not have those benefits faces. I find myself, personally, in a position of privilege. As it is, while I grapple with issues philosophically, religiously, and ethically, these challenges remain less immediate for me than they do for others.

Jeff Helmreich: If we're not talking about the word of God challenging us personally, what about the work of God? This has been a year of terrible natural disasters, and whether it's a tsunami or a tornado, it's hard for a believing person not to attribute those natural disasters to God. Is it, then, a personal challenge to continue revering and worshiping a God whose hand is in all of that?

Dov Linzer: I know people who are very challenged theologically by natural events. Personally, I'm not. God created a world; He has set the laws of nature. Are natural disasters an expression of God intervening with and micromanaging these laws? I don't know. But what I do know is that the Jewish response is not "How did God let this happen?" but rather, "How am I to respond? Where does my responsibility lie?" When I first met Rabbi Avi Weiss, I was in his office and saw a little sign. One person says, "I want to ask God how He allows poverty and injustice and suffering and so much tragedy in the world." The other person says, "So why don't you?" And the first person answers, "Because I'm afraid that God will ask me the same question." So while we have natural disasters, we don't know all that we've done to contribute to them. For example, in New Orleans, we had disastrous weather as well as a tremendous amount of human negligence. God has created a world and now it is up to us to figure out how to take the forces of nature and to be the most powerful moral and religious agents that we can be in that world.

Sharon Brous: Of course there is a political analysis in which we must assess our behavior to see how human beings are contributing to freak weather conditions, why we aren't doing more to protect the most vulnerable. But there is also the theological or spiritual response. The question is not, "How did God let this happen?" but, "How are we called to respond to tragedy?" Tragedy calls us to a radical reassessment of the way that we live, knowing that the world could change dramatically in an instant and everything that we love could be gone. How does that knowledge impact how we live in the world now? In the language of Yom Kippur, it's *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* — repairing relationships, recognizing that there is something greater than us at work in the cosmos, and doing acts of justice in the world. Rather than asking, "How could God do this to people?" I prefer to ask, "What must we learn from these tragedies?" It seems to me that the answer is very clear. For Jews, it's about love, humility, and working toward a more just and peaceful world.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides *Sh'ma* readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Why did Abraham argue with God at Sodom but not argue when told to sacrifice his son?
2. Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? Was the binding of Isaac a test of Abraham?
3. How do you reconcile morally challenging religious texts with continued reverence for tradition and Torah?
4. What does it mean to you to say, "*Hineini*, Here I am"?