

## **Sincerity and Authenticity:** **A New Reading of the Akedah**

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RH D2

I want to tell you the story of Janine Shepherd. Janine was a premier skier on route to represent Australia in the winter Olympics. In one Ted talk, she spoke of how, throughout her life, she had always identified herself as her body. Indeed, one of the names her friends gave her was “Janine the Machine,” because of the way she could push her body farther and faster than anyone else. She was a world class athlete, fully in charge of herself.

All of that changed, however, on a training bike ride when she was hit by a truck. Janine suffered a massive spinal cord injury that left her severely injured and mostly paralyzed. She endured a couple of harrowing weeks in the hospital that she called her death experience. Ms. Shephard related that at some level of soul, she understood in those dark moments that she had the choice whether or not to return to her body. She was aware that her body, once under her machine-like control, was broken beyond repair. And still she decided to return. She chose life. At the age of 24, she had to discover that

“a broken body isn’t a broken person.” Listening to Janine’s story confronts us with the notion that we are rarely who we think we are—that life will force us, sometimes dramatically as was her case, and sometimes in quieter ways, to change our self-perception.

In Janine’s case, external change was forced upon her on that mountain road. A year after the accident when a plane flew directly overhead, her life’s direction changed again. Looking up, she decided that if she couldn’t walk—or run, or ski—then she would fly. That is exactly what she proceeded to do. She gained her commercial pilot’s license, went on to earn an instructor’s license so she could teach others to fly, and eventually became a trained aerobatics pilot and instructor. In the years since, she has written books and become a motivational speaker.

Did Janine Shepherd change because of her accident? Well, clearly she could no longer identify herself as an athlete. A core part of what she considered her authentic self evaporated when the truck hit her. She was forced to concede that she was no longer a skier.

Simultaneously, that indomitable will that drove her to Olympic level achievement also propelled her toward other remarkable attainments and accomplishments. Her iron will was the same before and after. It's not so easy to decide if she was the same person pre and post-accident—though she believes that she is a better and more complete person because of her spinal cord injury.

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The world's great stories never mean one thing, because they are about people, and a person can never be explained completely. Stories operate at the deepest level of the soul, and so they are never exhausted. As Brian Rohr, a storyteller I know, put it, “stories have a heart, and the role of a storyteller is to connect their heart and the heart of the listener to the heart of the story.”

We return to these perennial stories year after year, and we are able to mine new understandings from their endless wisdom and their beating heart—in part because we have gained new wisdom and new perspectives in the intervening time. Our heart is therefore open to hearing something different in a familiar narrative.

Among the treasury of enduring tales, the Akedah, or the binding of Isaac continues to fascinate. It would be hard to think of another story that has been as open to as many different understandings. Is Abraham the knight of faith? The ideal Jew? An abusive father? Did he pass a test or fail it? Is the Akedah the preeminent story by which humans ended child-sacrifice as a way to serve God? Or does it highlight that every parent sacrifices their child on an altar of their own making—on the altar of high achievement, perhaps, as Jews are often accused of doing?

We can produce strong readings to defend any and all of these possibilities. What I'd like to request is that we act like Janine Shepherd; she put aside past understandings of who she was to make a new future. If we do the same with the Akedah, we can give a fair hearing to a different and somewhat novel interpretation, one that is timely and relevant:

*Namely, the Akedah is the perfect collision of the conflicting values of authenticity and sincerity. It pitches authenticity vs. sincerity.*

Moreover, if we reflect on authenticity and sincerity, we will be able to glean some insights into key challenges of our time and the role of *teshuvah*. I also believe that by analyzing some different concepts of authenticity and sincerity, we will gain a better grasp on selfishness, duty and the sovereign self. It is in the various ways that these three things interact—selfishness, duty and the sovereign self—that we can come to understand a source for many of today’s challenges. If we can forge a healthier relationship between our duties to others and the needs of the sovereign self, *teshuvah* will be easier and we will be able to live with greater equanimity.

This is a sermon, in other words, where I will argue and plead with you that we all need to live with both greater authenticity AND greater sincerity.

For the sake of this sermon, I’d like to offer two simple definitions of authenticity and sincerity. These definitions may not be how we use the words in every day conversation, but they do capture the historical meanings. Then I’ll provide deeper background to the history of

those words as we use them before returning to the Akedah.

**Authenticity** refers to the real McCoy, in artwork, and in personhood. Authenticity says that my emotions and my internal reality are more important than rationality or a social role. Under authenticity, my primary responsibility is only to myself. Authenticity, in other words, is the relationship we have with ourselves. It is **static**, because it assumes that each of us possess a core, unchanging essence.

**Sincerity** is something different. Sincerity is our social persona. It is the commitment we make to the society around us that we will do what we say, and that we will present ourselves as we are. Because of that, it is **dynamic**.

Authenticity—my relationship with myself is the primary source of authority. Static.

Sincerity-my relationship with and duty to others is the primary source of authority. Dynamic.

Now to a more in-depth exploration of these concepts.

### A Short History of Authenticity and Sincerity

While it's beyond the scope of a Rosh Hashanah sermon to run through this history in depth, it is important that we grasp a bit of the intellectual history of these ideas, and the way they filter into our everyday society. Because if we don't know how the idea of authenticity gained currency, then we actually can't even claim the authenticity we espouse. What I mean is that unless we are aware of the source, our authenticity-seeking is just another script imposed from the outside. So please bear with me.

In 1971, cultural critic Lionel Trilling penned a highly influential book, "Authenticity and Sincerity." In it, he tracked how those two ways of being a person have come to define so much of western civilization. Most of us are probably familiar with Shakespeare's famous line "to thine own self be true." Two hundred years later, this idea was popularized by figures like the enlightenment thinker, Jean Jaques Rousseau and was given the name of "authenticity." There must have been something in the air,

because simultaneously, the same idea appears in Jewish thought by thinkers who had never heard of Rousseau. Rav Simcha Bunim, for example was an 18th century Polish thinker. An entire school of Jewish thought dedicated to authenticity would emerge from him. Amazingly, his ideas resonate and shape contemporary Judaism, even though most Jews have probably never heard of him.

One secular philosopher made authenticity the center concept of his philosophy. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that authenticity would lead to a higher form of human consciousness, even as he wrote about how it also caused people to feel alienated from themselves and others. That alienation would force us to evolve a new way of thinking and being.

Given what he thought of sincerity, it was a price worth paying. For Hegel, sincerity was only the “heroism of dumb service.” What he meant was that without authenticity, people plod through their lives somewhat mindlessly. Phrased differently, sincerity is how a person internalizes conventional social norms and behavior. Sincerity is how you become bourgeoisie.

To bring that down from the sky, if you go to school, earn good grades to get into a good college to get a good career and do your part, you are acting out of sincerity. You are filling a role.

Indeed, what we learn from these enlightenment thinkers is that authenticity was a mixed blessing. It gave us autonomy—a good thing. But it also gave us alienation—a bad thing. They go hand in hand.

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If you believe in the rights of the individual, you are for authenticity. Authenticity gave us women's rights, gay rights, gender rights; protections against racism, the rights of religious minorities. One person, one vote. Authenticity gave us the rise of the novel, which celebrates the inner life of the individual. It has created a flowering of artists and an appreciation of different cultures. It gives everyone a voice. Authenticity honors the charismatic person.

But authenticity also has given us self-obsession and narcissism. It underlies societal polarization and fractious

identity politics. Authenticity has also given us the resurgence of public racism, because what I feel about others is simply a true expression of my inner realm. There's no need to control my thoughts or my behavior about the other.

Authenticity accounts for our distrust in public institutions and in all institutions for that matter. Institutions are primarily about social responsibilities. Institutions demand that individuals limit themselves. James Nolan wrote a book called "The Therapeutic State." In it, he argues that authenticity has harmed our democracy. Our focus on the self has had unintended consequences. Emotional arguments have replaced reasoned discourse both in Congressional hearings and in our criminal justice system. In both public and private education, we have often placed a student's self-esteem as high or higher than their basic literacy in a subject. Twenty years ago, he prophetically said that the cult of authenticity partly accounts for our poor choice of leaders. (cf Orlando Patterson, NY Times, DEC. 26, 2006)

***The individual is sovereign, with all that is good and bad about that.***

Sincerity is the very opposite of all that and in many ways, it has been on the decline for a long time. For centuries before the rise of authenticity, the norm of sincerity offered an alternate model of selfhood. Once again, Shakespeare said it best:

“All the world’s a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players./They have their exits and their entrances,/ And one man in his time plays many parts.”

Shakespeare’s “self” is both public and social. Rather than there being one essential, true core to each person, we take on different roles based on our interactions with others. Right now, I am a rabbi. Later today, I will be a father, a host, a neighbor. I change based on my roles and duties. I don’t give sermons to my neighbors, and I don’t exhort them to behave in a certain manner. In other words, “Sincerity rests in reconciling our performance of tolerance with the people we become.” (ibid)

There are tremendous benefits to this older model of behavior. It built trust in institutions and politics. It insisted on mutual responsibility. Its central currency was

**character** rather than charisma. “Will someone keep their promises? Will they honor the meanings and understandings we tacitly negotiate? Are their polite gestures consciously offered in good faith?” (ibid)

Sincerity is also stifling. It is the twin of conformity. It boxes us into particular roles, even if those don't quite match what we feel on the inside. Sincerity led gay people to try to pass as heterosexuals. It left people in unfulfilling jobs. It had a conservative effect on social institutions and individual lives, preventing necessary change and reducing tolerance for risk-taking. As we heard Hegel say earlier, sincerity is the heroism of dumb service.

How are we to square these two ways of being? What are our duties to self, and what are our responsibilities to the larger world? What is the nature of this *teshuvah* that we are called upon to do between now and Yom Kippur?

Is *teshuvah* returning to who we essentially are? A restoration of our basic identity? Can there really even be such a thing? Isn't our authenticity still tied to society and understandings greater than just our own internal relationship?

Or is *teshuvah* that process by which we strive to become something we are not yet—a better version of ourselves? Is teshuvah, in other words, an act of authenticity or a commitment to sincerity? And where can we find an answer?

Within the Bible, we have one pure example of the conflict between sincerity and authenticity in which the public is absent. One sole case where persona and peer pressure is missing and that allows us to see the conflict more clearly. This is, of course, the story of Akedat Yitzhak, of the binding of Isaac.

On the one hand, Abraham has been called the first authentic individual. God told him, “Lekh Lekha”—go to yourself. And so Abraham threw off societal constraints. He threw off midrashic constraints when he smashed a shop full of idols—do you remember that story? He threw off Biblical constraints when he left his birth country, when he allowed Lot to choose his parcel of land, when he founded a new religion dedicated to an invisible and non-local God. He started a new social movement, gathering a group of unrelated people around him (“and all the souls

he and Sarah acquired”). None of those actions were socially acceptable in his day.

And on the other hand, Abraham is the perfect example of Hegel’s “hero of dumb service.” When God tells him he will start a new nation, Abraham sincerely obeys. When his nephew Lot is captured by some tribal kings, he sincerely gathers an army to rescue him, fulfilling his duty without taking even a shoelace in payment. In yesterday’s Torah reading, when Sarah tells him to send forth Hagar because she is undermining their traditional family structure, he concedes.

At Mount Moriah, Abraham the sincere is confronted with authentic Abraham. If he kills his son as God commanded, he will be a sincere person, fulfilling his social role and responsibility as God’s servant and founder of a nation.

But as an authentic individual with a normal love of family, how can he kill “his son, his only son, the one he loves, Yitzhak?” How can he kill a part of himself? And how on earth can society, as represented by God, demand such an impossible sacrifice from him? In this reading of the

Akedah, Abraham remains frozen with the knife mid-air for an eternity.

Who is he to be in that moment? What is expected of him? God told him to kill Isaac. God also told him that the Jewish people would be descended from Isaac. Abraham has been put in the perfect double bind. As contemporary scholar Reuven Kimmelman remarks, no matter what he does, he will disobey God. And no matter what he does, he will therefore also obey God.

More importantly, who are we called to be during these Yamim Nora'im, these days of Awe?

Speaking personally, it is clear to me that our age is out of alignment. We privilege our authenticity over our sincerity. The rights of the individual override any sense of responsibility to larger society. Our parochial identity politics override our patriotism and commitment to the larger value of America. Apart from the people in this sanctuary, our personal spirituality takes precedence over our covenant with God and the Jewish people. We need more sincerity and less narcissism. More duty and less self-expression. More community and less alienation.

Yet above even that, there is a value for each of us to feel ourselves frozen between these two poles of being. We should feel the knife in our hand. We should know as adults—as moral agents—that we can't get it right. Not completely. We should know that our lives are constantly in motion.

We should understand that in any given moment we are all being tested, and that sometimes we must let the knife fall, while other times we must use it. We have to understand that above all else, God demands that we must change, and that none of us are permitted to remain standing where we were.

When the truck clipped her bike, and when she looked up at that airplane, Janine Shepherd heard the message.

When Abraham stared at his bound son and his heart breaking from the near-impossibility, he heard the message.

That is what it means to be a limited mortal being. This is what Yom HaDin, the day of judgement is. At every

heightened moment of moral dilemma we must ask where our duties lie—to self or society. And if we get it right, we get to live deeply and humanly.

That is our choice. And that is our legacy. Choose well, friends. Choose well.