I’m going to discuss today one of the strangest and most painful episodes in the Bible, the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham on Mount Moriah. The episode is shocking, and even a bit revolting. We would like to write it off as somehow primitive and archaic, reflecting the limitations and barbarity of earlier times, as, say, one writes off the ethnic slaughter in Joshua, or the murder of the concubine in Judges, or the bloody dynastic struggles in Samuel and Kings. But this passage, so apparently contrary to the ethical and spiritual tenor we honor in the Bible, was written by the Biblical E author, a figure whom we know to have had insight into what we value about the Bible and whom we cannot for that reason merely dismiss as a primitive. And the passage has puzzled and fascinated thoughtful spirits ever since, becoming enshrined, for instance, in one of the highest rituals in the Jewish tradition, the services for Rosh Hashanah, so that whatever it meant to its author, what it continues to mean today is still to be reckoned with.

I’d like to start by reading the passage aloud, from Chapter 22 of Genesis: “Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you.” So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burn offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told
him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the fire-stone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” and he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” and he answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, you favored one, from ME.” When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, “On the mount of the Lord there is vision.”

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.”

Now I’d like to offer for comparison a different story, from the Euthyphro, and early di-
alogue of Socrates. Socrates and Euthyphro are discussing piety. It’s a funny word, “pious,” nowadays used mostly with an undertone of abuse: to call somebody “pious” is to imply that he is self-righteous and narrow, and probably hypocritical as well. But they mean by the word something different—the performance of acts enjoined upon them by religion, say, or, better, a whole habit of life informed by a religious concern. Euthyphro offers that a pious act is an act that is pleasing to the gods. He means this as a definition: you know an act is pious if it turns out to be pleasing to the gods. After a little by-play about how hard it is to apply this definition in a polytheistic religion—Socrates asks if the act must please all the gods? or some? or just the ones who are right?—Socrates gets to the real question, asking “Is an act pious because it pleases the gods or is does that act please the gods because it’s pious?” Euthyphro expects a verbal trap here—the sentence is rather tangled—but the question is a simple one: is an act pious just because the gods happen to like it, or is there some rule one can discover through reason, some moral principle one can discuss, by which one can know in advance whether an act will be pious? Do the gods, on their mere say-so, have the power to define anything as pious—killing your relatives, say? Or is the pious something in itself, something intelligible to us, something that pleases the gods because, like us at our best, they are the kind of beings who admire good things.

I was brought up to favor the second view, and I think most of us here were as well. A world in which the pious is measured by some rule is an intelligible world, a world reason can fathom, a world in which ethical thought can make clear our way. But at the same time it is a world subject to certain limitations, and one hesitates, for all its persuasiveness, to confine one’s theology wholly to this view of the world.

A world seen this way is a world whose rules we can understand. And perhaps we can even feel admiration for such a world. Some natures might even feel awe. But it’s the awe one feels before a particularly intricate and well-designed piece of machinery. It’s not a world that calls out
anything human from us, and it’s not a world that demands from us specifically human virtues, such as loyalty or love, virtues that are inevitably things that attach to particulars rather than to universals, and virtues that are only virtues because of their slight irrationality. The world captured by rules is a world in which we value the universal above the particular, and although the universal is grander than the particular and deeper than the particular, there is something less than fully human about a world in which particulars are slighted. We are asked to love our children, and we are asked to love humanity. The love of our children is in some ways a much smaller thing than the love of humanity. And it’s in some ways a more selfish thing. And that love is not entirely a matter of rational ethical dessert: however admirable our children our, we love them chiefly because they are ours. But there’s something the matter with one for whom, for whatever rationally compelling reasons, the love of humanity completely trumps the love of their own children, even though it is fair to say that most people love their children and don’t think much about humanity, and that there is something heroic, if chilling, about that kind of love of humanity. The attachments that most matter to us ethically are not attachments that are the product of rationality anyway: one does not love Dogs in the abstract the way one loves Toto, and when Toto dies one can’t quite replace him with Lulu, even if Lulu is a better dog in every way. Such an attachment only has ethical meaning because of its slight irrationality, and to attempt to find a rational basis for it is to compromise fatally its importance.

Furthermore, if faith is something we can understand a rule about, then faith can be subject to a kind of calculation: God is supposed to be pleased by this good thing we’ve done, and it’s his problem if he’s not. (Half of the comedy of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone comes from the spectacle of Professor Kant lecturing God about what God had jolly well better honor if he wants anybody to think of Him as a proper God.) Indeed, if piety is purely a matter of rule, then there is no reason to imagine anything personal about God at all, and there is no reason to
see in piety any relationship to those precious things which have in them anything of the personal, whether values like loyalty and respect, or feelings like love and wonder. And there would be no room in the concept of piety for awe and terror, what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that seems to be an indispensable part not only of religious feeling but also of a fully human life.

Like most Unitarian-Universalists, I’m prepared to think of the picture of God I seem to have inherited from my culture as something of an idol, perhaps an illusion, perhaps even a neurotic projection. I’m not about to be bossed around by a bearded, irascible, and above all imaginary old man, particularly if he thinks he’s going to order me to do stuff that strikes me as wrong. It cuts no mustard with me to be told that I have to trample my neighbor because the Bible tells me so. And if I’m going to imagine God in a personal way at all, I’m at least going to imagine a God who is pleased by all the things that I already think are right. But all the same, it’s hard to say that one has the same kinds of feelings about “the ground of all being,” or “the focus of an ultimate concern” that one has about that vigorous, difficult, but intensely alive lord the J author portrays in Genesis and Exodus, the one who makes Adam out of mud and Eve out of Adam’s rib, who chats with them in the cool of summer evenings in the Garden of Eden, who wrestles with Jacob (and gives him a low blow), and who surprises Moses from the burning bush. And to imagine a God who approves mostly of the things one already thinks are right is to imagine a doll who says “I love you,” when you pull the string. Whatever we imagine God to be should be capable of challenging us in the most intimate and personal ways, which means that God must be strange, and what is strange can be terrible. At the very least, love of God is something personal, not something general, and all love of persons involves risk, because persons are always to some degree unknowable to us.

And yet, to go back to the other side, a world in which what is faithful depends upon divine whim is a world which we can never fully understand, a world in which it is never perfectly clear
to us what we ought to do, a world in which we are never fully at home. Is it possible to make way for awe in religious feeling without making way also for the awful? It’s not merely squeamishness that makes me draw back from that prospect. But, shockingly, this unintelligible world of divine whim is the world into which the story of the binding of Isaac projects us, a world which mystifies philosophy and which faith alone can face, although even then with a shudder. I can’t solve this contradiction, since faith seems to need a foot in both worlds, and yet can’t stand in one without relinquishing the other. But I don’t think the religious life is a matter of developing a bullet-proof theology so much as of developing a way of facing those contradictions without evasion. Gwen Buehrrens once defined a creed to me as “a poem one tries to live.” That seems to me a good definition of theology generally, and it captures the most important way theology differs from philosophy.

It’s easy for us to under-read the story of Abraham and Isaac because we, unlike Abraham, know how it comes out. I sometimes hear people say—many heard it in church school for instance—that if Abraham really has faith then he knows all along that God can’t really mean what he appears to demand, that Abraham sacrifice his child in fire. Abraham must know somehow, I keep hearing, that God will find a way of making it all come out OK. But if course if the test that God is making of Abraham really is a test, Abraham’s bets cannot be hedged in this way: he has to assume that God is playing for keeps.

In college I was surprised to learn that this story, archaic-sounding and mythological as it appears to be, is not the work of the J author, whose God is so anthropomorphic, so full of vigor and character, with human hands, a human temper, and a human love of puns. The story is the work of the more abstract, more theological, more modern-sounding E author. And it’s clearly no survival of some archaic stratum of biblical history but the work of a sophisticated and very modern religious sensibility.
In the first place, it’s not merely a sacrifice of something important that God asks of Abraham. He asks of Abraham not only that he give up something that he values; he asks Abraham to give it up in a way that is as mad as he can think to make it. It would be different, for instance, if God asked Abraham to burn his house rather than his son. What he asks is something designed to call into question his own status as an ethical God. “I make the rules,” he seems to say, “I’m not bound by them.” That the demand seems crazy is in a weird way the sign that it’s authentic: only God could ask you to do something like that. It doesn’t take God to ask you to do something you were going to do anyway, or ought to do anyway. It doesn’t take an order from God to make us love our children. The fact that it’s something you would never do in your right mind is intended is meant to show that Abraham, who is ready to do it and who is nevertheless despite everything in his right mind, really is under the pressure of a demand from God. That’s what it would take to make him do such a thing.

God’s demand of Abraham is a particularly odd demand in the context of a religion whose tenor is so persistently ethical, because what Abraham must overcome in order to ready himself to sacrifice his child is not only his own love of Isaac, to which he is ethically bound, but also his own expectation that God be ethical, that God’s greatness is not merely power but goodness. He must overcome, as Søren Kierkegaard says, not only need and love, but also ethics and religion, his duty to his son and his admiration for his God. It would be no shock if Moloch demanded the lives of children. But it is a shock for this God to, because one of the things the ancient Israelites were most proud of is that they did not make such sacrifices. The Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, all those who worshipped the Great Mother, sacrificed infants by fire in just the way God asks Abraham to do here. The prophets point this out about the pagan nations whenever they get the chance: it is the trump card in their hand, proof positive that the pagan nations worship insane delusions. (And this is not just propaganda on the prophets’ part either: those peoples did sacrifice children, and
archaeologists have found the bones.) Here is the twist to God’s challenge: he says to Abraham
that if you really believe in the Jewish God, you must do the one thing which would mark you as
un-Jewish, the one thing which would make you most closely resemble those neighbors for whom
we feel the most justifiable contempt. If you would keep faith with me, you must do that which
above all other things would break faith with me: you must treat me like Moloch. It’s a tall order.

One realizes that it’s a taller order still when one remembers the promises God has been
making about the very child he asks Abraham to sacrifice. Abraham did not come to have this
child in the easiest of ways, one remembers. Isaac’s begetting by a one hundred year old father
on a ninety year old mother was so improbable that the news of it moved his mother to laughter.
(Hence Isaac’s name, which means “laughter.”) God has been telling Abraham repeatedly, even
before Isaac’s birth, that he will have (through Isaac) numberless offspring, like the sands of the
desert or the stars of the sky. But Isaac can hardly have these offspring if Abraham burns him on
Mount Moriah first. So here’s the catch: for Abraham to fulfill the test God puts to him, he must
be willing to behave as if all of the promises God has been making about Isaac were lies. Not only,
this is to say, must Abraham behave to God as if God were Moloch, he must behave as if all of his
promises, as if all of his words, were as nothing.

Now of course in the event it doesn’t work out this way. God stays Abraham’s hand at the
last moment. God even arranges it so that the lie Abraham had to tell to pacify his son—that they
didn’t have a ram with them when they started to climb the mountain because God would provide
one once they reached the top—also turns out to be true. (There it is, horns tangled in a bush.) The
story seems to close up here, and some of its terror is put behind us. It is as if we should have seen
this conclusion coming, as if we should have known that what the story is really about is this: God
guarantees that he won’t ask us to do anything crazy because he is satisfied that we would bring
ourselves to do it if he asked us to. But that doesn’t suffice to quite allay the terror, and the scandal,
of the story (any more than God’s providing Job with new daughters even prettier than the ones he had before quite allays the scandal of his killing them in the first place).

And maybe it’s the scandal of it that’s the point—clearly the author has gone far out of the way to make it as scandalous as possible. For one of the things he points out is how close our ideal of the noble is to our vision of the most base: if Abraham is the man of faith, the man willing to do anything for God, even something which would make that God into Moloch, even something which would make that God in detail a liar, it is only a small step that separates him from the man who runs against his feelings, his common sense, his sense of right and wrong, because he has been ordered to do so by someone he respects, precisely the kind of person we choose as an exemplar of the banality of evil. Abraham is the founder of faith, but he is also someone who, in the classic excuse, just follows orders. Why does the noble run so close to the base? For clearly Abraham is a heroic figure, a knight of faith (in Kierkegaard’s phrase), not a base figure. But it’s beyond me, as someone who wants to know what the rule is that will enable me to tell the pious from the impious, the noble from the base. Maybe all I can say is that whatever is divine is terrible, and cannot be understood but only faced as what it is. But that is a non-answer too, in the way that “there are no easy answers” is the easiest of answers. Maybe I want to say that it is faith that keeps this question of the noble and the base alive, keeps us from concluding that all acts like Abraham’s are base one’s. I don’t want to say, with Tertullian (was it Tertullian?), that I believe because it’s absurd, and because it’s absurd I know that it’s believing that I am doing rather than merely knowing. What I want to say is what—who was it? Augustine?—said: I do not know before I believe, I believe in order to know.