Theater of the Absurd
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Our parashah this week, Parashat Vayera, tells the well-known story of the Akeidah, in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

In the 1970s, Woody Allen wrote a humorous and sarcastic interpretation of this biblical story:

And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, "I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on." And Isaac trembled and said, "So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole thing up?"

"What am I going to say?" Abraham said. "I'm standing there at two a.m. in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?"

"Well, did he say why he wants me sacrificed?" Isaac asked his father.

But Abraham said, "The faithful do not question. Now let's go because I have a heavy day tomorrow."

And Sarah who heard Abraham's plan grew vexed and said, "How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes, for the Lord hateth practical jokes and whosoever shall pull one shall be delivered into the hands of his enemies whether they can pay the delivery charge or not."

And Abraham answered, "Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that."

And Sarah said, "And thou art willing to carry out this senseless act?" But Abraham told her, "Frankly yes, for to question the Lord's word is one of the worst things a person can do, particularly with the economy in the state it's in."

And, so, he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and said, "How could thou doest such a thing?"

And Abraham said, "But thou said—"

"Never mind what I said," the Lord spoke. "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?" And Abraham grew ashamed. "Er—not really…no."

"I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately run out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees. "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, “No sense of humor. I can’t believe it.”

“But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?”

And the Lord said, “It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.”

And with that, the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with Him tomorrow.

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I wanted to share this take on the Akeidah tonight because, friends, I think in this country we have officially entered the theater of the absurd.

I think you know what I’m talking about.

For the first time in my rabbinic career, I scrapped my original sermon for this Shabbat and decided to write a new one.

I usually write my sermons on Friday afternoon, but I decided this week to try to get ahead of it and write my sermon on Wednesday. Boy, was that a mistake.

Last week, I talked about how, in 1789, the people of France, fed up with the privileged and out-of-touch aristocracy that ruled them, launched a revolution that would completely remake their society.

I believe the election results last week indicated that many American voters feel the same way about the ruling class that has dominated our government for so long. They didn’t just want to “throw the bums out,” as the saying goes; they wanted to give them a big middle finger in doing it.

I understand the frustration, the anger, and the mistrust many of our fellow citizens feel toward the elite, inside-the-Beltway media and government-bureaucracy types. Honestly, I think it’s well-earned.

People are tired of being told what to do, what to think, and what they can and cannot say by supposed “experts” who seem to get it wrong more often than they get it right.

The beauty of democracy is that we get to vote them out when we don’t like the job they’re doing.

But that doesn’t mean we don’t take the duty of leadership seriously.

I think we know intuitively that giving the middle finger is not a governing strategy.

As I watch the parade of notables lining up for top government posts, I can’t help but worry that we are witnessing an American Akeidah. It feels like our new leaders are so eager to stick it to the old elite that they’re willing to sacrifice the future of our country on the altar of paranoia, vengeance, nihilism, and spite.

I get that the voters gave a mandate to President-elect Trump to shake things up and do things differently. As former President Obama said, “Elections have consequences.”

But the antidote to the hubris of the vanquished is not hubris by the victor.

The antidote to judgy intellectualism is not vindictive ignorance.

The antidote to failed expertise is not blustery anti-expertise.

The antidote to a ruling class that takes itself too seriously is not to indulge in theater of the absurd.

We know that Abraham would have gone through with the sacrifice of his son Isaac if God hadn’t intervened at the last second. I’m worried that this time, there won’t be anyone there to stop it.

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Since Election Day, many of you have come to me and said, “Rabbi, we’re despondent, we’re scared, and we’re looking to you for comfort.”

For those who feel that way, I just want you to know I get it. I’m really sorry. As I said last week, I think it’s important for all of us to be empathetic and caring toward others, even if we don’t share the same feelings.

I’ll admit, though, that I’m not sure what else to say, at least right now.

People like Woody Allen and Mel Brooks showed us that humor can help.

Music can inspire us and soothe our souls. Prayer, too.

Personally, I’m choosing to be hopeful.

I’m hopeful that once our new leaders feel they’ve met their understandable need to give their opponents the middle finger, they’ll choose to take the responsibility of governance seriously.

Maybe that’s naive. Or maybe it’s because it’s the Jewish way to be a “captive of hope.”

May God grant our leaders wisdom and bless us all with strength and peace.