

## **RH Day 2: The Akedah**

Twice a year, today, and when we chant Parashat Vayera in the normal cycle of Torah reading, we confront one of the most challenging and disturbing events in the entire Torah. Known as the Akeidah, or The Binding of Isaac, we recall that fateful time when, after blessing Abraham and Sarah with a son in their old age, G-d calls to Abraham, who answers with a prompt, “Heneini” – here I am, as if reporting for duty. G-d then tells him, “Kach na, et beencha, et y’chidcha asher ahavta, et Yitzchak, v’lech l’cha el eretz hamoriah v’ha-a-leihu sham l’olah al achad he-harim asher omar eilecha.” – “Take your son, your favored/only 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 that I will point out to you.” And without a word, Abraham prepares to do just that.

I don’t think I need to invoke a spoiler alert when I tell you that, at the very last minute, with the knife poised above his head, Isaac is spared when an angel of God stops Abraham from going through with it.

Happy ending, yes? Isaac’s life is saved, Abraham proves his loyalty to and faith in G-d by passing the sacred “test” that was put before him, and G-d’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants remains intact.

Some commentators attempt to justify God's motives as well as the near-horrific outcome of this test by reasoning that it actually proved that G-d does *not* desire human sacrifice, as was supposedly practiced by the other barbaric nations living in the Israelites' midst, and our G-d, unlike the many that they worshipped, was a G-d of love, compassion and mercy.

As uplifting and comforting as this message strives to be, however, and as much as I struggle to accept it, I am left unsatisfied. Even if we accept that everything turned out well in the end (and even that I'm not so sure of, but more on that later), I am left with the following questions: How can a loving, compassionate and merciful God demand that a father murder his son as a show of loyalty in the first place? And how can we hold up as a role model a father who would even consider going through with it?

And yet, as Rabbi Louis Jacobs points out, our tradition praises Abraham for it. He states, "In traditional Jewish thought, the Akedah is used as a paradigm for Jewish martyrdom; the Jewish people are ready at all times to give up life itself for the sake of the sanctification of the Divine Name (Kiddush Ha-Shem)." Rabbi Shlomo Riskin concurs, agreeing that, "(The Rabbis) admire Abraham's control of his fatherly love and mercy in order to implement God's command.

They illustrate his portrait as a paradigm of the highest expression of unconditional adoration of and obedience to God.”

As we join together for the Zichronot (remembrance) section of the Musaf Amidah shortly, we even cite this event as one of the primary reasons why God should remember us favorably at this time: We pray: p.321: “Remember how (Abraham) bound his son Isaac on the altar, subduing his fatherly compassion so that he might do Your will wholeheartedly...Remember today the binding of Isaac and may it arouse Your mercy for his descendants.” In short, this act was so noble, so admirable, so remarkable, that it should reflect well on us and earn us a place in the Book of Life.

In today’s world, however, this seemingly courageous act of near-martyrdom would hardly earn him a spot on the “top 10 Jewish leaders of all time” list. And what happened to Abraham’s sense of morality and commitment to ethical and social justice? Here was a man who risked his life to save his nephew Lot after he was taken captive by invaders. He went into battle and fought for his family, teaching us the message that we are responsible for each other, and we can’t rest while there are those who are imprisoned.

He had the chutzpah to argue with G-d to spare the corrupt and depraved cities of Sodom and Gemorrah, reasoning that it was possible for good people to live in the midst of evil, and their lives were worth saving, because each life was made in the image of God. Wasn't the life of Abraham's own child worth fighting for? At the least, why didn't he offer himself up instead?

Some argue that Abraham didn't put up a fight because he knew, above and beyond all certainty itself that God would never make him go through with such an unthinkable act. After all, it directly contradicted one of God's earlier commandments, "(Gen. 9): Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." Not to mention the fact that the Brit Milah, the covenant of circumcision assured the future of Abraham and his offspring for all time.

The Rabbis do surmise, however, that Abraham might have had trouble accepting that Isaac was God's intended victim, as they questioned the exact wording of God's commandment to, "take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love?" Why doesn't G-d just say, "Take Isaac?"

The Rabbis offer this explanation in a Midrash, or story that recounts what they imagine is the more complete version of the conversation. As related in Genesis Rabah, when G-d says "take your son" Abraham replies, "I have two sons."

G-d continues, “your only one” –“Each is an only son to his mother”; “whom you love”- “I love them both”; to which G-d responds by explicitly saying “Isaac.”

And that’s where the dialogue ends. Are we content to think that Abraham might have simply thought, “Oh, THAT son, well, OK, just so I’m clear.” Abraham says nothing. Personally, I think he at least owed Isaac a fair fight. Because even if Abraham knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was only a test, one that he would pass with flying colors, Abraham surely had to wonder why God would put Isaac through such a terrifying ordeal. Why make this innocent boy suffer? And the fact that he had a three day trek in which he could have at least tried to change G-d’s mind and didn’t is troubling, to say the least.

Rabbi Marc Angel offers an original spin on this midrash, interpreting God’s command not as a test of Abraham’s faith, but as a strategy to help Abraham realize how little he appreciated Isaac! When God clarifies, “Your son, your only son....whom you love...” Abraham might’ve been thinking, “I love Ishmael! I sent him away with great reluctance, but he is my first son; he is stronger than Isaac I prayed that God would accept Ishmael as my heir.” Rabbi Angel explains, “(God) was testing to see if Abraham could open his eyes and realize the virtues of Isaac!

Abraham offered no resistance to God's command because Abraham did not value Isaac highly....but as he brought a knife to Isaac's throat and was about to lose him forever, suddenly it dawned upon him how terribly he had misjudged Isaac; he now loved Isaac totally." Rabbi Angel also surmised that the ram didn't just "appear," but had been there all along, but Abraham was so focused on his grisly task that he didn't even notice it there in plain sight.

This creative reinterpretation, namely that the whole incident was designed by God to teach Abraham to open his eyes and appreciate the son that was destined to become the next Patriarch of the people, is intriguing and one that I had never heard before. Yet this supposed plan, that Abraham would discover his love for his child only by coming "this close" to killing him, seems rather unsettling to me. And how would Abraham ever explain that to Isaac? "Sorry for the scare, son, but the good news is: you're alive and I now realize how much you mean to me!" Surely there could've been a better way.....

But Rabbi Angel's original and intriguing "midrash" inspired me to think outside of the box as well, and see this story in a new light, juxtaposed against an incident that happened in the previous chapter where, once again, Abraham is asked to part with a son, although it's on Sarah's command, not God's.

Sarah, whose motives aren't quite clear, demands that her husband boot out Ishmael, Abraham's son with Sarah's handmaid Hagar, and Hagar as well. And so he does, after God backs Sarah's request.

There are several significant and interesting parallels between this episode and the one to follow:

1. Sarah demands that Abraham banish Ishmael; God demands that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. However, whereas Abraham is emotionally affected by Sarah's request (Gen. 21:11: "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his"), God's request is met with silence.
2. Both conversations with God (God's instruction to do what Sarah says, along with the assurance that God will also protect Ismael, as well as God's command to offer up Isaac, along with *no* such assurance that all will be well) happen in "night visions," because directly after these Divine-human interactions, the text continues, in BOTH instances, "Vayashkeim Avraham ba boker: Early next morning, Abraham....." It's phrased exactly the same way!
3. Ishmael cries out and God hears. Isaac, like his father, is silent.
4. An angel of God comes to the rescue and speaks both to Hagar, and Abraham, and once again, the Hebrew is almost identical, with one noteworthy difference. In the Hagar story, we read,

(Gen. 21:17): “Vayikra Malach **Elokeim** el Hagar: And an angel of God called to Hagar....” In the Akedah story, the text states, “(Gen. 22:11): Vayikra eilav Malach **Adomai**: Then an angel of the Lord called to him....” Note how two different “names” for God are utilized.

So what does all this mean? Here’s my radical reinterpretation:

Maybe Abraham never got over his grief at having to abandon his son Ishmael in the wilderness. Perhaps he even doubted, even after hearing God’s assurances, that God would indeed save Ishmael, and he was terrified that Ishmael would suffer and eventually die of thirst. And maybe that caused Abraham to suffer a mental and emotional breakdown, which in turn caused Abraham to become delusional.

And perhaps those delusions led Abraham to *think* that he heard God’s voice, the voice of **Elokeim**, the name used in the Hagar story, the name that describes the God of might, justice and kingship, commanding him to sacrifice the one son he had left. And maybe he saw this test as another chance for him to prove his loyalty to God after doubting him earlier. Abraham could prove to God that he now was fully confident that God would not let anything bad happen to either son, and so, unlike the first time, he deliberately didn’t appear “distressed,” but stoic and, more importantly, silent.

Suggesting that God might not have *literally* spoken to Abraham and that the command was, rather, an imagined one, might seem quite irreverent. But I am not alone in my desire to find a way to let God “off the hook.” Medieval commentator Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi also questioned, “How could the Lord command such an abomination to be done?” His answer? He didn’t! The Rabbi apparently surmised, “Abraham’s ‘imagination’ led him astray, making him believe that he had been commanded to sacrifice his son.” (Wikipedia)

That’s the only answer that I can feel completely comfortable with as well, as I also can’t accept, no matter how hard our sages might try to justify it, that God would ever impose such a cruel test, even if God had no intention of going through with it.

Even accepting that God did indeed speak to Abraham, it is still possible to believe that Abraham misinterpreted the words, “*v’ha-aleihu sham l’olah*” to mean, “offer him there as a burnt offering” as our own translation states. Professor Kalimi, references Genesis Rabbah 56:8: “I did not tell you ‘slaughter him’ (***Shehchathu***), rather ‘take him up’ (***haAleihu***).” He concludes, “According to this source God never intended that Abraham sacrifice his son; Abraham misunderstood God’s request.”

Rashi agrees, adding, “...The Holy One, blessed be He, did not wish (Abraham) to slaughter (Isaac) but to *bring him up* to the mountain, to prepare him for a burnt offering, and as soon as he brought him up...He said to him, “Take him down.”

This interpretation, that Abraham simply misunderstood God’s intention, seems to make sense. But the statement, “God put Abraham to the test,” implies that God might have deliberately left room for the misinterpretation of the word “*haAleihu*: offer him vs. bring him up,” especially since, in the context of the barbaric environment he was living in, Abraham would have every reason to believe that God desired actual follow-through, as child-sacrifice seemed to be the norm in that time. And, again, I just don’t want to believe that ***Adomai***, the God of loving kindness and mercy, the God that Abraham heard when he was *prevented* from going through with his mission, would subject His children to such a test.

So I’m going to stand by my theory that perhaps the voice Abraham heard wasn’t really God’s at all, but his own. This encounter did, after all, supposedly happen in a dream, or night encounter.

And, as Professor Kalami points out, “Chapter 22 is the only place in the book of Genesis that God demands a sacrifice from a human and points out exactly what, how, and where He wants it, without leaving the one who is to perform the sacrifice any option.”

The book of Jeremiah also provides proof texts that God abhorred human sacrifice: (Jer. 7: 31): “They have built the high places of the Topeth.....to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire – which I had not commanded and had not entered my mind.” And later, (Jer. 19:5): “...and they built the high places of the Baal...to burn their sons in fire as burnt-offerings to the Baal, which I never commanded, nor spoke of, nor even considered in My heart.”

However we interpret this story: Whether Abraham was following God’s instructions to the letter, misinterpreted those instructions, or didn’t really hear the authentic voice of God at all, how are we to judge Abraham’s behavior?

It seems that God approves, for according to Gen. 22:15, “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....

All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.” But which command? The command to sacrifice Isaac, or the command to simply “bring him up,” or the command to “not raise your hand against the boy?”

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin argues that Abraham's real test was not that he listened to and was willing to heed God's voice telling him to sacrifice Isaac, as that would've been common practice, but that he listened to, and trusted the angel of God telling him NOT to! Rabbi Riskin comments, "Indeed, it is even possible to understand the verse usually translated as, "For now I know that you are a God fearing man, seeing you have not *chasachta/withheld* your only son from Me" (Gen. 22:12), to mean, "For now I know that you are a God fearing man, seeing you have not DONE AWAY WITH (the Hebrew *chasach* can also mean to remove, or cause to be absent) your only son BECAUSE OF (My command.)"

But perhaps God's blessing came with a price. It's interesting to note that after this episode, Abraham and G-d never speak again, perhaps indicating that this experience permanently altered their relationship. At the beginning of this scenario, G-d describes Isaac as, "your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love." The words, "*Isaac, whom you love*" are conspicuously missing from the angel's words.

Rabbi David Hoffman surmises that G-d is actually saying, "I now know that you love me and I also now know you do not love Isaac. No father who loves his son would ever raise his hand in violence against his son."

Perhaps this is why the angel is described as “*Malach Adomai*,” the angel of the *merciful* God who although not tacitly approving of Abraham’s initial willingness to sacrifice his son, forgave him because his love of Adomai was so uncompromising. Possibly “*Malach Elokeim*,” the angel of the God of *justice* who appeared to Hagar, might not have been so compassionate.

Communication doesn’t just cease between God and Abraham. In fact, Abraham never speaks to anyone else in his family again. Isaac presumably doesn’t return home with his father, and next week’s Parashah begins with Sarah’s death. The only conversation Abraham has with anyone is with his servant, Eliezer, whom he instructs to go out and find a wife for Isaac. The next thing we hear about Abraham is that he has married Keturah, has more children, and dies at the age of 175. And although the text does say, “the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things” and later, that he was “old and contented,” Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard challenges this, stating,

“From that day Abraham grew old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac prospered as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened and he knew no more joy.”

So maybe Abraham didn't really pass the test after all. Or maybe he barely squeaked by. However Abraham interpreted the words he heard that day, maybe all G-d wanted was for Abraham to say, "G-d, my faith in you is so strong that I know you would never ask such a thing of me, and therefore I will risk not my son's life, but my own life by refusing to do this." And when Abraham was silent, G-d waited for three days while father and son trekked through the wilderness, hoping that Abraham would change his mind. Finally, realizing that Abraham really was going to go through with it, G-d had to stop him.

In our day and age, when someone commits a crime and uses the defense, "God told me to do it," they will likely end up in a prison or mental health care facility, because I think it's fair to state that most of us feel, as Rabbi Hoffman does, "If your understanding of the love of G-d conflicts with your love of other human beings, you are tragically mishearing the will of G-d." Yes, Abraham is blessed, his loyalty, misguided or not, is rewarded. But the price Abraham pays is living the rest of his life without his son, "his favored one." Perhaps Abraham made the ultimate sacrifice after all.

Shanah Tovah

