

Akedah – *Max Jasny*

Today's Torah reading deals with central issues of the Jewish people – faith in G-d, sacrifice, fear, love, ethics, and family relationships. It is probably the most discussed and analyzed of the stories in the Torah. A short story -- only 24 verses – the Akedah – the Binding of Isaac – is a story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac at G-d's bidding.

Some discussions of the parasha treat it as an admonition against child sacrifice. There are sixteen other passages in the Bible specifically against child sacrifice. In the Biblical era, the sacrifice of children to gods and to ancestors was a common practice. The authority of the male head of the family was absolute and children had the status of property rather than as persons in their own right. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Torah, and this parasha in particular, is opposed to every element of this world view. The Akedah establishes the legal basis against the parental ownership of children, a custom that sadly persists in many places to this day.

But the story goes deeper than that. Although there are many aspects to the parasha and many questions and difficulties, I will try to limit my discussion to two questions, though it is hard to avoid the others that arise in every line of the text:

Why was this test of Abraham necessary, and why, because of it, is Abraham held up as a worthy model for sacrifice and devotion to G-d?

And why is this story specifically read on Rosh Hashanah?

The story begins: **Vayehi*** *ahar hadvorim ha'eileh*, And it came to pass, after these things, *v'elohim nitah et Avraham...I* that God tested Abraham...

(* Rashi says that whenever Vayehi appears in the Torah, the story that follows is sad...)(from Elie Wiesel, 92nd St. Y lectures)

G-d had tested Abraham nine times before, but these were mostly tests of his skills in diplomacy and battle, and his endurance of hardship and pain. This was to be a test of Abraham's spiritual character.

No study of the text can begin without Rashi, the great medieval explicator of the Torah. Rashi draws on the Talmudic commentators, who often add stories and characters not found in the written text. One of these added actors is Satan.

So the chapter begins: *"ahar hadvorim ha'eileh"* Rashi writes:

"Some of our Sages say (Sanh. 89b) [that this happened]: after the words [translating "devarim" as "words"] of Satan, who was accusing, and saying, "Of every feast that Abraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!" He [God] said to him, "Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before Me,' he would not withhold [him]."

Elie Wiesel, among others, was troubled by the idea that Satan could have goaded G-d into proving His faith in Abraham by testing him, as he later did with Job.

But If Abraham was to be the progenitor of a Holy people, he had to model deeper spiritual attributes than he has already shown. And the Talmudic sages often used dialogs with Satan to represent both the possible judgements of succeeding generations, and the arguments between our own different inner voices.

For example, in this story, Abraham and his small entourage set off early in the morning, and in the next verse, it's already the third day! What went on during those three days? Isaac of Vorki teaches that Satan was talking to Abraham, trying to drive a wedge between him and G-d. First Satan tried the rational approach:

“Abraham, look at what you're about to do. Ishmael is already hopelessly distant from the ways of Judaism. That leaves only two Jewish men in the entire world: you and Isaac. So now make a simple calculation. You and Sarah are old, you will have no more children. If you go and **slaughter*** your son, your only one, Isaac, won't you literally blot out Jewish men from the Universe?”

(*In the text, G-d does not say “slaughter” or “kill,” but “prepare” or “offer” as a sacrifice....)

Abraham reaffirmed his commitment to carry out G-d's directive, and said “All of those calculations that the world would be without Jews are not my concern. The world belongs to the Holy One and it is not for me to supply Jews for it.” The teaching explains that **we** have an obligation to be a Jew. G-d will worry about whether there are Jews in the world.

Satan tried other approaches: “If you carry out this sacrifice, G-d will condemn you as a murderer.” Abraham answered “Nevertheless, I shall do what G-d **commands***.” (Aside – Rashi says that the Hebrew for “Take now your son..” is literally in the form of a request, and in some translations appears as “Please take your son....” This confers on Abraham a larger measure of choice. He is acting of his own free will.)

Finally, Satan said: “I have seen it; G-d Himself will change His mind, and stay your hand. He will prevent you from your task, and He will give you a ram to sacrifice in place of your son.”

Abraham replied: "It is the punishment of a liar, not to be believed even when he tells the truth."

Thus, on the journey to Moriah, Abraham resisted the fear and uncertainty, and the internal arguments, both rational and emotional, ***which we all experience***, even if we have committed to a course of action. To "do the right thing," to follow G-d's wishes, Abraham had to hold out the will of G-d's as a higher value than his own personal ideas and feelings. Kierkegaard, in his book about the Akedah, "Fear and Trembling," describes this triumph of faith over individual principles as the "teleological suspension of the ethical."

Jewish history is filled with examples of sacrifice and martyrdom. The story of Chana and her seven sons, during the reign of Antiochus, is one example. As her sons, one by one, were tortured and killed because of their devotion to Torah and to G-d, Chana said, "My children, tell your ancestor Abraham, 'You bound only one son upon an altar, but I bound seven.'"

Similar stories have come from the Inquisition, at Masada, and into modern times. People have sacrificed their lives, even killed their own children and then themselves, for their beliefs, for causes important to them, or to avoid what they believed would be worse than death. -- I personally would not make those choices, but Jewish history has many such examples.

Why is Abraham's sacrifice held to this day, as a model for devotion, above all these? Often, the causes they died for were part of their identity, part of their sense of self. Even in sacrifice, they felt as though some part of them would continue in the world because of their acts. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son. But what he had already sacrificed was his attachment to his Self, to any personal agenda.

G-d had promised Abraham that he would be the patriarch of a great nation as numerous as the stars, and a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In their old age, G-d gave Abraham and Sarah a miraculous son, through whom G-d's promise would be fulfilled. Now G-d has asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, and with him, the legacy that he had been promised. By the binding of Isaac, Abraham proved that his devotion to G-d was not based on any expectation of reward or self-fulfillment. He followed a calling beyond any part of his personal identity. "Now I know" said G-d, "seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me, that you are a G-d fearing man."

Why is this parasha so fitting for this day of Rosh Hashanah?

This model of letting go of identity and attachment to the self, can also be found in Buddhist thought, but it fits well into the spirit of the Days of Awe. The ram's horn we sound on Rosh Hashanah is a wake up call, and a reminder of our task of t'shuvah as modeled by Abraham. The process of tshuva may start by asking forgiveness of the people you've wronged, but it continues beyond that.

There is a midrash that when Abraham sacrificed the ram that was provided, he asked G-d to accept the burnt offering and its ashes as if they had been from his son Isaac. He asked G-d to promise to suppress his anger at, and to forgive future transgressions of his people, just as Abraham had suppressed his compassion to do G-d's will at Moriah. Thus, Abraham, by his sacrifice, conferred upon G-d an obligation to forgive our own transgressions. There is a reference to this in the Zichronot prayers of Rosh Hashanah:

"Remember unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the lovingkindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our

father on Mount Moriah: and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So may Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness may Thy great wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city, and Thine inheritance."

The parallels between this story of sacrifice and Divine forgiveness and the Christian story of Jesus, were not lost on those involved in the disputations and writings of the middle ages

There are some commentaries that Isaac was actually sacrificed on that day. On certain fast days ashes that are placed on heads are said to be "reminders of Isaac's ashes." The text also says "and Abraham went back then to his servant boys, and they arose, and went together to Bersheva." – no mention of Isaac. Perhaps a part of him was left on that mountain. But Isaac's part in this story would be the subject of another, or much longer, discussion.

On a final note, it has been said that there is a danger in using Abraham as a model for following the word of G-d. To suppress long established ethics, logical arguments, and the yearnings of your heart, to follow the word of G-d, may allow for drastic errors in judgement.

How do we know what G-d wants of us? According to tradition, Abraham was a Prophet. G-d spoke directly to him and Abraham recognized his voice. We don't get to speak with G-d. For the rest of us, there is Torah. Torah, learning, discussion, the advice of the Rabbi. Reaching the truth and the right thing to do may be straight forward in many instances. But there are those times, when parts of our self, things we identify with, can get in the way. Then it takes more work,

and practice, to reach for the divine, while letting go of the ego, and to know which is which.

L'shana tova tikatevu.