

## **Akaidah**

**Harry Waizer, September 7, 2002**

Shana Tovah

The Torah reading for today is the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. To test Abraham, G-d commands Abraham to offer up his son, Isaac. Abraham, unquestioning, commences a three-day journey to the place where he will sacrifice Isaac. As Abraham reaches out his hand to perform the sacrifice, a Malach, an angel, calls out to him to stop. Abraham lifts his eyes, sees a ram trapped in the nearby thickets, and then offers the ram as the sacrifice, sparing Isaac.

On one level the story has a certain fairy tale simplicity. A man is given a choice, obey G-d and have your beloved child die, or disobey to save your child's life. The man chooses to obey, but at the last moment the child is saved and they both live happily ever after; the man has many more children and lives to a ripe old age, the child finds and marries his true love, Rebekkah. Complexity then creeps in as we confront the issue that this terrible dilemma is not presented by some evil fairy tale wicked king or witch, but by our own just and righteous G-d. And yet greater complexity occurs as we question whether they in fact did live happily ever after.

The Akedah raises many large, fascinating questions for us as Jews; about the fundamental nature of humankind's relationship with G-d, about our expected level of readiness to obey G-d and sacrifice, about how we resolve conflicts between our obligations to G-d and our obligations to our fellow humans. Today, I would like to focus on three discrete questions.

My first question was visceral rather than intellectual; how could G-d do this to Abraham. For three days Abraham journeyed with Isaac, convinced that at the end of his journey, he would kill his beloved son. We can only try to imagine the turmoil, the agony he must have endured? Abraham understood that G-d's motive was not Isaac's death. He had just witnessed G-d destroy Sodom and Gemorah; G-d could certainly achieve Isaac's death without Abraham's help. What a terrible burden to impose on Abraham. And what about Sarah. Had she, at age 90, miraculously been given the gift of motherhood, only to now see her son sacrificed by her husband? While every one of the commentaries I read justified and exalted the Akedah, I found myself wondering at the cruelty of this test.

My second question is why did Abraham not challenge G-d? This is the Abraham who stood up to G-d repeatedly in an effort to save the unworthy people of Sodom and Gemorah; why would he not at least question G-d's death sentence for the innocent, righteous Isaac?

Finally, why did G-d, who himself delivered the commandment to sacrifice Isaac, have a messenger deliver the message to save Isaac? Why did he not deliver this joyous commandment himself, or simply provide a miracle, allowing Isaac to survive the sacrifice?

There is much Midrash and commentary that attempts to explain what G-d was trying to

accomplish with the Akedah. Maimonides, for instance, believed the Akedah was designed to demonstrate Abraham's fidelity and trust in G-d to surrounding nations. Rabbi Yehuda Nachshoni in his Studies on the weekly Parashah, discusses a number of more recent commentators who saw the Akedah as a sign for future generations of the spiritual power of the Jewish people, an event to be recalled each Rosh Hashanah as a reminder to G-d of the millions of Jewish people that have been tested and sacrificed for Kiddish Hashem, sanctification of G-d's name. Ibn Ezra among others, suggests that G-d did not want to test Abraham's faith; G-d after all knew the outcome. Instead, G-d wanted Abraham to experience the depth of his own faith and to thereby grow spiritually.

These commentaries attempt to answer the intellectual question, why did G-d command the Akedah, but my question is more personal. What does it tell us about our G-d that he was capable of such an action, one that by human standards was extraordinarily cruel? A Midrash tells us that Sarah, in the mistaken belief that Abraham has actually sacrificed Isaac, died of grief before she could learn that Isaac had been spared. Another Midrash tells us that after the Akedah, Isaac never sees Abraham again. Everett Fox points out that after the Akedah, G-d never speaks to Abraham again. The Akedah story is no fairy tale, where all live happily ever after. It is woven of the fabric of real life, where decisions have consequences, often unwanted, even as worse consequences may be averted.

In an effort to address this question, I tried to put the Akedah into a context relevant to us. Of course, none of us will receive a call from G-d commanding us to personally slaughter a loved one. But every day, we face the ordinary events of this extraordinary, G-d created world in which some of us or a loved one may be told that we have cancer, heart disease or another progressive disorder, or that a child has a congenital disease and likely will not survive to adulthood. How many parents have witnessed the sacrifice of their children to war, declared or undeclared? G-d's apparent cruelty to Abraham and Sarah was a variation on that visited on humankind every day. We puzzle over why this kind of suffering is permitted by G-d, why we, or this person, or that child was chosen to suffer. Philosophers as diverse as Maimonides and Kierkegaard have considered G-d's apparent indifference to human suffering and responded with a description of G-d as ineffable, beyond our comprehension. In apparent contrast, more mystic interpreters of Judaism, such as the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, describe the distinctive quality of the biblical G-d as a concern for the needs and feelings of human beings. There is much in the Torah, indeed in the Akedah itself, to support both views and I do not view them as irreconcilable; they merely reflect different aspects of a one G-d who encompasses all attributes. The world can appear cruel and indifferent, and the Akedah reminds us that we are not the first to have to deal with the intolerable and incomprehensible. But though G-d may at times appear indifferent, or at least nonresponsive, to individual suffering, a merciful G-d has given us the spiritual and intellectual tools to deal with our world. The Akedah therefore is also an eternal reminder that when we are tested to the limits of human endurance and comprehension, we must not surrender to what appears inevitable. To the very end we must continue to struggle,

attempt to comprehend, change what may at one time appeared to have been inevitable and cope with dignity with what is indeed inevitable.

That brings me to the second question; why did Abraham not pray for mercy, for Isaac if not for himself. There is a Midrash that posits a conversation between G-d and Abraham, but it never suggests that Abraham challenges G-d. But why not? Faced with the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah, Abraham argues with G-d about the injustice saying “Chalillah Lach Hashophet Kol Ha’aretz Lo Ya’aseh Mishpot” “Heaven forbid that the judge of all the land should not do justice.” And G-d concedes the point. While the Rabbis of the Mishnah and later traditional commentaries universally extol Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, I still question : Why did Abraham not fight for his son’s life?

I think a clue lies in the ending of the Akedah. After the angel stays Abraham’s hand, the text tells us “Vayisah Avraham Es Aynav V’hinei Ayil Acher” “And Abraham lifted his eyes and behold there was a ram”. Some commentators interpret this lifting of the eyes to mean Abraham opened his eyes metaphorically, saw what he could not see before, that the sacrifice of Isaac was not in fact G-d’s will, and sacrificed the ram instead. Rashi points out in fact that G-d never says to Abraham that he should sacrifice Isaac, G-d’s words are “Halehu sham Leola”, bring him up for an offering. While I find this approach appealing, it seems clear that Abraham at least believed he was being asked to sacrifice Isaac. The Torah says Abraham picked up the knife “Lishchot es b’no” “to slaughter his son”. While the Rabbis of the Mishnah and later traditional commentaries universally extol Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, I find this unqualified glorification difficult to accept.

I see Abraham’s response as a very human response to an apparent death sentence imposed by G-d. In the same Torah portion that contains the story of the Akedah, Vayera, we see that Abraham had his human imperfections; he was prepared to see his concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael perish in the wilderness rather than challenge his wife Sarah, and was prepared to allow King Avimelech to take his wife Sarah to bed under the false premise that she was Abraham’s sister. Abraham, the patriarchal model of Gemilat Chasadim or kindness to strangers, the one who dares to challenge G-d to save the people of Sodom and Gemorrah, is less quick to apply his patriarchal virtues to himself and his own family. We see this flaw often in others and ourselves; people who will extend themselves extraordinarily for friends or community, for world hunger and world peace, and yet can’t seem to find the time for their families... who would never fail to offer every courtesy to strangers and friends in their lives but fail to extend them to their children and spouses. Abraham passed his divine test with G-d but, at least initially, failed the test of his humanity. Rabbi Rona Jaffe, in a Women’s Commentary on the Torah, takes the view that it is Sarah who dies of grief, the Matriarch who could not suspend ethical law in response to a supposed divine imperative, that is the real heroine of this story. It is only after three days, on the verge of the indefensible slaughter of his child, that Abraham becomes the Patriarch again, and divines G-d’s true will. The Akedah is a story of spiritual triumph, but it is also a cautionary tale of human frailty.

And what does any of this have to do with my third question, the role of the messenger in this story? The heart of the story of the Akedah is marked with textual book-ends. When G-d first calls to Abraham, Abraham responds by saying “Hinayni” “I am here”. Commentary tells us that the word Hinayni denotes a particular sense of receptivity. When the Malach calls out to Abraham to stop the sacrifice, he calls out “Abraham, Abraham”. Midrash tells us the double Abraham denotes a sense of urgency. Abraham responds with his second “Hinayni”. The angel tells him not to harm Isaac and only then does Abraham lift up his eyes and see the ram that he then sacrifices in lieu of Isaac. Midrash tells us the ram was always there, but Abraham needed the message of the angel before he was able to see it. Abraham needed to hear his name shouted out to enter into that second Hinayni, that further state of receptiveness. Rabbi Kook, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox commentator, states that when the divine light shined forth in purity, it was revealed that divine surrender did not require Abraham to engage in child sacrifice, what Rabbi Kook calls “this disgusting form of idol worship”. G-d did not merely want to assure that Isaac survived, he wanted Abraham to develop a deeper understanding of G-d, to realize that Isaac’s sacrifice would have given G-d no glory. Had Abraham opened his mind and eyes sooner, he would sooner have seen what was always there and spared himself and his family. But Abraham needed help, the intervention of the Malach, to see what to us, with the benefit of hindsight, is so clear.

This kind of intervention is one we may all need from time to time. What is the Akedah after all but the story of a man facing a cruel dilemma and finding an acceptable, if less than perfect, resolution by opening himself up to an alternative that he finds with a crucial outside assistance. All of us from time to time face the challenges of life, dealing with illness or the illness of loved ones, facing economic difficulty, even financial ruin. Life is sometimes no less cruel to us than G-d was to Abraham. Too many of us are like Abraham, willing to rise up in a fervor of righteousness to help others, but unwilling to open ourselves up to accepting help for ourselves and our families. Each of us from time to time can use our own Malach to show us the way. But we need to open ourselves to the Malachim around us, and see the help that is available. We must not permit ourselves to repeat Abraham’s mistake.

And each of us as well is a potential Malach or divine intermediary. For us, the message is “become the Malach”, the divine messenger, the intermediary, shouting out that help is available and should, and must, be accepted. We must not let our friends and family repeat Abraham’s error.

Last year we saw first hand the cruelty that G-d permits in this world, and the speed, kindness and generosity with which our human Malachim can respond. We cannot avoid all harshness in our lives, but with the lessons of the Akedah before us, we can bind ourselves to each other and recognize that as much we all are prepared to give, we must also be willing to receive. And we can look to ourselves and each other to act as Malachim, not to alter G-d’s will, but to help each other deal with that will, and to see that such will is effected in a manner that reflects the divine spark that G-d has planted within us. May the coming year bring to all of us less of G-d’s

apparent indifference, and reveal to us more of G-d's mercy.