

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



## What Did Abraham Actually Know?

**Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS**

"But was he really as strongly convinced of such a revealed doctrine, and also of its meaning, as is required for daring to destroy a human being on its basis?"

—Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, §4  
(Transl. George di Giovanni)

What would you do if a voice told you to sacrifice your child?

In the next section of this passage from Kant, which deals with the example of an inquisitor who seeks to put a heretic to death, Kant explains why Abraham was just as wrong to follow God's command and take Isaac to be sacrificed. (Gen. 22:1-10)

Maybe God did speak to Abraham, and if so, maybe it would be theoretically appropriate to follow God's command. But Kant raises the question of certainty. His objection to Abraham's action is more about what we can know, rather than about what is (in theory) permitted behavior.

Kant makes two claims: (1) We know that murder is wrong, and (2) we can never be sure that we received or understood God's words accurately. For Kant, the essence of morality is known with certainty (Kant's own principle, the "categorical imperative," is related to the better-known Golden Rule), and so our conscience is always a check on our actions. In contrast, we can never be certain about what we believe to be a communication of God's will. And so, regardless of religious convictions, Kant insists that valuing human life always comes first.

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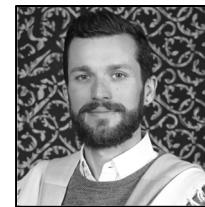


# TORAH FROM JTS



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וירא תשע"ט



## The Legacy of Sodom

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*Content note: this commentary discusses sexual violence.*

Following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his two daughters flee to the mountains above Zoar. They are stricken with fear, having witnessed the devastation of the two cities. They grieve the dead, a vast number that includes Lot's wife, the mother of the two women, who—having paused to look back toward Sodom—was turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:23–26). It is necessary to understand the emotional frame within which they are operating, as it underlies the following narrative.

After some time dwelling in the mountains, the eldest daughter comes to the terrifying realization that they may be the last remnant of humankind. "Our father is old," she confides to her sister. "And there is not a man left on earth, who can come to us in the common manner" (19:31). She proposes that they give their father wine and—in his inebriated state—have sex with him. Upon conceiving, they would preserve their familial line and ensure the survival of humankind.

When addressing issues of sex, coercion, and consent, the ability to identify and ascribe agency can be difficult. This is particularly true in this narrative, where Lot—despite being the target of violence— inhabits several positions of authority vis-à-vis his daughters, by way of age, gender, and family role. Yet he is also intoxicated, rendering him less capable and aware than the two women. If this is a case of coerced or unwanted sexual behavior, who bears responsibility?

Several commentators blame the daughters. Their view is—in part—sympathetic: the two women were motivated by fear. Rashi (on v.31) argues that when the eldest stated, "There is not a man left on earth," this

demonstrates her belief that the entire world has been destroyed, as in the time of the Flood. This sentiment is echoed by Ibn Ezra, who notes in his commentary on the same verse that—from the daughters' vantage point—it appeared as if everything had been covered by fire and brimstone; this is synonymous to the experience of Noah, who saw that everything had been swallowed by water. They act to ensure their security, and the future of humankind.

Even though the daughters acted out of fear, it is clear that this is an act of sexual violence. Radak notes that the purpose of the wine in v. 32 was to intoxicate Lot, so that he would not be aware of what was happening. Alcohol is commonly used to facilitate unwanted sexual behavior, as it inhibits physical and psychological resistance; this is particularly true when the perpetrator is concerned about the victim's ability to refuse, as may have been the case with Lot—an older man—contra his two daughters. Alcohol limits the capacity for self-advocacy.

Yet, it is important to name the social landscape that serves as the backdrop to this story. The daughters are also the victims of sexual violence; only a few verses earlier, their father had offered them to a mob of aggressive Sodomites. While it would then seem that Lot was the first to transgress normative boundaries, it is clear—from their behavior and the behavior of their neighbors—that all parties were operating within a society indifferent toward consent. Each was shaped by social structures (sometimes referred to as rape culture) where the expression of power and desire through violence has become normalized.

As we grapple with the overwhelming prevalence of sexual violence in our communities, we must hold perpetrators accountable. However, we also need to take a close look at the social structures that have facilitated its occurrence; it is clear that we are the inheritors of a culture that normalizes the coexistence of sex and coercion. It is incumbent upon us to create a new normal, teaching our children the value of consent and the immutability of bodily autonomy. The responsibility is ours. Only together can we break the cycle of violence that claimed both Lot and his daughters.

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## Genesis Chapter 22

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including a JTS rabbinical student each Monday. Here is a past contribution from this week's parashah. Visit [929.org.il](http://929.org.il) to learn more.

When our feet touch land again, it is no longer freshly baked earth watered by the grace of dew. It is broken by rivers flowing over cracks and crests like spilt blood. The ground hurts. Still God asks each of us to live on, to be fertile.

This narrative, though one of the most well-known in the Torah, is perplexing at best to the modern reader. Avraham hears God's message that he must sacrifice his beloved son Isaac and agrees with blind faith. When they reach the designated mountain, the Torah tells us that Avraham tells his servants to wait while he "took the wood for the offering and put it on his son Isaac, then took in his hand the fire and the knife, and the two walked off together" (v. 6). Why would the Torah tell us that Avraham and Yitzhak walked together? Physically, Yitzhak had a more arduous journey, and would have slowed down Avraham's pace due to the burden of the wood. Most traditional commentators, following Rashi, conclude that the addition of the extraneous word "together" indicates that they both walked with joy—Isaac because he did not know what was to come, Avraham because he was about to fulfill God's command.

But perhaps the opposite is true—the Torah specifically indicates that Avraham and Yitzhak walked together because they both walked slowly, encumbered by a heavy burden. Yitzhak labored with the wood, but Avraham also carried a heavy load as he trudged toward the seemingly certain death of his beloved son. With this one extra word, the Torah teaches us to pay attention to the burdens others carry—the weight on their shoulders that causes them to shuffle and drag their feet—even if we cannot see them. Avraham may have willingly obeyed God's command, but he went to fulfill it just like his son, slowly making his way up the mountain, painfully aware of the weight on his shoulders.