

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



What Did Abraham Actually Know?

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“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, 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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Parashat Vayera 5776

פרשת וירא תשע"ו



Ultimate Values and the *Akedah* Story

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Can there be anything left to say about the *Akedah*, perhaps the most discussed and analyzed story in the Torah? Clearly if this were simply the story of an old man who hears voices and travels to a nearby mountain with his son in order to kill him there, and who, at the last moment, sees a ram and kills it instead, we would not still be fascinated talking about the story more than two millennia later. No, this is an allegory. . . and therein lies its survival and its power, and our task is to find meaning in the story for ourselves and for our lives.

My initial reaction after hearing the story was, “So what else is new?” Parents often sacrifice their children in all kinds of ways. Many in the class that entered medical school with me were people whose talents and desires drew them in different directions and who were there at their parents’ insistence. It was not so long ago that children were required to take over family businesses or enter loveless marriages. What about war? Wars are fought by the young and when countries go to war, they are saying, “There are values we hold strongly enough to let our children die for.” When the “The Greatest Generation” went off to fight World War II, their parents sent them with anxiety but also with pride and the conviction that they were doing the right, the moral, the correct thing. Think of our brothers and sisters in Israel whose children are regularly put in harm’s way to preserve values that provide a life of meaning. Of course no one wants their children to die, but the ideal of preserving a secure Jewish state is just that important.

For all the difficulty we, in this day and age, have with Abraham—why did he not simply refuse? Why did he not at least argue with God?—for our ancestors, the issue was not that God asked too much, but that Abraham did not do enough. The Talmud (BT Gittin 57b) relates the story of a woman whose seven sons were all martyred, tortured to death in front of her. It is a paradigm of loving acceptance and suffering, a story of mourning and rejoicing, mourning because it was decreed that her sons be slain and rejoicing because through their deaths Heaven’s glory was sanctified. A heroine and

paragon of virtue, she says: “Go and tell Father Abram: Let not your heart swell with pride! You built one altar but I have built seven altars and on them have offered up my seven sons. What is more: Yours was a trial; mine is accomplished fact.” (Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 15)

In some midrashim, Abraham’s failure to carry out God’s demand was not for lack of trying. In one, when the angel’s tears dissolve his dagger, he asks if instead he can strangle him, or burn him, or cut him to pieces—that is why the Torah says, “Do not put forth your hand to him or do anything [else] to him.” In another, Abraham actually does stab and kill Isaac, who is revived, whereupon Abraham stabs him again—that is why the angel has to call out to him twice.

During the crusades, there were numerous stories of men slaughtering their wives and children before killing themselves, and of mothers telling their children to hold still so the knife wouldn’t slip. For Jews in the rabbinic period and the Middle Ages, “their sufferings and sacrifices exceeded by far everything endured by the original *Akedah’s* father and son.” (Spiegel, 21) They were sympathetic mainly to Abraham’s being thwarted from demonstrating his devotion to God.

Most modern commentaries tend to be critical of Abraham, but a recent popular film that I believe is a midrash on the *Akedah* story takes a different view. *Footnote*, an Israeli film that won Best Screenplay at Cannes in 2011 and was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Foreign film, is about an Israeli family—the father and son both Talmud scholars at Hebrew University. The father does esoteric philological research, very much out of fashion in contemporary academia. The son’s research is much more modern and he is the more well-known of the two. The father does not have much regard for the kind of scholarly work the son does. One day, the father receives a call informing him that he has won the prestigious Israel Prize. He and his family feel he should have received it years ago and the only reason he has not is the personal animus of the head of the Israel Prize committee. Once it is announced, he becomes a minor celebrity. In a television interview, he ridicules the type of research his son does and in effect, throws his son under the academic bus. Ironically, the call he received was an error.

The committee had actually awarded the Prize to the son. They inform the son, but he says that since his father has been told he won the prize, and it has been announced publicly, it must not be retracted. It would be too devastating to the father who feels that his life’s work has at last been vindicated. The committee agrees to let the award stand with two provisos. The son must write the citation given with the prize and must agree never to allow himself to be considered for the Israel Prize. The son agrees, a great personal sacrifice. In preparing the citation, the son reluctantly comes to the conclusion that his father’s work, of

which he had been so proud, was really not so great or important, and that the prize had not been withheld because of any personal vendetta on anyone’s part. Soon after preparing the citation, he tells his mother what happened, and she silently acquiesces, just as we may presume that Sarah does in the *Akedah* story. Meanwhile the father, the great philologist, reading the citation that will accompany the presentation of the prize, figures out that it was written by his son and realizes what happened. He knows but does not say anything to anyone and participates in the ceremony where he receives the Prize. It is never discussed, but all three, the father, the mother, and the son, know what happened, and are all complicit in the sacrifice of the son.

I suggest the same is true of all three protagonists in the *Akedah* story. Abraham acquiesces to God without protest, Isaac goes along with his father with full knowledge of what is about to happen, and Sarah gives her silent assent. Sarah and Abraham have been on this journey together since *Lekh Lekha*, since they were told to leave their homeland to establish a new world order. And they have inculcated this value in their son. Sacrifices are made along the way, of which the *Akedah* is the ultimate. Clearly the story rejects the notion of actual human sacrifice, which distinguished Israelite religion from its pagan contemporaries, and this rejection continues to be a major trope in Jewish thought. Nevertheless, the actions of Abraham and the others in the story were less hard to understand and relate to for Jews in former times.

For those of us in the so-called “Me Generation,” the idea of ultimate values that demand and justify ultimate sacrifice are much harder to accept. This theme plays out prominently during the *yamim nora'im* when we retell not only the story of the *Akedah*, but of Hagar and Ishmael being banished to the wilderness and their probable deaths, of Hannah giving up the child she was so desperate for, and of Jewish martyrs through the ages.

The *Akedah* story demands we grapple with the question: What values do we hold dear enough that we would be willing to sacrifice everything? It forces us to live with the tension between our certainty of the answer and our awareness of our own fallibility.

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