

Parashat Vayera 5770, 2009:

Avraham's Choice and Reward

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom* and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and HaRav Shimon ben Chaya Hakohen.

“... Abraham I cannot understand, in a certain sense there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment.” (Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, 1843 introductory words to his analysis of the Binding of Isaac.)

Beyond question, the *Akeida* (Binding of Isaac) was the ultimate trial that anyone could bear. Avraham was the personification of *chesed* (kindness). The Midrash is replete with story after story of his *gemilut chasadim* (overflowing kindness). Whether it was his four-door open tent to welcome wayfarers, or his beseeching Hashem on behalf of the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham was the embodiment of *chesed* in action. How strange indeed, and how powerfully echo Kierkegaard's words in our ears, when Avraham was presented with his choice: Follow the direct command of Hashem to bring his son Yitzchak as a *korban olah* (completely burnt offering) or refuse to do so on the grounds that this divine imperative flew in the face of everything that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* had taught him. Make no mistake about it: This was Avraham's choice and its outcome determined his ultimate *schar* (reward) and destiny.

It is crucial to recognize that Avraham chose to follow Hashem's command with complete free will:

And it came to pass after these things, that G-d tested Abraham, and He said to him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, yea, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you." And Abraham arose early in the morning, and he saddled his donkey, and he took his two young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for a burnt offering, and he arose and went to the place of which G-d had told him. (*Sefer Bereishit 22:1-3*, this, and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105), based upon Talmudic and Midrashic sources, notes that Avraham performed G-d's bidding with alacrity and a profound feeling of love and devotion:

And Avraham arose early: "He hastened to [perform] the commandment (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 4a*). **And he saddled:** He himself, and he did not command one of his servants, because love causes a disregard for the standard [of dignified conduct]. — [From *Genesis Rabbah 55:8*]"

Following the successful completion of this nearly super-human trial, an angel of Hashem spoke to Avraham for the second time, and informed him of his future rewards:

And an angel of the L-rd called to Abraham a second time from heaven. And he said, "By Myself have I sworn, says the L-rd, that because you have done this thing and you did not withhold your son, your only one, that I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore, and your descendants will inherit the cities of their enemies. And through your children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice." (*Sefer Bereishit 22:15-18*)

Let us briefly recount the major points of Hashem's blessing:

1. Avraham will "surely be blessed."
2. Avraham's descendants will one day be multiplied "as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore."
3. Avraham's heirs "will inherit the cities of their enemies."
4. Avraham's children will cause all the nations of the world to be blessed.

One is immediately struck by the future-oriented tone of this four-part blessing. In some ways it appears quite problematic. After all, it was Avraham, rather than his children-to-be, who successfully rose to the challenge of the incomprehensible trial of the *Akeida*. Therefore, *prima facie*, he should have been the one to receive the lion's share of the rewards instead of his descendants.

The answer to this seeming quandary, however, is really quite simple. In fact, it was already foreshadowed in Parashat Lech Lecha. True, Avraham and Sarah were focused on changing the present and in revolutionizing man's recognition of, and relationship to, G-d. Thus, Rashi and the Midrash teach us that they actively converted many former idol worshippers in Haran to the service of Hashem (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:5): **And the souls they had acquired in Haran:** "whom he [Avraham] had brought under the wings of the *Schechinah* [Divine Presence]. Abraham would convert the men, and Sarah would convert the women, and Scripture ascribes to them [a merit] as if they had made them (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 39:14)." Yet, their ultimate goal was to change the future of all mankind and thereby "*l'takan haolam b'malchut Shakai*" ("to improve and alter the world so that all mankind will recognize the Kingship of the Almighty," *Aleinu*). This objective could be reached, if and only if, they were the progenitors of a new and inspired G-d-intoxicated people. They therefore needed their own children to ensure the survival of their way of life and dedication to Hashem. As a result, the Almighty promised Avraham:

"And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing," "And I will make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man will be able to count the dust of the earth, so will your seed be counted, "And behold, the word of the L-rd came to him, saying, "This one [Eliezer] will

not inherit you, but the one who will spring from your innards-he will inherit you.’ And He took him outside, and He said, “Please look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So will be your seed.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:2, 13:16, and 15:4-5)

Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban (1194-1270), comments upon the seeming repetition of the blessing of myriad children to Avraham in Parashat Lech Lecha and in our *parasha* “One should note that the blessing of many children was already promised to him [Avraham] when Hashem told him that ‘Your seed will be multiplied like the stars of heaven and like the dust of the earth.’” Yet, precisely because of the *Akeida*, he suggests something new has taken place in the Avraham - G-d relationship: “But now, G-d has added a reason to him [Avraham] as to why [he will be blessed with countless offspring], namely, ‘...because you did...’ this great action – consequently, Hashem took an oath in His great Name – that his [Avraham’s] children would inherit the gates of their enemies.” The Ramban continues by noting a quizzical paradox: As a direct result of the *Akeida*, wherein Avraham nearly slaughters Yitzhak as a *korban olah*, G-d now promises the eternity of the Jewish people:

Behold, G-d [now] promised that there would never be any sin that could bring about the entire destruction of his [Avraham’s] descendants. In addition, they would never fall into the hands of their enemies in such a manner that would preclude them from rising up [once again]. Behold, this is a complete guarantee [literally “promise”] that we will ultimately share in the Final Redemption. (*Sefer Bereishit* 22:16, translation and emphasis, my own)

Based upon Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nachman’s keen insights, we can readily see that Avraham received the ultimate personal reward as a result of his choice to undertake the *Akeida*: the guarantee of the future of the Jewish people. This, after all, was his self-chosen goal and purpose in life, and this was his reward.

Our people exist today, in complete defiance of the laws of logic and history, because of the beneficence of G-d, as well as the faith and dedication of *Avraham Avinu* and his free-willed choice to follow the Almighty's command. With G-d's help, may we never be tested like Avraham. Yet, when each of us are tested in our own unique ways, and face our own personal trials and tribulations, may G-d help us to have the strength of character and depth of faith to emulate Avraham's noble and inspiring example. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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