

Parashat Vayera 5771, 2010:

*Understanding the Akedah (Binding of Isaac)*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

... 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 *Akedah* is the ultimate trial that anyone could bear. Avraham is the personification of *chesed*. The Midrash is replete with story after story of his *gemilut chasadim* (acts of kindness). Whether it is his four-door open tent or his beseeching Hashem on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham is the embodiment of *chesed* in action. How strange indeed, and how paradoxically echo Kierkegaard’s words in our ears, when Avraham is presented with his choice: Follow the direct command of Hashem to bring Yitzchak as a *korban olah* (completely burnt offering) or refuse to do so on the grounds that this divine imperative flies in the face of everything that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has taught him. Make no mistake about it: This was his choice and its outcome determined his ultimate judgment and reward – and the future of the Jewish people.

While Kierkegaard was astonished and baffled by Avraham’s actions, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and adherents, understood the *Akedah* from the perspective of our obligation to engage in sacrifice in the service of Hashem: “Of course, the idea of sacrifice is a

cornerstone of Judaism, and the *Akedah* has inevitably introduced sacrificial action as part of our historical drama.” (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 11) *Avodat Hashem* (the service of G-d), however, demands its own analysis if we are to ascertain how sacrifice fits into this aspect of the G-d - man encounter and relationship. In this context, the Rav explained *avodat Hashem* as “service awareness.” This means that our entire being is metaphorically in the palms of His “hands”:

Man is a servant of G-d. He belongs completely to G-d – body and soul. G-d owns human existence at every level, physical, spiritual, and social. Every movement of our muscles is related to G-d. Every thought that flashes through our minds belongs to Him. Every feeling, stirring of the soul, every joyful anticipation or sad expectation is not the property of man. (Ibid. , page10)

Moreover, as G-d’s servants, we need to keenly recognize His total mastery of the universe and of ourselves:

G-d is the L-rd of the world and the master of man. Hence, G-d from time to time calls upon man to return to Him whatever is His. He demands that man give not a part but the whole of himself. He requires of man to return divine property to its rightful owner. (Ibid. , page 11)

In light of this last point, it is possible to understand how, and why, Hashem commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak as a *korban olah*. In a certain sense, Avraham was returning to G-d that which was always His:

The supreme sacrifice is never too much, since G-d owns everything and man possesses nothing. “The soul is Yours, and the body is Your handiwork” (High Holy Day prayers). Total sacrifice was decreed by G-d when He summoned Abraham to offer Isaac on Mount Moriah. (Ibid.)

When analyzing the *Akedah*, it is crucial for us to remember that G-d’s commandment to sacrifice Yitzchak was absolute and unequivocal in nature:

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.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 22: 1-2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The simple and direct reading of this passage (*peshat*) leaves little doubt in one’s mind that Avraham was required to literally offer his beloved son as a *korban olah*. Yet, toward the end of our narrative, Avraham is commanded to refrain from human sacrifice and to offer an animal in place of Yitzchak:

And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife, to slaughter his son. And an angel of G-d called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham! Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad, nor do the slightest thing to him, for now I know that you are a G-d fearing man, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he saw, and lo! there was a ram, [and] after [that] it was caught in a tree by its horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Ibid. , 22:10-13)

We now have a new set of quandaries: “Why did Hashem, via the agency of His angel, suddenly order Avraham to cease and desist in his sacrifice of Yitzchak?” Moreover, does not this contravention of His earlier commandment deny Avraham the *schar* (reward) to which he was due? Stated somewhat differently: “Why were the preceding events sufficient to prove to Hashem that Avraham was ‘a G-d fearing man?’” Rav Soloveitchik addresses these problems by first noting: “the *Akedah* is multi-semantic, lending itself to many interpretations. G-d demands that man bring the supreme sacrifice, but the fashion in which the challenge is met is for man to determine.” (Op. cit.) Here, too, as in so much of the Rav’s philosophy, man is presented as a free-willed active agent who receives G-d’s commands while maintaining the freedom to fulfill them in his own unique manner.

We are now in a position to answer our questions. One would think that “total sacrifice” could only be achieved if man fulfills the literal meaning of the term. Yet, the Rav teaches us that there are actually two ways in which this can be realized:

There are two ways in which the total sacrifice is implemented – the physical and the experiential. The choice of the method is up to man. The need for sacrifice was established as an iron law in Jewish history. However, whether man should sacrifice on a physical altar atop some mountain the way G-d summoned Abraham to do or *in the recesses of his personality is man's privilege to determine*. Whether the sacrifice consists in physical agony, pain, and extinction of life or in spiritual surrender, humility, and resignation is man's affair. G-d wills man to choose the [type of] altar and the [manner of] sacrifice. (Ibid. , italics and brackets my own)

Given this analysis, it is manifestly evident that Avraham did indeed sacrifice Yitzchak.

The sacrifice, however, was not physical in nature. It was, instead, experiential and took place in the innermost “recesses of his personality.” For all intents and purposes, Yitzchak, in the persona of Avraham's son, ceased to exist. True, the physical form of Yitzchak remained. Nonetheless, he was a transformed being who was now *kulu l'Hashem* (totally and completely Hashem's) and no longer Avraham's. Moreover, since this change was experiential rather than physical, it actually took place before Avraham arrived at Mount Moriah. It happened, in fact, from the moment G-d issued His command:

Abraham implemented the sacrifice of Isaac not on Mount Moriah but in the depths of his heart. He gave up Isaac the very instant G-d addressed Himself to him and asked him to return his most precious possession to its legitimate master and owner. Immediately, with no arguing or pleading, Abraham surrendered Isaac. He gave him up as soon as the command “and offer him there for a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2) was issued. Inwardly, the sacrificial act was consummated at once. Isaac no longer belonged to Abraham. Isaac was dead as far as Abraham was concerned. (Ibid. , 11-12)

As alluded to in my opening paragraph, Avraham's actions in reference to the *Akedah* stand in stark contrast to the manner in which he argued and pleaded with Hashem on

behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that instance, Avraham bravely and unhesitatingly responded in the following manner:

And Abraham approached and said, "Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"(*Sefer Bereishit* 18:23-25, underlining my own)

It is at this point, and for the first time in the annals of human history, an individual, in the personage of *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham), encountered G-d in a challenging manner. His response on behalf of the depraved and profligate inhabitants of Sodom speaks volumes regarding the nature and universal quality of justice (*mishpat*). In Avraham's and Judaism's view, even G-d must uphold the standards of justice that He has established for mankind. Why, then, did Avraham immediately accede to the Almighty's command to kill his own beloved son? Why did he not hold G-d to the same bar of justice that G-d held man to – in this case the prohibition of human sacrifice for any and all reasons? Stated simply: If he could advocate and plea for the people of Sodom, why did he not do the same for Yitzchak? Here, too, Rav Soloveitchik provides us with a penetrating analysis of the motives underlying Avraham's behavior:

He [Avraham] did not argue [with G-d]. Satan laughed at him. Eliezer and Ishmael had contempt for the old man who had become entangled in an adventure with an invisible G-d who scoffed at him. Yet Abraham asked no questions. He did not point out the contradiction between G-d's promise to be with him and his children and the paradoxical command to kill Isaac and burn his flesh...Had Abraham engaged the Creator in a debate [as he had done on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah], had he not immediately surrendered Isaac, had he not experienced the *Akedah* in its full awesomeness and frightening helplessness, G-d would not have sent the angel to stop Avraham from implementing the command. Abraham would have lost Isaac physically. (Ibid. , page 12, brackets my own)

Thus, Avraham's refraining from debating the Master of the Universe and total submission to His will resulted in the physical salvation of Yitzchak. Truly, this was his greatest test and sacrifice.

Each of us is tested in many ways every day. Thank G-d these tests are not of the same kind and degree that Avraham faced. Nonetheless, with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu's* help and our heartfelt desire, may we find the inner strength to answer all of our challenges as *Avraham Avinu* did. May we, too, ever be able to answer Hashem with the words, "*Hineini*" ("Here I am"). *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom