

Parashat Vayera 5782, 2021:

Of Trial and Challenge

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Beyond question, the *Akedah* represents the ultimate trial that any parent could possibly bear. It must have been exceedingly difficult for *Avraham Avinu*, who was the personification of *gemilut chasadim*. With his four-door tent perpetually open to passing wayfarers, his pleas to Hashem on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and countless other deeds, Avraham was the embodiment of *chesed* in action. As such, Hashem's direct command to him to bring his son as a *korban olah* (completely burnt offering), appears astonishing.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, explained the *Akedah* from the perspective of sacrifice in the service of Hashem: "... 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, so, too, the following quotes) An analysis of this aspect of *avodat Hashem* (the service of G-d), is essential to understanding humankind's relationship with the Almighty. The Rav

interpreted *avodat Hashem* as “service awareness,” that is, our entire being is under Hashem’s control:

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. (10)

The Rav urges us to keenly recognize the Almighty’s total mastery over the universe and 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. (11)

In light of this last point, we can gain an important insight as to why Hashem commanded Avraham to bring Yitzchak as a *korban olah*: 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. (10)

When analyzing the *Akedah*, it is crucial to remember that the Almighty’s commandment to Avraham 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*)

Although a direct reading of this passage (*peshat*) leaves no doubt that Avraham was commanded to offer Yitzchak as a *korban olah*, toward the end of our narrative, Hashem,

through His *malach*, commands Avraham to refrain from harming Yitzchak and to offer the ram He provided in his place:

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. (22:10-13)

Although one might think authentic sacrifice can only be achieved if we fulfill the literal meaning of this term, the Rav teaches us that there are two ways in which this can be realized, namely, the physical and experiential. Therefore, in his view Avraham did indeed sacrifice Yitzchak; the sacrifice, however, was not physical in nature. It was, instead, experiential. As such, the Rav states, it took place in the innermost “recesses of his personality.” For all intents and purposes, then, Yitzchak, in the persona of Avraham’s son, ceased to exist. True, the physical form of Yitzchak remained; nonetheless his experience had transformed him so profoundly that he was now *kulu l’Hashem* (totally and completely Hashem’s). Moreover, since this change was spiritual and experiential, rather than physical, the Rav opines that it took place before Avraham ever arrived at Mount Moriah:

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. (11-12)

We are not the *Avot* and the *Emahot*, yet, we, too, are presented with untold challenges in our lives. What should our response ideally be? Long ago, *Dovid HaMelech* said it best when he proclaimed: “I shall raise my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? My help is from the L-rd, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not allow your

foot to falter; Your Guardian will not slumber.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 121:1-3) Just as our ancestor, Avraham, “lifted up his eyes” and saw the ram Hashem had provided, so, too, may we raise our eyes and recognize that the Almighty is watching over us, and is ever our Protector. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)