

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

There is a mystery at the heart of the biblical story of Abraham, and it has immense implications for our understanding of Judaism.

Who was Abraham and why was he chosen? The answer is far from obvious. Nowhere is he described, as was Noah, as “a righteous man, perfect in his generations.” We have no portrait of him, like the young Moses, physically intervening in conflicts as a protest against injustice. He was not a soldier like David or a visionary like Isaiah. In only one place, near the beginning of our parsha, does the Torah say why God singled him out: Then the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Abraham was chosen in order to be a father. Indeed Abraham’s original name, Av ram, means “mighty father”, and his enlarged name, Avraham, means “father of many nations”.

No sooner do we notice this than we recall that the first person in history to be given a proper name was Chavah, Eve, because, said Adam, “she is the mother of all life.” Note that motherhood is drawn attention to in the Torah long before fatherhood (twenty generations to be precise, ten from Adam to Noah, and ten from Noah to Abraham). The reason is that motherhood is a biological phenomenon. It is common to almost all forms of advanced life. Fatherhood is a cultural phenomenon. There is little in biology that supports pair-bonding, monogamy and faithfulness in marriage, and less still that connects males with their offspring. That is why fatherhood always needs reinforcement from the moral code operative in a society. Absent that, and families fragment very fast indeed, with the burden being

overwhelmingly borne by the abandoned mother.

This emphasis on parenthood – motherhood in the case of Eve, fatherhood in that of Abraham – is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality, because what Abrahamic monotheism brought into the world was not just a mathematical reduction of the number of gods from many to one. The God of Israel is not primarily the God of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the God of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the God of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The God of Israel is the God who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for and cares for a child.

Sometimes God is described as our father: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Malachi 2:10). Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, God described as a mother: “Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you” (Is. 66:13). “Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Is. 49:15). The primary attribute of God, especially whenever the four-letter name Hashem is used, is compassion, the Hebrew word for which, rachamim, comes from the word rechem, meaning “a womb”.

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected with our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: “Now that I’ve become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: Now I know what it’s like creating something you can’t control”).

All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house.” The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son: “Then God said: Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah, and there sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you.” How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that God chose Abraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counter-intuitive. There has to be



This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in honor of Stacey’s 120th birthday which will be celebrated, God willing, many, many years from now, in good health and with loads of happiness!

separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.

I argued last week that Abraham was in fact continuing a journey his father Terach had already begun. However, it takes a certain maturity on our part before we realise this, since our first reading of the narrative seems to suggest that Abraham was about to set out on a journey that was completely new. Abraham, in the famous midrashic tradition, was the iconoclast who took a hammer to his father's idols. Only later in life do we fully appreciate that, despite our adolescent rebellions, there is more of our parents in us than we thought when we were young. But before we can appreciate this there has to be an act of separation.

Likewise in the case of the binding of Isaac. I have long argued that the point of the story is not that Abraham loved God enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that God was teaching Abraham that we do not own our children, however much we love them. The first human child was called Cain because his mother Eve said, "With the help of God I have acquired [kaniti] a man" (Gen. 4:1). When parents think they own their child, the result is often tragic.

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allow us to have a healthy relationship with God. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about *bittul ha-yesh*, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of God, but that is not the normative mainstream of Jewish spirituality. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the kabbalists called *tzimtzum*, God's self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Abraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Isaac could be Isaac and not simply a clone of Abraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably when he said, "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!"

God loves us as a parent loves a child – but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop his or her own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O'Donohue, "to bless the space between us". *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in*

memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**A**nd it came to pass...that God did test Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am! And He said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I shall show you.” (Genesis 22:1–2) When God presents Abraham with the most difficult and tragic command to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, Abraham rises early the next morning, loads his donkey, calls his servants and immediately starts the journey – without a word of protest. We find no indication that Abraham considered the possibility of remonstrating with the divine, asking for a reconsideration of the injunction, a reasonable reaction given that the Almighty had just guaranteed him: ‘Through Isaac shall your seed be called.’ Could God have changed His mind?

What makes this question even more poignant is that Abraham does stand up to God when he wants to. In one of the most memorable exchanges in the Torah, the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah brings out all of Abraham's oratorical skills as he pleads for the lives of the wicked inhabitants. ‘Will the judge of the world not act justly, will the Almighty destroy the innocent together with the wicked?’ he provocatively asks. And if there are at least ten innocent residents, ought the country not be spared? If Abraham was willing to defend the wicked Sodomites from a mass death, couldn't he have done at least as much for his righteous, beloved and divinely promised son?

There are a number of directions to take in explaining Abraham's silence, and I'd like to suggest three.

First of all, there is a commentary suggested by Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi reminding us of the historical context of the world in which Abraham lived. True, the Torah was given for all time, but it was also given within a certain contextual and historical frame. Abraham lived at a time when the pagan world demonstrated allegiance to the idol Molokh by ritually sacrificing children. Therefore, embedded within the mind of the patriarch was the terrible possibility that such a command may well reach him from his God. In a world of idolatry where children were often sacrificed to Molokh, Abraham may well have understood and even expected that he too could be commanded to do the same – and so he does not even attempt to argue. From this perspective, the command of the Akeda, and its subsequent cancellation, irrevocably makes child sacrifice unacceptable to the Jewish religion. From this perspective, the real test of Abraham comes with the second divine command emanating from the mouth of the angel, ‘Abraham, Abraham...Do not send forth your hand against the lad

and don't do anything against him...' [Gen. 22:12]. When the patriarch agreed not to sacrifice his son to his God, he demonstrated his break from the world of bloodthirsty idols and his true acceptance of the God of justice and compassion.

This interpretation has special poignancy when modern Israelis witness the chairman of the Palestinian Authority using young children to sacrifice themselves in the front lines of battle – urging them and paying them to throw stones at Israeli citizens while shielding gun-toting Palestinians behind them to become suicidal homicide bombers. The imams promise them eternal bliss in Paradise. Clearly, such cynical use, or rather misuse, of precious children is absolutely biblically forbidden, as the final word of God at the conclusion of the Akeda story demonstrates.

Yet another offshoot of this interpretation is the all too common syndrome of overly ambitious, hyper-successful parents – worst case scenario in pursuit of fame and fortune, best case scenario hoping to save the world (this includes committed rabbis) – who sacrifice their children for God. In the case of a rabbi or educator, the student or congregation often come first, even at the Shabbat table. The Almighty is ultimately teaching Abraham that he dare not sacrifice his son, not even for Him!

Secondly, I've written in the past of two types of prayer – national prayer on behalf of the world and personal prayer on behalf of oneself or one's family – based on two distinct ways in which Moses beseeches the Almighty. When it comes to a prayer on behalf of the entire nation of Israel – a prayer for forgiveness following the sin of the Golden Calf – Moses pleads for forty days and forty nights, beseeching, remonstrating and even demanding that the Almighty not forsake His covenantal people. However, when his own sister Miriam is sick, he utters only five words: 'O God please heal her.' After all, God's promise guaranteed the nation's eternity, but not necessarily the health of Miriam, Moses' own sister.

What's true for Moses applies equally to Abraham. When it comes to the destruction of an entire society, a possibility that innocents will die along with the masses, Abraham pleads with all his rhetorical gifts to alter the horror of the edict. But when it comes to Isaac, his own son, he can allow himself only the minimum of words and gestures. For a people he will plead, but for himself – and Isaac is really an extension of himself – he must remain silent.

And finally, perhaps, Abraham does not argue because he is in a different relationship with God than he was when he remonstrated on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, a more distant relationship which does not permit the camaraderie of questioning a divine order.

Fear of God (*yirat haShem*) and love of God (*ahavat haShem*) are the two fundamental attitudes one takes toward the Almighty. The first emanates from a sense of distance from God and the second from a sense

of closeness to God. Maimonides looks upon the fear of God as emanating from the existential realization of one's own smallness in the face of the Infinite, inspired by the magnificent wonders of the cosmic universe. The one who fears God is overwhelmed by the mysterium tremendum of divine powers, and is filled with feelings of profound reverence and awe before the majesty of divine creation (*yirat ha-romemut*). In contrast, love of God, teaches Maimonides, emanates from the desire to cleave to God as a lover, who yearns to remove any separation from himself and his beloved, whose thoughts are totally involved with her at every moment and in every situation. In commenting on the verse, 'Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,' Nahmanides insists that the individual who serves God from love is on a higher spiritual level than the one who serves Him from fear, which is why our Sages have ruled that a positive commandment (love of God) pushes aside and overrides a negative commandment (fear of God). Nevertheless, both relationships are necessary and complement each other.

Fear of God is critical in the fabric of human existence. Those who love – either God or another human being – may sometimes rationalize away their own lapses and indiscretions with the sense that the beloved will understand, that those in love 'need not say they are sorry.' The very closeness of the relationship can breed a 'taking for granted' attitude. Fear of God brooks no exceptions, doesn't allow anyone to take any advantage. Fear of God keeps us on our toes. It keeps us brutally honest, constantly spurring us on to remain steady and steadfast despite the narrowness – the abyss on either side – of life's very narrow bridge. Abraham was the great example of worshipping God from love.

He left the comfort of his homeland, birthplace and family and entered unknown territory in order to be with God – much as a lover following his beloved. The Talmudic sages suggest that he arrived at the God idea as a result of his own intellectual understanding – and for the great philosopher Maimonides, knowledge and love are synonymous. Abraham establishes altar after altar in the name of his beloved God, of whose ethical teachings and powers of creativity he never ceases to speak – and attempt to persuade others to accept. He is close to God and he understands God – even to the extent of his realization that the Judge of all the world will never perpetrate an injustice, will consider it an anathema to destroy the righteous with the wicked. Hence, he argues with the divine on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He then sojourns to the land of Gerar where Avimelekh is king. Afraid that Sarah's beauty will endanger his life, Abraham instructs Sarah to say she is his sister. The king takes her into his harem, but then in a dream Avimelekh learns that he has overstepped his bounds, that Sarah is actually Abraham's wife. Explanations follow, and when Abraham is asked why he lied he explains, 'Surely the fear of God is not in this

place....' Abraham believed that since the 'Gerareans' had no fear of God, they would be likely to murder him if he were indeed the husband of the beautiful Sarah. After all, the very first question they asked him – a stranger in town – was not whether he needed hospitality, but was about his wife!

In the end, Avimelekh makes Abraham a wealthy man. 'Behold my land is before you, dwell where it pleases you.' Abraham receives sheep, cattle, male and female slaves, even a gift of a thousand pieces of silver. Sarah is restored to Abraham. But the last words we read before the account of the Akeda is that Abraham lives in the land of the Philistines for many days. Indeed, the very introduction to the Akeda story begins: 'After these things...' – the last thing being Abraham in Gerar.

What was he doing there? Hadn't he just declared that 'surely the fear of God is not in this place...?' And nevertheless, he remained behind! What happened to his own fear of God? Was it affected? Could it possibly not have been affected? Each of us is affected by his/her environment. Should the first patriarch have lived for many days in a place absent of the fear of God? Abraham will have to be tested to determine if indeed he is still worthy of becoming the father of the Jewish people. As the events of the Akeda unfold, and Abraham lifts the slaughtering knife, what are the words of the angel of God? 'Do not harm the boy...For now I know that you fear God....'

A circle has just been completed, an event that began with Gerar and ends with Moriah. Abraham has proved that he still fears God despite his residence in Gerar. The entire incident of the Akeda bespeaks Abraham's fear of God, his unquestioning acceptance of a divine command he could not possibly understand. His experience in Gerar had apparently caused him to work overtime on his 'fear of God' – and perhaps neglect a bit of his 'love of God.'

From this perspective, entirely new light is shed on the manner in which the Sefat Emet interprets the verse that describes Abraham's approach to Moriah: 'And he saw the place [makom] from a distance.' We must understand this to mean that Abraham saw God (makom is after all also taken by the Midrash as a synonym for God, who is every place) from a distance, an expression of fear of God, yirat ha-shem. Had Abraham perceived God from up close, he would have realized – argues the Sefat Emet – that the God of ethical monotheism could never possibly have wished for a human sacrifice!

Perhaps the basis for this fascinating insight of the Sefat Emet is the Talmudic interpretation of the prophet Jeremiah's denunciation of child sacrifice, 'which I (God) did not command, which I did not speak, and which did not approach my heart' [Jer. 19:5]: 'Which I did not command' refers to the son of Mesha the King of Moab...; 'Which I did not speak' refers to Jephthah; 'Which did not approach my heart' refers to Isaac, the

son of Abraham...' (Ta'anit 4a)

And this is very much in line with Rashi, who suggests that Abraham actually misunderstood the meaning of the command of the Almighty: 'I God, never said for you to slaughter [Isaac] but only for you to lift him up' – to dedicate him to Me in life and not in death! In other words, an Abraham steeped in the emotion of fear of God, as important as such an emotion may be, is too far away to have perceived the real intention of the divine. And certainly one who feels far removed from God is hardly going to be brazen enough to conduct intimate conversations with God, to dare to argue against a divine command!

And if the first commandment to go to Israel, with which Abraham initiates his election, expresses the first patriarch's love of God, this final commandment of the Akeda expresses his fear of God. Only an individual who combines both religious dynamics can be the father of the children of Israel.

Especially in light of this last interpretation, there remains yet one agonizing question: why was the divine command ambiguous, leaving room for Abraham's seemingly 'misguided' interpretation? I believe that our Torah understands only too well that the future history of our people will be fraught with tragedies of exile and persecution, a holocaust war against the Jews and liberation wars to acquire the Jewish State. All of these required and requires parents to see their children burnt on the stake, to accompany their children to the idf base...There is profound historic necessity for the fact that this last trial of Abraham pictures him as willing to silently take his only beloved son to be sacrificed on the altar of God, if he understood that such was the divine command. Given the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the tear-drenched history of our people, Abraham and Isaac also had to serve as supreme models of those ready to give up life and future for the sanctification of the divine name. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The story of the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to his ninety-year-old mother Sarah is not only one of the highlights of the parsha but it is one of the foundation narratives of all of Jewish history. Without Yitzchak there simply isn't a Jewish people. The birth of Yitzchak is one of the triumphal moments of Jewish life, a reflection of God's mercy and guidance in creating His special people.

It is therefore all the more surprising – indeed shocking – that the story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak appears in this very same parsha. In effect, this story of the binding of Yitzchak on the altar of Mount Moriah

completely negates the miraculous birth of Yitzchak. Of what necessity or purpose is the miracle of Sarah's giving birth to Yitzchak if the entire matter will be undone by the succeeding story of Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak? What is the point that the Torah wishes to teach us by unfolding this seemingly cruel sequence of events? Is not God, so to speak, mocking His own Divine Will and plans by this sequence of events, recorded for us in this most seminal parsha in the Torah?

Much ink has been used in dealing with this most difficult issue. It has been the subject of much commentary in Midrash and Jewish thought throughout the ages. Amongst the many mysterious and inscrutable issues that God raises for our analysis in His Torah, this contradiction between the miraculous birth of Yitzchak and the challenge of his being bound on the altar ranks high on that long list of Heaven's behavior that requires Jews to have faith and acceptance.

But is this not the nature of things in today's Jewish world as well? After the most negative of extraordinary events of sadistic cruelty that we call the Holocaust, miraculous positive events have occurred to the Jewish people. The old woman of Israel, beaten and worn, was revived and gave birth to a state, to a vibrant language, to myriad institutions of Torah learning and good deeds, to the miraculously successful ingathering of the exile communities to their homeland, to a scale of Jewish affluence unmatched in Jewish history. In short, the story of the Jewish people in its resilient glory over the last seventy-five years defies rational and easily explained historical logic. And yet the danger and tension of open hostility to the State of Israel, the threats to its very existence, the attempts to delegitimize it and boycott its bounty, all are evident in our current world.

In the story of Yitzchak, the Torah teaches that we have to live in a world of almost absurd contradictions. Logic plays a very small role in the events of history that occur to the people of Yitzchak. Yitzchak is a product of miracles and his very maturation and survival is also a product of supernatural stuff. So too is this the story of the Jewish people in our age. Just as Yitzchak survived and proved successful, so too shall we, his progeny, survive and be successful and triumphant. ©2023 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Years back, a Hebrew Christian approached me, arguing that his belief in Jesus grew from the story of the Binding of Isaac, called the Akeidah in Hebrew. Jesus, he suggested, was able to do what Isaac could not. Jesus gave his life for God, while Isaac did not reach that level. An analysis of the Akeidah story

meaningfully responds to this challenge.

One notably unusual feature of the Akeidah narrative is the absence of dialogue: Abraham and his son Isaac hardly speak. The Midrash fills in the empty spaces. As Abraham walked to Moriah to slaughter his son, the Midrash suggests that an elderly man approached him, arguing that it was improper for a father to sacrifice his son. Furthermore, the elderly man questioned the ethics of sacrificing life for God (Midrash Tanchuma 22:10).

Nehama Leibowitz concludes that the elderly gentleman represents Abraham's inner conscience. As Abraham walked to Moriah, his inner soul stirred, and he began to ask himself profound questions about the appropriateness, both as a father and as the founder of ethical monotheism, to sacrifice his son's life.

This Midrash may have been inspired by the only time in the narrative – and, for that matter, in the whole Bible – that Abraham and Isaac speak to one another. It occurs when they walk to Moriah. Isaac begins his comment with just one word, “Avi” (my father; Genesis 22:7). In other words, Isaac says, Father, how can you do this? How could you offer me, your son, as a sacrifice? Isaac, in the same sentence, continues asking, “Where is the animal to be sacrificed?” hinting at an ethical concern with respect to human sacrifice.

Although some conclude that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son without question, in fact, he was filled with doubt. And it was through his doubt that he came to understand what God truly wanted from him. Doubt is not necessarily negative. It spurs us to ask questions, and from questions come answers that can catapult us to higher levels of understanding.

Once the father-son pair arrive at Moriah, the angel of God steps in and tells Abraham not to sacrifice the child (22:12). Here again, the Midrash quotes Abraham as asking, How can you so quickly change your mind? Yesterday, you told me to sacrifice my child, and now you tell me to refrain from doing so?! According to the Midrash, the angel responds, “I never told you to sacrifice [she'chatehu] the child, only to take him up to the mountain [v'ha'alehu]. You brought him up, now bring him down” (Bereishit Rabbah 56:8).

In broader terms, v'ha'alehu (literally “to bring him up”) means to dedicate him. Abraham assumes that the ultimate dedication is through death. In the end, the angel, who may have been Abraham's inner conscience, tells Abraham that the greatest dedication to God is living for God, not dying for Him. For this reason, Abraham heeds the command of the angel. The angel was not contradicting God's command but was giving Abraham an understanding of God's will – to sanctify God by living every moment properly.

Indeed, the Midrash Tanchuma takes the argument beyond what may have been Abraham's misunderstanding of the word v'ha'alehu, as it presents God declaring incredulously, How could one ever

imagine that I would ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? In the words of the Midrash, "It never entered My mind to tell Abraham to slaughter his son" (Midrash Tanchuma, Genesis 4:40).

And this is what I told my Hebrew-Christian friend. Isaac reached the highest of levels, as through the Akeidah he was taught one of the most important messages: in Judaism, ultimate redemption comes through life, not death. ©2023 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Welcoming Guests

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

From Parshat Vayera, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 127a) learns that "The mitzva of *Hachnasat Orchim* is greater than greeting the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*)." Nowadays, opportunities to greet the Divine Presence are few and far between, so we are rarely faced with this choice. However, it does sometimes happen that tending to guests has an impact on other *mitzvot*. For example, let us say that guests arrive at one's home unexpectedly on Shabbat itself, and they need a place to stay. In order to accommodate them, he must work hard to clear space for them. Though normally we would avoid exerting ourselves on Shabbat, since this is for a mitzva it is permitted. Bear in mind, we are not talking about neighbors who drop in for a cup of coffee, but travelers who have nowhere else to go.

Another possible conflict presents itself if one is planning to attend a *shiur* (Torah lecture) when unexpected guests arrive. Should he sacrifice Torah study for *Hachnasat Orchim*?

On the one hand, the Talmud (*ibid.*) states that "The mitzva of *Hachnasat Orchim* is greater than waking up early in the morning to go to the *beit midrash* (study hall)." On the other hand, the Mishnah (*Peah* 1:1) states that "*Talmud Torah keneged kulam*," the study of Torah supersedes all other *mitzvot*. *Hachnasat Orchim* is certainly included, as it is mentioned explicitly in the same mishnah.

Some resolve this seeming conflict by explaining that one's Torah study takes precedence over *Hachnasat Orchim* only when there are others who will host the visitors if he does not. Alternatively, it may be that *Hachnasat Orchim* takes precedence over waking up early to go to the *beit midrash*. In contrast, when the conflict is between hosting guests and Torah study itself, Torah study takes precedence. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Avraham answered and said, "Behold I have taken upon myself to speak to my Master and I

am but dust and ashes." (Beraishis 18:27) Avraham is lauded for his humility here, in describing himself as dust and ashes. In a way, these descriptions were a praise of Hashem, as this is what would have become of Avraham Avinu had he been killed in the war with the kings (dust) or in the furnace by Nimrod (ashes.) Part of humility is recognizing what Hashem has done for you and that our own strengths are truly His.

There is another aspect to these words to be appreciated. Both dust and ashes are wispy and fragile, essentially worthless and powerless. However, dust or dirt can be combined with water and used to build things. Mud, cement, and bricks, all utilize it as a key component.

A human being is indeed made up of dust, and he must realize that he has the opportunity to build the world through his actions. Avraham's comment about being dust could be understood as recognizing that whatever he had done was not even a beginning to what he could potentially do. A person who feels he has achieved much and can rest on his laurels will not live up to all he can. Rather, a person must feel that he's just scratched the surface of his capabilities and continue striving his entire life.

But dust differs from ashes.

Ashes are quite the opposite of dust. Instead of a building block of potential, they are the remains of something that once existed but was consumed. A home that burned down to ashes can never be rebuilt from the same materials. The potential is gone. The strength that once existed has been turned into nothingness.

The message here, again, is that one should not take arrogant pride in his accomplishments, and certainly not in his strength, intellect, or wealth, which are only tools of potential. As the Navi tells us (*Yirmiya* 9:23), "Rather in this shall the proud take pride, be thoughtful and come to know Me..."

Avraham's position, then, was to acknowledge to Hashem that he was limited, and whatever achievements he'd made could be negated by Hashem. Only in this way could he plead for the people of Sodom, with the understanding that whatever his intentions were, his perception was limited and he would bow to Hashem's will. Though it might seem humane to spare their lives, the people of Sodom may have reached a point of no return. Indeed, they had, and they were destroyed as part of Hashem's plan for the betterment of the world.

When one connects with Hashem in this manner, he has torn down the barriers between his humanity and Hashem's greatness, and is ready to be lifted and molded by his Creator.

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l was once walking on Shabbos in an area that had a Kosher eruv. He saw an older man shlepping a heavy bench down the street, while his two grown sons followed him, empty-handed.

He asked why they weren't helping, and they responded that they had a certain chumra (stringency) which prevented them from carrying in this area. The student who recounted this story reported that R' Shlomo Zalman was so upset by it, that it took him several days to get back to himself, and he even canceled one or two of the shiurim he normally gave. ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Why the Akeidah, the Binding of Yitzchak?

One of the most difficult passages in the Torah is the Akeidah, the demanded sacrifice of Avraham's son, in spite of the promise that Hashem made to Avraham that Yitzchak would inherit from Avraham and lead the family. Most people have a limited knowledge of the story and picture an old man taking his very young and innocent child as a sacrifice. The actual story is quite different though much of its message is the same.

It is clear that the Akeidah was a special test of Avraham, as the Torah states that Hashem tested Avraham. According to Midrash, this is one of at least ten tests that Hashem used to help Avraham understand his commitment to Hashem. The Torah states: "And it happened after these words (things) that Elokim tested Avraham, and he said to him, 'Avraham,' and he said, 'I am here.' And He said, 'Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak, go to the land of Moriah, and bring him up there as an offering (sacrifice) upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you.'"

HaEmek Davar explains the beginning words of this section, "And it happened after these words (things)." The problem that he perceives is that the words imply a connection between the previous section of the Torah while at the same time demonstrating a closeness in time. The Rashbam explains that whenever the words "after these words (things)" are used in the Torah, it indicates a connection to that which occurs immediately prior to those words. That would mean that the passage concerning the treaty with Avimelech was connected to the Akeidah though they were years apart. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that some Rabbis state that Avraham sinned by making a treaty with Avimelech which called for no attacks on Avimelech or his children for four generations. This implied that Avraham disregarded Hashem's promise that his children would inherit the land. Avraham, however, could point to another promise of Hashem, that his children would be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years. Avraham understood that the promise he made to Avimelech would be over by the time the "children" would return to the land.

Rashi quotes a Midrash which attempts to answer both problems, the closeness in time and the reason for the test of the Akeidah. The Midrash tells the

story of Satan (an angel given the task of questioning the motives and actions of Man, and not to be confused with the concept of a fallen angel in some religions). Satan came before Hashem and said that Avraham had never sacrificed an animal to Hashem at any important festive meals as thanks to Hashem. He questioned Avraham's true loyalty to Hashem. Hashem's response was that Avraham was more than a loyal servant and would sacrifice even his own son if asked to do that. HaRav Moshe Sternbuch explains that Avraham did not feel the need to bring a sacrifice as Yitzchak was to be dedicated entirely to Hashem, a "sacrifice" in his own right. Rashi continued with a different dialogue where Yishmael said to Yitzchak that he willingly agreed to be circumcised at the age of thirteen, whereas Yitzchak had no say in his circumcision. Yitzchak answered him that Yishmael served Hashem with only one limb of his body, whereas he, Yitzchak, would be willing to serve Hashem with his whole body. Yitzchak was thirty-seven at the time of the Akeidah.

Every test that Hashem gave any of the forefathers had a purpose. Based on the reasons for the test stated earlier, except for the argument between Yitzchak and Yishmael, Hashem tested Avraham to determine whether his loyalty to Hashem was complete and unwavering. But, if Hashem already knew what was in the hearts of Man, why was this test necessary? In order to understand this, we must look at Avraham from different Midrashim which give us his background yet is not told in the Torah.

When Avraham was three years old, he realized that the idols that his father made were not true gods. By the time he had reached the age of forty, he understood that there was only One Hashem Who ruled the entire world. He spent his life convincing others to accept the One True Hashem. But there was much more to Avraham's intellect; his study of the world included Man's relationship to his fellowman, the animal kingdom, and the land. He understood that Hashem had created a world that must work together to serve Him. There was balance, justice, and truth in the system that Hashem had created. The Rambam explains that were Man capable of divorcing his feelings and needs from how he perceived the world, he would be capable of divining all the Laws of the Torah except for the groups of Laws called "Chukim," as the reasons for these laws are incomprehensible for Man. That is the definition of a Chok. It is a law which one performs, even without understanding, because one realizes that Hashem is our Father, and one follows this law because "He said so."

Avraham's problem was that his mind was so above average that he was able to discern the reasons for performing even the incomprehensible Chukim. This meant that he performed every law because he also understood the benefit of that law. Avraham was never able to perform a law simply because "Hashem said so." This forced Hashem to test Avraham with a

commandment that contradicted logic and posed enough serious questions as to cause skepticism about its source. Hashem had already told Avraham that only a son coming from Sarah would inherit him, that his inheritance would specifically go through Yitzchak, and that he would be the father of myriads of people. For once in his life, Avraham could not comprehend how each of these promises would be fulfilled if he was now to sacrifice Yitzchak. Still, this was what Hashem had commanded him, and Avraham was willing to serve Hashem without question.

Perhaps now we can understand this test and others. Hashem knew the outcome before He tested Avraham, but Avraham did not know if he was strong enough in his Faith of Hashem to fulfill this commandment. Through this test, Avraham learned something about himself that he could not have learned in any other way. Hashem is always testing us also at many points in our lives, so that we can learn our own strengths and abilities. When we struggle, when we suffer, when we face heartbreaking situations, we can choose to complain or doubt Hashem or to ask ourselves what we are to learn from the experience. Hashem does not make our loved ones suffer so that we can grow, they have their own challenges, but He uses their situations to show us our strengths. May we learn that every experience we have is for our benefit, even if we cannot comprehend it. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DONIEL TRENK

Yishmael and Esav – Brothers in Arms

It's fascinating to observe how in Israel, even among secular politicians, words of Torah occasionally find their way into their discourse. An example of this occurred recently when Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the words "זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָךְ עַמְלִיק" in reference to our existential battle against Gazan terrorists.

Netanyahu was not alone in expressing this sentiment. Many have pointed to Amalek as the origin of the unprecedented horrors that transpired on Simchas Torah.

We may question however, whether Amalek, grandson of Esav, is a suitable metaphor for our current enemy. Don't we associate the Muslim world with the descendants of Yishmael instead?

Yishmael plays a notable role in this week's parsha and emerges as a character with complex and sometimes contradictory traits. On one hand, he is described as a "פָּרָא אָדָם", a wild and uncivilized man. He was expelled by Sarah Imenu for various transgressions, including the act of shooting arrows at Yitzchak and asserting his claim as the rightful firstborn.

Yet, on the other hand, Avraham seemed to share a special connection with him. Yishmael received his name from a Malach Hashem, and another Malach

Hashem saved him at the "בְּאֵר". Yishmael joined Avraham in the great mitzvah of Milah when he was only thirteen years old. It's worth noting that only two nations incorporate the name of Hashem in their titles: "יִשְׂרָאֵל" and "יִשְׁמָעֵאל".

Moreover, Yishmael demonstrated teshuva when Avraham passed away. He allowed Yitzchak to take precedence in Avraham's burial, recognizing his younger brother's rightful place. This duality in Yishmael's character and his relationship with Avraham adds depth and nuance to his persona and what his descendants may ultimately become.

Where does Yishmael go wrong? Just like the familial conflict between Yaakov and Esav, Yishmael harbored a deep grudge, believing that his position as the firstborn was "stolen" by his younger brother. This appears to be the basis for their ongoing enmity, with the children of Esav and Yishmael battling against Bnei Yisroel, both claiming: "the land is mine, this G-d is mine, we are the true descendants of Avraham, and you have stolen everything" (in the words of the first Rashi, "Listim Atem,"- "you are robbers!").

It is fitting, then, that in the final verse of Parshas Toldos, Esav and Yishmael join forces and become "mechutanim" - "And Esav went to Yishmael, and he took Machlas daughter of Yishmael, son of Avraham". Esav and Yishmael deliberately intertwined their lineages, creating a toxic blend of death and destruction that historically would be aimed at Bnei Yisroel.

It is evident from the pesukim that Yishmael possessed a unique and positive relationship with Avraham Avinu, even towards Hashem. However, through intermingling with the house of Esav, he planted a spark of malevolent hatred in his soul. When this animosity manifests in his descendants, it poses a grave threat to Bnei Yisroel.

With this perspective in mind, radical Yishmaelim can indeed be likened to Amalek, even sharing a common genetic ancestor.

We recognize that there are 1.8 billion Muslims globally, and the majority of them hold no animosity. They bear the name of Hashem as descendants of Yishma-El, which signifies "Hashem has heard." However, on the flip side, there exists an enduring hostility towards Jews, which appears to emanate from the complex blend of Yishmael and Esav.

In the end, it is the descendants of Avraham, channeled through Yitzchak and Yaakov, who hold the destiny of manifesting Hashem in this world. This is the great gift and responsibility of the Bechora. Bearing this in mind, we may aim for success at this pivotal historical juncture, a time of true Milchemes Hashem. © 2023 Rabbi D. Trenk

