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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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 G-d 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 G-d of Israel is not primarily the G-d of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the G-d of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the G-d of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The G-d of Israel is the G-d who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for and cares for a child.

Sometimes G-d is described as our father: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one G-d created us?" (Malachi 2:10). Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, G-d 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 G-d, 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 G-d is deeply connected with our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d to leave his father: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house." The second is that Abraham was the father told by G-d to sacrifice his son: "Then G-d 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 G-d commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that G-d chose Abraham specifically to

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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 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 G-d enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d. G-d is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allow us to have a healthy relationship with G-d. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about bittul ha-yesh, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of G-d, 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 G-d, they remain themselves. G-d does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the kabbalists called tzimtzum, G-d's self-limitation. G-d 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!"

G-d 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". *© 2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the most difficult stories of the Bible - and certainly the complex highlight of Vayera - is the "binding" (and near slaughter) of Isaac, but the tale preceding it may legitimately be called the "binding" (near death) of Ishmael. This occurred when Abram (Abraham), acting on the commandment of G-d, banishes his eldest son, but without providing him and his mother with enough supplies to survive a desert journey. And perhaps, when the Bible introduces the story of the binding of Isaac with the words, "And it happened after these things...," the "things" which preceded and even caused the akeda ("near sacrifice") of Isaac refers to Abraham's harsh treatment of Ishmael. G-d is saying, in effect, that if Abraham could send Hagar and Ishmael into the desert with only bread and a jug of water, then G-d will now make Abraham take Isaac to Mount Moriah ostensibly to watch him die.

There seem to be many biblical parallels between the two stories that give credence to this "measure- for-measure" interpretation. In both stories it is G-d who commands the near sacrifice; in both stories it is an "angel of G-d" who saves the young men, both of whom are referred to as "na'ar" (youth) rather than "son" in the context of the deus ex machina (Gen. 21:17; 22:11, 12); and in both instances the son in question does not return to live with his father.

However, upon further reflection it seems to me that the akeda story - clearly an important test for Abraham in its own right - cannot be taken as a mere reaction to Abraham's "niggardly" treatment of Hagar and Ishmael; moreover, Abraham sends his son and mistress away only in acquiescence to G-d's command that he listen to Sarah, with the Bible expressly stating that "the matter [of the banishment] was very grievous" in his eyes (21:10-12). Abraham only agrees after hearing G-d's promise that "I shall also make the son of

this maidservant a nation, because he [too] is of your seed" (21:13).

Hence I believe that Abraham did give them sufficient supplies, but Hagar got lost in the desert. The point of the biblical narratives - and the parallels between them - is not "measure-for-measure punishment," but to stress the fact that Ishmael is also a son of Abraham, that he too will become a great nation, and that the destinies of both will always be intertwined. Indeed, because Ishmael has been so significantly blessed by G-d, Isaac seems to be almost obsessed with him - or at least with the place where G-d promised greatness to Hagar's son - and this obsession haunts him for life.

You will remember that when Hagar first becomes pregnant and Sarai (Sarah) is still barren, Hagar behaves superciliously toward her. In response, Sarai treats Hagar as a handmaiden again (rather than as an equal wife, as the Code of Hammurabi ordains), and she flees. An angel of the Lord finds her, exhorts her to return to Sarai as a handmaiden, and then grants the following blessing: "I shall increase, yes, increase your seed, and they shall not be able to be counted because they are so numerous... and behold you are pregnant and shall bear a son. Call his name Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your affliction [at the hands of Sarai]. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand over everything and everyone's hand against him; and in the face of all his brethren shall he dwell" (16:9-11).

This blessing of Hagar's seed parallels the blessing that G-d had just given to Abraham's seed: "Look now heavenwards and count the stars; you cannot count them; so shall be your seed" (15:5). And when, in the next chapter, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham, reflecting his destiny to be the father of a multitude of nations, Isaac will wonder whether the main heir to the Abrahamic patrimony is Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn! The place where G-d bestows this Abrahamic blessing on Hagar's seed is a well between Kadesh and Bered which Hagar names "the well for the Living G-d who looked after me," Beer-lahai-roi (16:13, 14). And even though later on, when Abraham is told by G-d to banish Hagar and Ishmael because Ishmael is "mocking" around Isaac, G-d promises Abraham that "through Isaac shall be called your [covenantal] seed" (21:12). Yet G-d still saves Ishmael's life and guarantees that He will make from him "a great nation" (21:18).

Hence Isaac spends his life both attracted to the more aggressive firstborn Ishmael, who will also father a great nation, and jealous of the brother who may well have been his father's favorite - after all, when G-d informs the 99-year-old Abraham that his 89-year-old wife would become pregnant, the patriarch responds: "Would that Ishmael may live before thee!" (17:18). Isaac is, after all, rather meek - witness how reluctant he is to get into any kind of battle with Abimelech, even though the king of Gerar has reneged on a contract - and he may well fear that Abraham favors the more aggressive Ishmael. He may even have suspected that his father wanted to see him dead at the akeda to clear the way for Ishmael, and therefore doesn't return with his father to Beersheba afterward; we only find Isaac with Abraham at the end of Abraham's life. Isaac is jealous, but is also guilt-ridden.

Ishmael is after all the firstborn, who is banished and whose mother is banished because of him. And Isaac is also filled with feelings of unworthiness because of his lack of self-assertiveness.

And so Isaac, due to his conflicted relationship with Ishmael, is described as going back and forth from Beer-lahai-roi ("bo mibo" - literally coming from coming, Gen. 24:62, 63), which is where Eliezer finds him when he presents Rebecca. And Rashi even suggests that Isaac returns to Beer-lahai-roi to bring Hagar as a new wife for Abraham after Sarah's death; Isaac serves as shadchan ("matchmaker"), since he feels guilty about Ishmael and Hagar's banishment. And Abraham is buried by "Isaac and Ishmael his sons" - the Midrash says that Ishmael returned and repented - after which "Isaac dwelt in Beer-lahai-roi" (25:8-11).

The chapter concludes with the 12 "princes of nations" born to Ishmael, paralleling Isaac's 12 grandsons and tribes. Ishmael and Isaac are involved in a kind of perpetual approach-avoidance dance wherein they see each other as rivals but come to recognize that they must learn to live together in the same part of the world, where each will develop into a great nation.

Abraham is indeed the father of a multitude of nations.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

At first glance it may appear that the commitment between G-d and Avraham described in the opening words of this week's Torah reading is in the nature of a singular and one-off event. There are various interpretations amongst scholars of Israel and the commentators to the Torah as to the level of prophecy that our father Avraham attained. The appearance of angels in the form of human wanderers and their message to Avraham and Sarah is itself the subject of very different interpretations by the generations of scholars of Israel.

However we understand the matter and whatever interpretation we will adopt, it is clear that for Avraham, the presence of G-d in Avraham's daily existence and even mundane behavior was a constant reality. It is not that G-d appears to him suddenly and unexpectedly on this hot desert day but rather Avraham sensed the Divine Presence in his life on a constant and permanent basis.

In the house of our founding ancestors the

presence of G-d was always an overriding factor that influenced their behavior and their worldview. Thus the opening words of this week's Torah reading described for us a permanent feature of the house of Avraham and Sarah. In their hearts and minds, in their behavior and attitudes, they were always dealing with the presence and appearance of G-d. The Torah is describing for us not a one-time singular event but rather the single most vital attribute that made Avraham the father of all nations and with Sarah, the parents of the Jewish people.

When dealing with the construction of the mishkan/tabernacle, the Torah is careful to point out to us that the Lord, so to speak, intends to dwell not in a building but rather within the hearts and souls of the people of Israel. The goal of Judaism has always been to foster and cement a permanent relationship, one that is deeply felt and viscerally experienced, between the Creator and the created.

One of the most characteristic features of Jewish life and society during the long centuries of exile and persecution was the fact that even the simplest Jew, relatively unlearned and certainly not a talmudic scholar, nevertheless experienced this deep connection with G-d. Tevye, the poor and harried dairyman, needs no intermediaries or appointments to speak to G-d. For him, as for millions of other Jews throughout history, G-d was a member of the family, so to speak.

He was to be found in their homes and shops, their barns and fields. He was a permanent presence in their lives. In our more sophisticated milieu, G-d has become a much more distant and less intimate figure to us. We have relegated Him to the synagogue and the study hall and even then only for certain hours of the day or for certain circumstances in our lives.

The rabbis taught us that there is a demand made upon us to emulate Avraham and Sarah in our own lives. That demand is not restricted only to behavior and actions but rather to the recognition that the relationship we have with G-d is constant and omnipresent - wherever we are and whatever tasks in life occupy us.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion (Va-yera) parallels last week's (Lekh Lekha) with one significant exception. Lekh Lekha is nationalistic, while this week's portion is universalistic. Both portions deal with Avraham (Abraham) as savior of Sodom. In Lekh Lekha, the focus is on family, as Avraham saves his nephew Lot who had moved to Sodom. (Genesis, Chapter 14) In Va-yera, Avraham tries to save the entire city filled with non-Jews. (Chapters 18,19)

Both portions deal with Sarah's declaring that she is Avraham's sister. In Lekh Lekha that declaration is followed by their eviction from Egypt. (Ch. 12) In Va-yera the declaration is followed by Avraham understanding that he is part of a larger world. He thus enters into a covenantal agreement with Avimelekh, King of Philistia. (Chapter 20, 21)

Both portions deal with the expulsion of Hagar, Avraham's second wife. In Lekh Lekha Avraham does not object. (Ch. 16) In Va-yera he is reluctant to have Hagar cast out. In the end, Avraham is thereby protective of the forerunners of Islam, Hagar and their son Yishmael.

Both portions deal with G-d's promises to Avraham. In Lekh Lekha, G-d makes a covenant exclusively with Avraham – promising him land and children. (Chs. 12, 15, 17) In Va-yera, G-d eternally connects with Avraham through the binding of Isaac. Still, whereas Avraham is described as walking together (yahdav) with Yitzchak (Isaac) to Moriah (Ch. 22:6), Avraham returns home together (yahdav) with his lads -- Yishmael and Eliezer, non-Jews. (Ch. 22:19)

It can be suggested that Avraham in Va-yera had become so universal that he forgot his national roots. The corrective to Avraham's universal leaning is next week's portion of Hayeei Sarah. Note that in Hayeei Sarah, Avraham acquires part of the land of Israel and finds a wife for his son—both minding the home front and echoing the nationalistic themes of Lech Lecha. (Chs. 23, 24)

One of the beauties of our tradition is that Judaism has nationalistic as well as universalistic dimensions. The way that we care for our own informs us how to treat the larger world. Indeed, the test of the way we love the world is how we show love toward our own brother or sister, our fellow Jew.

The flow of the Avraham / Sarah narrative indicates that one should realize that both elements are critical, yet one should make sure that when embracing the importance of universalism, that it not be at the expense of one's inner circle, family or nation.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And [Avraham] lifted his eyes and he saw, and behold three men were standing on top of him, and he saw, and he ran to greet them" (B'reishis 18:2). A simple reading of this verse raises two issues. First of all, why does it say "Avraham saw" twice; what did he "see" the second time that he hadn't "seen" initially? Secondly, if these men (actually angels

who appeared as men so that Avraham could fulfill the mitzvah of hosting guests, see Rashi on 18:1) were "standing on top of him," i.e. right in front of him, why would Avraham have to "run" anywhere in order to greet them?

Rashi addresses both issues, telling us that the term "on top of him" is not meant literally, as they weren't near Avraham at all. Rather, the term "above" is used in deference to the angels. Since they weren't really close to him, he had to "run" to where they were in order to invite them in. As far as Avraham "seeing" twice, Rashi says the first is meant literally, that he saw the men from afar, while the second refers to his "understanding" what was happening; the three men were just standing there and weren't coming any closer because they didn't want to bother him, so Avraham "ran to greet them" to invite them in. Although this answers the questions, Rashi (in our editions) doesn't stop there, but adds a couple of more thoughts, thoughts that seem problematic.

After telling us that Avraham realized the "men" didn't want to cause him to go out of their way for him, Rashi continues by saying, "and even though they knew that he went out to greet them, they stood where they were to honor him and to show him that they didn't want to bother him, and he preemptively (presumably before they could try to leave) ran towards them." There is then a note inserted telling us that this is the text in an old edition of Rashi, without indicating which part of the text was added based on this edition. From Rabbi Chaim Dov Chavel's edition of Rashi (Mossad HaRav Kook), which doesn't include most of the additional words I just quoted (nor does he indicate that they appear in any other editions), it would seem that the only words from this part that were not added by the publisher whose edition of Rashi was used for our text are "and he preemptively ran towards them." If we take out the "added" words, Rashi's comment pertaining to the word "and he saw" appearing twice -- as it appears in the first edition of Rashi -- reads "he saw that they were standing in one place and understood that they didn't want to bother him [so] he preemptively ran to greet them." [This matches the way Sefer Yosef Hallel contrasts the first edition of Rashi with ours.] The inserted words would seem to be trying to explain why the men/angels just stood there while Avraham ran to them, rather than moving towards Avraham to save him from having to run all the way to them. Nevertheless, the answer it provides doesn't sit well. After all, how could it be considered giving honor to Avraham by just staying there, if doing so caused him to exert himself even more? They didn't resist returning with him to his tent, so weren't saving him from any exertion by staying put. Instead, they caused a 99 year old man who was recovering from circumcision to run all the way to them. Some "honor"!

The "inserted" words not being Rashi's may negate the need to explain them, but we are still left with the issue they tried to resolve; why did the men/angels stay where they were once they saw that Avraham was running towards them? The truth is, we don't know that they didn't move towards Avraham once they saw him running towards them. All we know is that they had been standing when Avraham saw them; why assume that they waited there and let Avraham run all the way to where they were? Nevertheless, taking a closer look at the how our text of Rashi continues may tell us why they waited.

The inserted words discussed above aren't the only words added to this Rashi (the next set of added words do appear in Chavel's edition, albeit within brackets and with a note telling us that they are not in the first published editions of Rashi); the Talmud is then referenced in order to provide another answer to the questions posed above. In Bava M'tziya (86a), the Talmud discusses how the men could be standing "on top of Avraham" if he had to run to get to where they were. In our editions of Rashi, the Talmud is quoted as saying that when they saw Avraham loosening and tightening his bandage, they moved away from him, so Avraham ran towards them to bring them back. This would explain how they could have been "on top of him" (as originally they were) yet he had to run towards them (as they moved away), and could also explain why it says "he saw" twice; once when he saw them standing right outside his tent and then again when he saw that they had moved away. [It is interesting that Rashi provides his own answers to these questions, rather than quoting the Talmud's answer.] Nevertheless, there are now other issues to deal with (issues that would not explain why Rashi didn't really quote the Talmud).

For one thing, since G-d had sent the angels to Avraham in the first place, how could they decide to move away and not fulfill their mission? Didn't they realize that G-d knew Avraham's condition and had sent them anyway? Additionally, how could they have seen Avraham changing the dressing of his bandage from outside the tent? Wouldn't Avraham have done this privately? How could they have peered inside to see it happening? However, not only does this Talmudic reference not appear in the early editions of Rashi (as further evidence of this, see Mizrachi, who quotes an alternative approach to Rashi -- the Talmud!), but the added "Talmudic quote" is actually a misquote. And a careful reading of the Talmud will deal with the issues I raised.

The Talmud says that G-d Himself visited Avraham ("bikur cholim," see Rashi on 18:1), and it was G-d who "saw Avraham tying and loosening his bandage," not the angels. Avraham was changing the dressing in private, and no person could see him doing so (especially if they were outside the tent), but G-d obviously could "see" what was going on. And since it was inappropriate to stay there while this was

happening, G-d moved away. When the angels saw that G-d had moved away, they also moved away, as it was inappropriate to visit the sick while they are suffering. The Talmud doesn't say that the angels saw Avraham changing his dressing, only that they knew he was suffering. And even though G-d had commanded them to go to Avraham, when they saw G-d Himself move away (likely how they knew Avraham must be suffering), they took His lead and also moved away.

Avraham saw the angels when they first arrived, right outside his tent, and then saw them moving away, so ran after them. The angels saw that G-d wasn't moving back towards Avraham, so couldn't move back either. The Talmud answers the questions raised above, without raising additional issues. And so does Rashi, without relying on the Aggadah.

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The theme of "lifting one's eyes and seeing" appears in several places in Parshas VaYera. Avraham is described as one who saw in this manner, whereas others in the parsha failed to observe things properly. Sitting outside his tent in the heat of the day, Avraham chooses to lift up his eyes to view potential guests (Breishis 18:2). Furthermore, years later, as Avraham is traveling to the Akeida, he once again lifts up his eyes and observes Har Hamoriya from a distance (Breishis 22:4). What is the significance of not merely seeing, but also lifting up one's eyes to see?

We can appreciate the manner in which Avraham observed things by contrasting this to others in the parsha who failed to see. Chazal note that after seeing Har Hamoriya from afar, Avraham turns to Eliezer and Yishmael and instructs them to remain behind as he and Yitzchak proceed to the Akeida. Avraham saw a cloud of glory hovering over the mountain whereas Eliezer and Yishmael saw nothing. Something special can be present, but if one fails to "lift one's eyes" and search for it, he may never notice it. Avraham actively sought out spirituality and thereby merited to see the Divine Presence.

Looking for opportunities to "lift our eyes" is not just important in searching for Hashem, but it is critical for developing our relationships with our fellow man as well. In this area, Avraham also excels and actively seeks out opportunities to perform acts of chessed. Notwithstanding recovering from his bris at the age of ninety-nine, he eagerly searches for guests despite the intense heat of the day. In contrast to when Avraham "lifts up his eyes" and sees the potential guests, Hagar also finds herself in a situation in which she can perform a great chessed. Her son, Yishmael is ill and in great need of her care. Rather than comforting her suffering child she deliberately distances herself by saying, "I do not want to watch him die." Hagar had not learned from Avraham regarding how to search for opportunities to perform chessed. Rather, she chose to close her eyes and ignore the dire situation that presented itself.

It is not coincidental that Yishmael did not see the Divine Presence as he stood before Har Hamoriya. He had not learned from his father to cease the opportunity and search for it. Rather, he followed the path of his mother, Hagar's example of turning away.

As the descendants of Avraham Avinu, we must follow his legacy of always "lifting our eyes" and finding ways to connect to Hashem and our fellow man. By actively searching for spiritual growth we will merit that Hashem will look to us as well. At the culmination of the Akeida Avraham names the very place that would later house the Beis Hamikdash, "Hashem will see." May we soon merit the fulfillment of the prophecy of Yeshayahu (60:4), "Lift your eyes and see that your children have gathered to come to you." We yearn to see the day that the place in which Hashem sees will once again serve as our vehicle to see His presence and inspire us to follow in His ways by bestowing chessed upon one another.

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT"L *Harav Baruch Gigi, Adapted by Yitzchak Barth, Translated by Kaeren Fish*

"And it came to pass after these things that G-d tested Avraham, and He said to him, 'Avraham,' and he answered, 'Here I am.'" (Bereishit 22:1) What was the point of the Akeda? The great commentators all debated this question. One common view is that the Akeda represents the man of faith's blind obedience to G-d. This is an important foundation of service of G-d, but the Rambam offers a different perspective. He asserts that this was not the purpose of the Akeda, which actually had two other aims. One purpose was to demonstrate the level that monotheistic faith can attain: "The account of Avraham at the Akeda comes to teach two great ideas that are principles of our faith. First, it shows us the extent of the love and fear of G-d...in order to show mankind how far one should go for the sake of love of G-d and fear of Him, inspired neither by hope for reward nor by fear of punishment." (Guide of the Perplexed III:24)

In undergoing the test of the Akeda, Avraham sent a new message to the world: that he serves G-d not out of fear of punishment or fervent ecstasy, but out of pure love of G-d. Indeed, following the Akeda, the whole world knew that a person should be willing to sacrifice his life -- or even the life of his only son -- in the name of faith. According to the Rambam, this was Avraham's own intention: to demonstrate to the world "how far one should go for the sake of love of G-d and

fear of Him."

We learn that religious experience and ecstasy are not the essence of serving G-d, but rather fulfill one's obligation through deliberation. Even when we repent, we should be motivated by thoughtfulness and deliberation, not a passing feeling.

All his life, Avraham tried to publicize the faith of G-d in the world. The Rambam describes this activity: "He began to stand and call out with a great voice to all of the people and inform them that there is one G-d in the world and He is to be served, and he would go from city to city and kingdom to kingdom and call and assemble people." (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 1:4)

Yet, the Rambam's explanation of the Akeda seems to contradict his own statement (Hilkhot Melakhim 10:2) that gentiles are not commanded in the mitzva of sanctifying G-d's name and are not required to give up their lives for their faith. Why, then, did Avraham have to publicize throughout the world the concept of one's readiness to die for his faith? Rav Kook addresses this and explains: "When the divine illumination had to appear in its purity, it revealed itself via the powerful religious enthusiasm made manifest in the trial of the Akeda, which clearly demonstrated that passion and devotion to the divine reality need not be based on a knowledge of G-d clothed in the degrading garments of paganism in which the spark of divine goodness completely lost its way, but can be based on a pure apprehension of G-d.... This came to be through the decision of the Akeda, which remains a natural law for all generations: that even the delicate connection to that idea that transcends all aspects of the senses somehow penetrates the depths of the heart." (Iggerot HaReiya 379)

In light of this, we need to clarify the substantive difference between Avraham's faith and the faith of the pagans. The G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov is an abstract and unattainable G-d who has no image or bodily form and who cannot be conceived by human thought. The gods of Canaan, in contrast, were physical idols fashioned by human hands. The message of the Akeda lies not only in the readiness to sacrifice one's life for one's faith, as the other nations also were prepared for such sacrifice. Rather, Avraham's innovation was his readiness to sacrifice his son for a G-d who was not accessible through the senses. Naturally, the pagans believed that Avraham's faith lacked certainty. While they were able to touch their gods, bow down before them, and tend to them, Avraham had never seen his G-d.

Throughout this endeavor, Avraham was plagued by a nagging doubt: would the belief in an abstract G-d, who could not be grasped by the imagination of the masses, have the power to overcome the darker human inclinations towards injustice, violence, and destruction? In order to prove to the entire world that faith in a single G-d was capable of overcoming human nature, Avraham had to sacrifice his son at the command of that same abstract G-d. Only in this way could he make the ethical faith of G-d known among the nations, and demonstrate that this faith was genuine and strong, able to overcome natural feelings.

When the angel of G-d reveals himself a second time, it becomes clear that G-d does not desire human sacrifice, but the idea of self-sacrifice remained.

The second purpose of the Akeda, according to the Rambam, is the truth of prophecy and the certainty in the word of G-d that addresses man. The pagan world never knew what prophecy was, and the Akeda teaches the power of prophecy. Even though Avraham was promised, "Your seed shall be called after Yitzchak" (Bereishit 21:12), when he was commanded to sacrifice his son on an altar, he moved quickly and calmly to fulfill the order. Had Avraham harbored any doubts about the authenticity of prophecy, he obviously would not have bound his son. Thus, Avraham proved that faith in the one G-d is absolute and free of doubt: "The second purpose is to show how the prophets believed in the truth of that which came to them from G-d by way of prophecy. We shall not think that what the prophets heard or saw in allegorical figures may at times have included incorrect or doubtful elements, since the divine communication was made to them, as we have shown, in a dream or a vision and through the imaginative faculty.... If the prophets had any doubt or suspicion as regards the truth of what they saw in a prophetic dream or perceived in a prophetic vision, they would not have consented to do that which is unnatural, and Avraham would not have found in himself sufficient strength to perform that act, if he had any doubt." (Guide of the Perplexed III:24)

If Avraham or any other prophet had a doubt about the prophetic vision, "they would not have consented to do that which is unnatural, and Avraham would not have found in himself sufficient strength to perform that act, if he had any doubt." The willingness to sacrifice one's life is based on the absolute truth of the command and the certainty of the prophecy.

Did Avraham succeed in inculcating the message of the Akeda? To a large extent, the answer is yes. Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religions of the Western world, are both monotheistic, and are thus preferable to the pagan beliefs that preceded them.

But in reality the same difference that existed thousands of years ago between the faith of Avraham and the beliefs of the nations of Canaan remains today between our faith and that of the gentiles. The god of the Christians, as we know, is not abstract. Christianity believes in the "holy trinity," which places a human messiah alongside the transcendent G-d. The various denominations within Christianity understand this

arrangement in different ways, but none of them believes in a completely abstract G-d.

In this regard Islam is much closer to Judaism. The Rambam, as we know, rules in his letter to Rabbi Ovadia the Proselyte that Muslims are counted among "the congregation of monotheists," and thus are not to be considered idolators.

On the other hand, there is an enormous difference between the Jewish concept of sanctification of G-d's name, and its Muslim counterpart. Like many fundamental beliefs of Islam, the belief in a hereafter was also borrowed from Judaism. But the Muslim version is substantially different from the hereafter that we believe in. We believe that in the World to Come, "there is no body or physical existence, but rather only the souls of the righteous without any body, like the ministering angels... no eating nor drinking, nor any of all the things that human bodies need in this world." (Hilkhot Teshuva 8:2)

Muslims, on the other hand, believe in a physical paradise that awaits the righteous after their death. According to Muslim belief, the World to Come provides those who attain it with all the physical pleasures that they were unable to enjoy in this world. In contrast with the pure, spiritual, and elevated paradise in which we believe, Muslims expect that after death they will reach a place where they can realize their wildest and ugliest fantasies. In contrast to Christianity, Islam succeeded in blocking the human imagination from conceiving the abstract G-d as something tangible, but gave human imagination free rein in conceiving of the World to Come.

The difference between the original concept of the World to Come and the paradise that the Muslims imagine for themselves is of great significance, and has ramifications for our attitude towards their faith in general. It is true that Muslims believe in one G-d, but the goal of their service of Him is to reach the hereafter that they believe in. Muslim martyrs who are prepared to die in the fulfillment of their religious command do not sacrifice their lives for the sake of the unity of an abstract G-d, but to get to Paradise. They have turned the loftiest of commandments -- sanctification of G-d's name -- into a vehicle for the realization of their most vulgar urges. Their self-sacrifice is not for the sake of G-d, but for the sake of their own physical desires.

In addition to the desecration of the concept of sanctification of G-d's name, the belief in a physical paradise also causes horrifying acts that are themselves a desecration of G-d's name. Muslim spiritual leaders encourage murder, claiming that such acts publicize the name of the great G-d. But in fact they are encouraging their followers to sacrifice their lives in the name of the fulfillment of their physical desires.

Various midrashim provide lengthy and detailed descriptions of the three days preceding the Akeda, during which Avraham and Yitzchak walked together towards Mt. Moriah. For many years I searched among these dozens of midrashim that attempt to describe the conversation between the father and his son being led to slaughter, but not a single one mentions the paradise awaiting Yitzchak. This would seem rather strange: we would expect to read that Avraham reassured his son by promising that he would reach Paradise after his death. But not a single midrash makes such a claim.

This illustrates the vast difference between the self-sacrifice of Avraham and Yitzchak at the time of the Akeda, and the self-sacrifice of the sons of Yishmael today. Avraham went to sacrifice his son solely for the sake of the unity of G-d. He never imagined for a moment that the Akeda might benefit Yitzchak as a means of reaching Paradise, and did not entertain any illusions concerning the pleasures awaiting his son after his slaughter. A Jew does not wish to die in order to reach the World to Come, but he is prepared to give up his life for his Creator, without any expectation of a better life in the hereafter.

Jews have sacrificed their lives throughout the generations for the sake of G-d's name, following in the footsteps of Avraham and Yitzchak. In contrast, the Muslim martyrs of today sanctify the murder of others. Moreover, the Jews who sanctified G-d's name did so to glorify G-d, not for their own benefit, unlike the Muslims, who are promised a paradise of fleshly pleasures.

Although Muslims are considered members of "the congregation of monotheists," in the words of the Rambam, they have desecrated the concept of sanctification of G-d's name. Only we, the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, sacrifice our lives when required to do so for the sanctification of His great name, and not for our own benefit. On this holy day (Rosh Hashana), we alone can cry out to the Creator of the universe, "Guardian of Israel, guard over the remainder of Israel...who declare, 'Shema Yisrael.'" Only we have the right to plead to our Creator to have mercy on us and guard us from those who rise up against us to murder us:

"Guardian of the singular nation, guard over the remainder of the singular nation...who declare the oneness of Your name -- 'the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one.'" *(This sicha was delivered on the second day of Rosh Hashana 5762 [2001].)*