

On Abraham Being Commanded to Offer His Son Isaac on the Altar

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Parshat Vayera

I recently passed along to a friend a story told by Rabbi Goldie Milgram

We were at Dorshei Derekh, a Reconstructionist-oriented minyan in the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia. The part of Torah being read had to do with the sacrificial system. It was the practice of this minyan to give maximum participation to congregants in commenting on the portion by either going around the room or letting each person call on the next person, being sure to alternate by gender so that women wouldn't be under-represented.

*To my surprise, my son raised his hand to be recognized. "The way I see it is that for thousands of years the Jewish people sacrificed animals to G*d in hopes that there would be an end to war, hunger, disease, and earthquakes. It took a really long time but eventually we realized that G*d doesn't have (and he paused dramatically) a nose! Then we tried a new idea, sending prayers instead of sacrifice fumes. And we prayed and prayed and prayed in hopes that there would be an end to war, hunger, disease, and stuff like tornados. It took an incredibly long time but we started to catch on that maybe G*d doesn't have (another dramatic pause; where does he get it?) ears! So I think today my mommy and her friends have another idea they're trying out. They're working hard to put an end to war, hunger, and disease, and they think that G*d has hands." Then he grabbed onto the hand of the person on each side of him and lifted them up and said, "And these are the hands of G*d." And then he sat back quietly.*

(Rabbi Goldie Milgram, Reclaiming Judaism as a Spiritual Practice, Jewish Lights, 2004)

My friend replied, with some very cogent questions.

Great story, thanks for passing it along.

*Of course questions are bound to arise. So why was it that G*d told Abraham to sacrifice his son? Was that how people got into the practice of making sacrifices? Don't you kinda wonder why G*d didn't give the people a little more direction? I agree that if G*d were to tell us what to do then we couldn't really be human and we wouldn't be able to evolve and grow, but then why was it that S/he told Abraham to make a sacrifice?*

*What is the meaning of sacrifice today? Is it a metaphor? Or is some other thing a metaphor for it? Is sacrifice still a part of the way we connect to and interact with G*d?*

Oh I'm just full of questions.

Indeed, those are excellent questions, and they are deserving of equally good answers, answers which, in a small way, I might begin to offer.

The Command

Traditionally, relying on the plain text of the Torah, G*d “tested” Abraham to see whether Abraham had sufficient faith in G*d to offer his son, his “only” son, whom he loved, Isaac (thus the text puts it). The Torah’s text (Genesis 22:2) tells us of G*d’s Command to Abraham:

And G*d said [to Abraham], “Take thy son, thine only one, whom thou lovest, Isaac, and לך לך (*lech l’cha*, take thyself) to the Land of Moriah and lift him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall show thee.”

There are several interpretations of the meaning of G*d’s drawing out the Instruction, of G*d’s building up the reference to Isaac:

- ☆ **Thy son,**
- ☆ **Thine only one,**
- ☆ **Whom Thou lovest,**
- ☆ **Isaac!**

The most traditional interpretation is that the gradual build-up is so that Abraham would be fully aware of what he was being told to do, so that (if G*d had simply said, “Take Isaac and offer him”) he would not just react in shock. By making Abraham fully aware of what he was being told, this interpretation would have it, Abraham was able to respond consciously and intentionally and thereby gain full credit for “passing” the test.

Another understanding, almost as traditional, has the sequence as G*d’s way of comforting Abraham in the face of the great sacrifice that Abraham is told to make (although, interestingly, the text does not say that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac but only to “offer” him). The text is, then, one side of a dialogue:

“**Take thy son,**” says G*d.
“I have two sons,” replies Abraham, with trepidation.
“**Thine only son,**” G*d continues gently.
“This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother,” Abraham protests.
“**Whom thou lovest,**” G*d whispers.
“I love them both,” cries Abraham.
“Take **Isaac,**” G*d says tearfully, and both G*d and Abraham are then silent.

Another form of the dialogue is far less gentle and truly puts Abraham to the test:

“**Take thy son,**” says G*d. That is, the one whom thou didst call “my son” and not the one whom thou didst call merely “the son of the slave-woman.”
And Abraham, stunned, says, “I have two sons.”

“Thine only son,” G*d commands. That is, the only one whom thou considerest thy son.

And Abraham, falling to his knees in shock, replies, “This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother.”

“Whom thou lovest,” G*d shouts. That is, the son of the woman whom thou lovest and whom thou considerest thy wife.

And Abraham, prostrate in grief, protests through his tears, “I love them both.”

“Take Isaac!” G*d roars, and both G*d and Abraham are then silent.

The Meaning

Why must Abraham show his readiness to offer his beloved son Isaac, through whom his posterity is to survive, as an offering to G*d? Is it a reflection of Abraham’s having earlier, at the behest of Sarah, cast Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness, dooming them to a death from which they were saved only through Divine intervention? Must Abraham learn what Hagar went through, seeing her son about (as she believed) to die?

The Islamic tradition, incidentally, teaches that it was Isaac who was cast out and Ishmael who was bound upon the altar.

The tradition teaches us that this episode – the *Akeidah* of Isaac – was G*d’s way of letting us know that we were no longer to bring human sacrifices. With G*d’s Revelation to Abraham, with G*d’s angel having shown Abraham a ram caught in the bushes to sacrifice in lieu of his son Isaac, it was made clear to us that we are not to sacrifice human beings, as so many of the peoples among whom we lived did. We attribute the lesson to G*d rather than merely citing it as a growth in our communal consciousness because what our consciousness grants us it can also retract. If our refraining from human sacrifice is just because we have “outgrown” it, then we can, if circumstances are right (perhaps we should say, if circumstances are wrong), revert to the old way. But if it is G*d Who has abolished human sacrifices, then we cannot go back, no matter what.

The Test

Abraham passed the “test.” He demonstrated his willingness to offer his son *at G*d’s behest* and to refrain from harming his son, substituting a ram, *at the behest of a mere messenger*. For it was not G*d Personally but an angel (the Hebrew word *mal'ach*, which we render *angel* actually means a *messenger*, just as does the Greek word *αγγελος*, from which our English word *angel* is derived) who said to Abraham, **“Do not harm the lad.”** Normally, it requires a higher authority to countermand an order that has once been given, but a mere angel, we are taught, can countermand even G*d’s Order if the result will be life-enhancing rather than life-denying.

Then again, it may be that Abraham actually failed the test! Perhaps the “test” was to determine whether Abraham would, indeed, stand up to G*d when G*d Commanded wrongly.

And that test Abraham failed. But Abraham, at other times, did argue with G*d. We think especially of the five “wicked” cities. When G*d informs Abraham (through angels/messengers) that the five cities will be destroyed because their “wickedness” was more than G*d was willing to bear, Abraham argues and bargains with G*d, eventually negotiating G*d down to agreeing to spare the five cities if as few as ten righteous individuals can be found there. Why, then, does Abraham not argue with G*d about his own son? Abraham, it seems, argues only when G*d tells him that G*d will do something. Every time Abraham is given an instruction – whether from G*d, from Sarah, or, presumably, from anyone else, he obeys. In the Biblical tales of Abraham, he is never described as failing to obey an instruction. And so it seems to be now, with the *Akeidah*. G*d says, “Offer,” and Abraham offers; the angel says, “Spare,” and Abraham spares. The entire story does not redound to Abraham’s credit.

Testing G*d!

But there is another interpretation. Not that G*d was testing Abraham – for G*d knew how Abraham would respond – but that Abraham was testing G*d! Abraham, according to this interpretation, had no intention of bringing the knife down and slaying Isaac, but Abraham had to know how far G*d would allow him to go. Had G*d’s messenger not stopped Abraham, Abraham would have stopped himself and would have concluded that G*d was far too bloodthirsty a god to be worthy of Abraham’s worship. And not Judaism, not Christianity, not Islam, not any of the “Abrahamic” faith traditions would ever have emerged. It seems that G*d did pass the test.

Or does it? Did G*d actually pass the test? Well, certainly not with any sort of a high grade. After all, what about Isaac? How did he feel when his father bound him on the altar? How did he feel when his father took out the knife? How did he feel when he saw the knife in his father’s hand descending toward his chest? What about Isaac?

Isaac’s Response

Isaac is not a very interesting character. Indeed, in his very “uninterestingness,” he is fascinating. After the *Akeidah*, Isaac is never again recorded as speaking to his father Abraham or to G*d. Did the experience of being bound for sacrifice on the altar stun him into permanent silence? Was it a form of “adult-onset” autism? Well, no, for Isaac does, in fact, do some things; he does relate. But he is, far and away, the most passive of the three Patriarchs. Almost everything he does in his life is either a pale reflection of something his father Abraham has done or a presaging in attenuated form of something his son Jacob/Israel will do.

Isaac is the only one of the three Patriarchs who bears only one name. Abraham’s name was changed from Abram, and Jacob became Israel, but Isaac is always Isaac.

Cain brought to the Eternal an offering of the produce of the field. And as for Abel, he, too, brought – of the first and the finest of his flock. The Eternal turned to Abel and his offering but did not turn to Cain and his offering.

Was G*d being arbitrary? Certainly not! But then why is it that Abel's offering was accepted while Cain's was not? What was the difference between Cain's offering and Abel's?

Cain brought some of the produce of the field. He had simply gathered it; he did not put any work into producing it. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it, and Cain put nothing of himself into it. Further, it was just **some of the produce**; it was, so to speak, what Cain had left over.

Abel, on the other hand, offered the first, the finest, the fattest of the livestock he had raised. He offered the first, taking care of his own needs only after first making his offering to G*d. And the Hebrew text can also carry the meaning **and Abel brought even of himself from the first and the finest of his flock**. Abel made himself a part of his offering; Abel offered himself to G*d.

In order for our offering to be fully acceptable, we must act as Abel did, giving the first and the finest of what we have and giving of ourselves with our offering, not as Cain, who offered the leftovers of the crops to whose production he had contributed nothing.

And as for Abel, he, too, brought.

As we have pointed out, the Hebrew text can bear the translation **And Abel brought himself as well**. Abel offered himself to G*d; he made himself the offering, and G*d, acting through the instrument of Cain's anger, accepted Abel's offering.

Unless the offering encompasses the one offering it, it is not complete. Many of the Hassidic masters taught that we should be prepared, in our prayers, to surrender our souls to G*d at any moment because of the intensity of our prayers.

When the twentieth-century Hungarian Hassidic master Rebbe Arele Roth, whose memory is a blessing, established his synagogue in Jerusalem, he established the rule – still followed there today, more than half a century later – that the prayers should not be said softly but must be shouted at the top of one's lungs. Because G*d is hard of hearing? Of course not. The prayers are shouted so that we may attempt to awaken ourselves to their reality – to our reality, our true inner reality – and the prayers are shouted as a way of putting our entire self into our prayers, on a physical level.

When we manifest that intensity physically, Rebbe Arele taught, the spiritual intensity will necessarily follow. Just as one puts one's entire body into the prayers, so will one put one's entire soul into them, offering oneself to G*d with every word, with every syllable, with every letter of every prayer.

Isaac is passive. Unlike his father Abraham (who is already married when we first encounter him in the narrative) and unlike his son Jacob (who went out and found himself a wife – four wives, in fact), Isaac does not choose his own wife. Indeed, he does not even give the instructions for choosing his wife. Isaac's father Abraham instructs his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac and even instructs him in the criteria to seek in finding Isaac's wife. In marrying, then, Isaac is passive in the extreme. Can it be because he was so traumatized by the *Akeidah*?

Isaac, in short, seems to be the dispensable Patriarch; he does virtually nothing on his own, serves only as a link

between his father Abraham, who founded the nation and was the first to be aware of G*d's one-ness, and his son Jacob, who was the father of the progenitors of the twelve tribes and whose name *Israel* the nation bears.

But there is something Isaac does that distinguishes him, and it may well have a connection to the *Akeidah*. When Abraham's servant Eliezer returns, bringing Rebecca, who is to be Isaac's bride, with him, the text tells us, **Isaac . . . loved her**. While G*d refers to Isaac, in commanding Abraham to offer him up, as **the one whom thou lovest**, Isaac is the first one about whom the narrative explicitly says "He loved." Perhaps it was only by being bound on the altar that Isaac learned to love. Perhaps it was only by loving that Isaac could redeem the experience of being bound. All we know with certainty is that Isaac was bound on the altar and that Isaac loved. And that Isaac was the only one of the three Patriarchs with only one name. And that Isaac was the only one of the three Patriarchs with only one wife. For Isaac, alone among the Patriarchs, was monogamous.

- ✧ He loved; for all his passivity, he had passion.
- ✧ He was silent; he knew how to keep silence.
- ✧ He never changed his name; he remained faithful to his essence.
- ✧ He was monogamous; he was passionately faithful to his wife Rebecca.

"Why doesn't G*d want me?" pleaded an elderly and disabled patient in the hospital, longing for death.
"G*d does want you, dear," the hospital chaplain replied. "G*d wants you here."

So perhaps it is Isaac, enformed by his experience on the altar, who is our best role model among the Patriarchs. And the tradition even says that Isaac knew – he knew! – even before he and his father Abraham reached the Land of Moriah that he was to be bound on the altar. But he did not know that he would be rescued at the last moment. So perhaps he went knowingly and even willingly. The Buddhist tradition speaks reverently of the *bodhisattva*, the individual soul who, having attained the level of being able to transcend the endless cycle of death and rebirth, has voluntarily chosen to return to the earth plane time and again, declining to enter *Nirvana* until s/he can bring all sentient beings along as well. Can it be that Isaac, voluntarily accepting the role of being bound on the altar in order to teach us what we need to know – that we must no longer sacrifice human lives to G*d – was a *bodhisattva*?

Sacrifices and Offerings

What other experiences do we have of sacrifices? The first one in Scripture (and there is a tradition which says that the first time a concept appears in Scripture is the paradigm for that concept to the end of time) comes in the very first part of Genesis, when Cain and Abel bring their offerings to G*d.

Because Cain knew that his offering had not been brought whole-heartedly, he anticipated its being rejected; he expected it (and himself) to be rejected by G*d. Isaac,

knowing that he was to be offered on the altar, brought himself (as, it seems, based on an alternate interpretation, fully supported by the Hebrew text, Abel did). But, human consciousness having grown since the time of Cain and Abel, G*d determined that Isaac could be an offering while remaining alive!

Where do we find ourselves able to bring sacrifices today? The Jewish tradition teaches us that, since the destruction of the Temple almost 2000 years ago, we can no longer bring animal sacrifices, meal offerings, and all the other offerings, as we did when the Temple stood. Prayer, we are taught, will suffice. We will bring the offering of our lips. Strangely, there are those who long for the restoration of the Temple and its sacrificial system. They are willing to see in the rescue of Isaac an opportunity for growth that has enabled us to leave behind us the concept of human sacrifice, but they are unwilling to see in the destruction of the Temple a similar opportunity to leave animal sacrifices and the panoply of other material offerings behind.

As did Abel, we can bring of ourselves; we can offer ourselves to G*d. And the Kabbalistic tradition tells us of four levels on which we can do so.

- ✧ The level of action.
- ✧ The level of understanding.
- ✧ The level of feeling.
- ✧ The level of being.

On the level of action, we perform the act. We bring an offering to G*d, an offering out of ourselves.

On the next level, the level of understanding, we become aware of what it means to offer something of ourselves to G*d.

As we climb to the next rung, the level of feeling, we realize ourselves as connected with G*d in an intimate way.

Finally, on the highest rung we can attain in this life, the level of being, we *become* the offering and know our oneness with G*d.

You Go, You Know Not Where

The Hebrew words which introduce the *Akeidah*, ***lech l'cha***, are the same words which introduce G*d's Command to Abraham (he is then still Abram) to leave his homeland and set out on a journey **to a place which I shall show thee**. G*d commanded Abram to leave the

The Buddha was asked by a disciple, "Are you a master?"
"No," the Buddha replied.
"Are you enlightened?" the disciple continued.
"No," the Buddha replied again.
"Are you a teacher?"
"No."
"Are you a guru?"
"No."
And on and on, the disciple asked if the Buddha were every sort of great person he could think of, and the Buddha continued to deny. Finally, the disciple, in frustration, asked, "Well, then, what are you?"
"I am awake!" the Buddha exclaimed.

comfortable confines of his homeland, his father's house, and to set forth on a journey whose destination he would learn only when he reached it.

And Abram went! What an incredible level of faith!

So, too, now. G*d commands Abraham to go on a journey to the Land of Moriah, to **one of the mountains which I shall show thee**, to a destination he will know only when he reaches it, and Abraham – together with Isaac – goes.

The Hebrew expression *lech l'cha* can carry many meanings. Going beyond the obvious literal meaning – *get thee out* – we can understand the first word *lech* (with a change of vowels, to be vocalized as *lach*) as meaning *to thyself* in the feminine form. The second word *l'cha* can also mean *to thyself*, but in masculine form. Abraham – and the “Abraham” within each of us, for the people in the Scriptural stories are, aside from their historicity or lack thereof, aspects of the psyche of each of us – is instructed to integrate his masculine and feminine aspects, for, as G*d declares when viewing Adam (before the Divine Surgery which produced Eve, but that is the subject for another essay), **It is not good for the human to be alone.**

As we bring our feminine and masculine aspects together, integrating them (or, in another interpretation, integrating our “shadow side” into our consciousness), we set out on a journey whose destination we cannot know until we arrive; we go to a **place which I shall show thee.**

Sacrificing Love for Love's Sake

Abraham's offering of Isaac – and this relates to Isaac's being able to love – is done out of love. What is Isaac to Abraham? Of course, Isaac is Abraham's son, but that is the obvious answer. On a deeper level, Isaac is Abraham's posterity. G*d has told Abraham that it will be through Isaac that Abraham's name will be blessed. And now Abraham is told to offer to G*d that very posterity!

This is perhaps the deepest level of love. No, not the offering of the “love object,” but the offering *of the love itself*. Isaac (viewing him now symbolically and not as an actual person) represents Abraham's love for G*d, and, in the name of that love, Abraham is called upon to sacrifice that love. If G*d had permitted Abraham to go through with the sacrifice, perhaps Abraham would have done so (my remarks above to the contrary notwithstanding). But then Abraham would have been permanently estranged from G*d. Out of love for G*d, Abraham was willing to give up his love for G*d!

Love, at its deepest level, will sacrifice even itself for the sake of the beloved.