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בס"ד

## Parashat Vayera Part III Testing Abraham: The 'Aqedah

### 1. Backdrop

Abraham had strongly disagreed with Sarah's request to "chase away this maid and her son" but she was determined to have her husband rid of Ishmael, his son by Hagar, "because the son of this maid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). "The matter was exceedingly bad in Abraham's eyes," but G-d intervened, instructing him to comply with Sarah's request, "for through Isaac shall seed be called to you" (v. 12). Undoubtedly with great pain, Abraham disinherits and sends away Ishmael for the benefit of Isaac. Though the text does not comment on it, the reader is aware that Abraham has withstood a great test. Subsequently, G-d presents him with the ultimate test, "take your son, your singular one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering" (22:2).

These two narratives concerning Abraham's only two sons are separated by one passage. The introduction to that passage is *וַיְהִי בַּעֲתֵי הַהוּא* ("And it was at that time" [21:22]), a rare locution in Tanakh (which only appears two other times) that reflects the relevancy of what is being related to the specific goings-on in the text.

The local king Abimelech, in the presence of his military chief, has a talk with Abraham. He recognizes that G-d has been with Abraham in all that he has done and that Abraham has become an important factor in the region. He requests that Abraham take an oath committing himself (standing for his children) to deal kindly with him and his future generations and that of the local populace. Abraham rebukes Abimelech for the well his servants stole from him (to which Abimelech and his military chief plead ignorance) and they establish a covenant and both swear. Abraham gives Abimelech seven sheep, a number which apparently symbolizes that Abimelech has achieved the spiritual dignity justifying Abraham entering a covenant with him. How ironic. Right after

disinheriting Ishmael and just before G-d commands him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is informed that he and his children were accepted as a permanent presence in the land and substantial progress has been made on behalf of his religious outlook.

Another prominent milestone in Abraham's life that is recorded in this passage is that after his interaction with Abimelech he planted an *eshel* "and called out there in the name of Hashem, G-d of the world" (21:33). He did not establish an altar as he had done on previous occasions. As we explain in our *Lekh Lekha Part I* study, an *eshel* is very possibly a tamarisk tree, which suits the region and provides substantial shade, benefiting passers-by. In Mesopotamian culture certain trees served as holy sites to which an individual may retreat to meditate and aspire to receive an oracle. At this point in his life it appears that Abraham felt he could dispense with the superficial prop of the altar in favor of a higher level of religious center, one that is more consistent with his teaching about G-d's will and with the deeper message of the Torah. Sacrifices were probably offered on those altars because the public considered them an important part of religious worship but it should be recalled that we are never told that Abraham offered a sacrifice on the altars he built except, ironically, on the coming occasion of the *aqedah*.

The text does not specify Isaac's age at the *'aqedah*. Ibn Ezra compellingly argues that the midrash that states he was then thirty-seven years of age cannot be *peshat*. Had Isaac been an adult, his own perspective would have had to be taken into account; the text would have noted his submission to G-d's command and he would have been directly included in the statements of prominent acknowledgement and reward. Ibn Ezra also rejects the opinion that Isaac was about five years of age, for he then would not have been able to carry the firewood. He presumes he

was a preteen. However, a preteen understands what is going on and the previous considerations would also apply to him. From the tenor of the narrative, especially as Isaac did not ask about the lack of a sheep for the burnt-offering until the third day when alone with his father, he surely does not appear to be much more than five or six years of age.

The test is transmitted with the words *קח נא את בניך*, which may be translated, “take, please, your son,” leading some commentators, trying to soften the harshness of G-d’s order, to assume that it is not a command but an expression of G-d’s desire, a preference He has. Some understand Rashi (based on *b. Sanh.* 89b) in this manner. “Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt” (Sarna, *JPS Commentary*, p. 151). Passing the test, presumably, is that much greater. However, it is not at all clear that even with such an understanding G-d’s preference and request is not a command, since it nonetheless expresses His will and desire, and ultimately that is what counts. Non-compliance would still stigmatize the individual as not possessing the highest level of commitment.

In any event, the particle *na* is probably employed as a matter of courteous speech, suitable even when giving a command; it does not necessarily indicate an optional dimension. Indeed, the more difficult the demand one is making on another, especially when addressing a “friend,” the more a gentle expression is appropriate; it informs the recipient that the order does not stem from personal ill-feeling. In addition, *na* is also used in other senses, taking the meaning of “now,” or to call attention to the importance of what is being stated, such as when Moses said to the people, *shim’u na hamorim* (“listen now you rebels” [Num. 20:10]). Thus, it does not appear indicated to complicate the dilemma presented to Abraham with the concept of an optional choice and open the issue of evaluation of his decision.

## 2. Formulation

The order to sacrifice Isaac is formulated with use of the phrase *לך לך* (“go you forth”), recalling G-d’s opening instructions to Abraham that began with that phrase (Gen. 12:1). These are the only two *lekh lekha* attestations in Tanakh.\* The linkage between the two formulations is extensive with many artistic devices, including correspondences of both chiasmus and parallels.

In both cases *lekh lekha* is attached to a cluster of terms that progressively point to the magnitude of the challenge: In the first case, “Go you forth from your land, your kinfolk and your father’s home” and in our case, “Take your son, your singular one, that you love, Isaac, and go you forth.” In the first statement, the phrase “go you forth” precedes the multiple terms of progression, while in the later one the “go you forth” follows the multiple terms. In both cases, with the *lekh lekha* G-d directed Abraham to an unknown destination, either that “I will show you” (with the first *lekh lekha*) or that “I will tell you” (with our *lekh lekha*). The concluding blessings in our passage reflect the blessings associated with the first *lekh lekha*.

The first *lekh lekha* passage follows the genealogy that traced Abraham’s forbears while the second *lekh lekha* passage precedes the continuation of that genealogy, tracing the progeny of Abraham’s brother Nahor. The latter, most significantly, culminates with the birth of Rebekah, who was destined for Isaac, thereby preparing the transition to the second generation. With the first test Abraham was to sever himself from his past to build a glorious future, while the last test required that he do away with any hope for that future.

Thus, an envelope is formed around the life saga of Abraham. After passing the climactic *‘aqedah* test there are only concluding narratives concerning him: the death and burial of Sarah, finding a wife for Isaac and brief statements summarizing details of the patriarch’s later life. Significantly, no further divine communication to him is recorded.

## 3. Concerning the Test

In the passage’s first verse, before the command is articulated, the reader is informed that what follows is a test; there is to be no misunderstanding even for an instant that the Deity may possibly have truly desired a human sacrifice.

The classical commentators have questioned the concept of G-d testing man; does He not know man’s inner thoughts, making a test unnecessary? In our case some have suggested that the test was intended to provide proof to the world of the extent of Abraham’s commitment to G-d’s command (but who would know

of it?) or to reveal to Abraham himself the depth of his faith.

The more straightforward explanation, however, appears to be connected to the principle that G-d granted man free will. To sustain that principle while acknowledging G-d's prescience many have posited an accompanying corollary: In His creation of man, G-d chose to limit His foreknowledge in areas governed by that free will and discover how man acts when he actually exercises his choice. So, although Abraham led an exemplary life up to the time of the test, G-d did not know how he would act if he was required to give up his single most valuable possession, which the *'aqeda* represents. As Satan said to G-d in the allegory at the beginning of the Book of Job regarding that commendable individual whom G-d considered "My servant...blameless and upright": "Is it for no reason that Job fears G-d? Do You not protect him, his household and all that he has all about; the work of his hands You have blessed and his possessions have increased in the land!" (Job:1:9-11).

Not knowing that he was being tested, what could have been going through Abraham's mind? Beyond feelings stemming from his personal love for his son, the considerations of justice for an innocent child who did not deserve to die, who would have to submit to the cruel fate of being slaughtered at the hands of his father at the request of G-d, renders the situation impossible to comprehend. The single son from Sarah, for whom Abraham had faithfully waited so long, whose birth was miraculous and regarding whom G-d promised that he would carry on the Covenant and transmit it to his progeny, who was to be the vehicle to bring the repeated divine assurances of blessing to the new nation and to the world, should now be turned into ashes? G-d cannot be reneging on His commitments!

But all such thoughts and questions had to be suppressed, for Abraham knew, absolutely knew without a doubt, that G-d was asking for the sacrifice of his son. To make the test valid we must posit that G-d had made it absolutely clear to Abraham that He wanted him to sacrifice Isaac.

The site of the sacrifice required a three-day journey. In this way Abraham had the opportunity to thoroughly review and mull over his situation and

probe for every possible honest explanation to reinterpret the command. He cannot be thought to be acting on a whim or reacting without due consideration.

Is it possible that Abraham had an inkling that somehow – though without any idea how – after all, things might turn out all right, silently hoping, because he knows he is fulfilling G-d's will and G-d is compassionate and just? Abraham's instructions to the servants to remain with the donkey while he and the lad would go forth to worship, "and we will return to you," gives us some slight indication of this (see *b. Mo'ed Qat.* 18a). Likewise, his answer to Isaac's poignant question of "Father...where is the sheep for the *'olah*?" with "G-d will see for Himself the sheep for the *'olah*, my son" may provide such a clue. Perhaps even his deportment, steadily moving forward without the slightest hesitation, suggests this. But it can be no more than an inkling, connected to recognition of the human incapacity to fathom G-d's ways.

Consistent with Biblical style, details concerning Abraham's inner thoughts, his considerations of Sarah and her reaction, and the agony of father and son, are all left to the reader's imagination. Through artistic use of such and many other literary devices this narrative is considered an exquisite portrayal of a man of faith remaining resolute in his commitment to G-d in the face of the greatest and most wrenching temptation to deviate.

When Abraham passed this test, G-d strengthens and expands His previous promises of blessing to him, to his progeny and to all the nations. For the first time, G-d explicitly made an oath to give him the blessings. (Although the previous covenantal commitments implied an oath, an explicit declaration to that effect surely adds a dimension to it.) The blessing of progeny is made more comprehensive by formulating it for the first time with comparison to both the stars of heaven and the sand by the seashore. Abraham is now told that his progeny will possess the gates of its enemies, thus sharpening the focus of previous generalities. The foundation of the blessings is now broadened; whereas previously it was conceived as resulting only from the standpoint of a divine purpose, now it was expressly linked to Abraham's having obeyed G-d's voice *עָקַב אֶשְׂרָא שָׁמַעַתָּ בְּקוֹלִי* (Gen. 22:17-18). The cluster of G-d's intensified blessings serves

to increase His involvement in fulfillment of the vision than otherwise would have been the case, helping Abraham and his progeny overcome unpredictable happenings.

#### 4. A Question

Why did Abraham not beg G-d to spare his son as he did on behalf of the people of Sodom when he heard of the impending decree upon them (18:23-32)? Why did he not argue as he did then: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

First, it must be stated that it is unacceptable to interpret the passage as implying that G-d considered Abraham's response to sacrifice his son as less than ideal, that the test was to see if Abraham would protest and resist. Clearly, the test was to see if he would be obedient and proceed. G-d's praise of Abraham upon stopping him at the last moment emphasizes that point, and the immediately following expansion of the promises to him is only consistent with such a basic understanding.

Some assume that Abraham did pray that G-d should reconsider His command, but was rejected; it was not mentioned in the text because it was something that should be taken for granted. When Moses reveals that he had prayed to be allowed to enter the promised land, he quotes G-d as having told him, "Enough for you! Do not speak to Me again of this matter!" (Deut. 3:23-26). Evidently, he had previously been praying for rescission of the decree and was refused, although the text had not mentioned it. Had he not seen fit to inform Israel of this matter shortly before his death, it would not have been mentioned in the Torah!

However, the cases are different. The decree concerning Moses was punishment for his sin, a matter he acknowledged and could resign himself to. Had Abraham prayed for G-d to spare Isaac, an innocent child, and been rejected, it would have been a relevant detail that the narrative would reveal.

In Judaic Seminar (2:2), Alexander Pruss addresses our question and presents two possible answers.

1) Through his interaction with G-d in the Sodom case, "Abraham has come to a fuller understanding of divine justice. He now knows that G-d's punitive action is precise: it does not sweep the innocent with

the wicked. He understands and believes more fully that G-d is just." G-d had never intended to kill the righteous with the wicked, it was only Abraham's lack of knowledge of G-d's justice that prompted him to intercede. When subsequently G-d asks him to sacrifice Isaac he does not intercede, since "by then he knows that G-d's will is not contrary to justice...he can trust that the command is good even if it does not seem to be so at first sight." Intercession "would have been a sign of doubt in G-d's justice," subject to criticism.

However, this approach does not appear to reflect the straightforward meaning of the text that narrates the episode of Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom – nor its context or implied meaning. As explained in our *Vayera Part I* study, it appears that G-d wanted Abraham to pray, and hinted as much, similar to the case with Moses after the golden calf episode. And the significance of the lengthy dialogue of Abraham's intercession does not appear to be limited to an educational session but a real argument that Abraham proffers and that G-d accepts. G-d's introductory communication to Abraham on this matter might very well have included the statement that if there are ten righteous men He would not destroy the city, teaching a lesson about justice if that was His plan; but that was not His plan. G-d's responses to Abraham on the progressively lower numbers of righteous that would be required to save the city are concessions to the prayer. Abraham achieves a tempering of divine justice with his prayer.

As the narrative is presented, G-d is in the "investigative" mode at the point of Abraham's prayer, so it cannot be asked, "Does He not know if there are fifty righteous men in the city?" As depicted throughout Scripture, prophets mitigate the severity of G-d's retributive intentions by means of their prayers, such as, "I threw myself down before Hashem as the first time...for...He was going to destroy you, and Hashem heeded me that time also" (Deut. 9:18-19). That is part of the mystery of how the world is governed. To allow prayer to have meaning and real impact G-d must not conduct the world the same way with or without it.

2) Dr. Pruss' second answer is that G-d's reason for commanding the sacrifice of Isaac was not one of justice as it was in the case of Sodom. In the latter case Abraham could express his view that true justice

would not be served by destruction of the city if certain conditions of righteousness could be met; accordingly, he asks G-d to reconsider if those conditions are met. Regarding Isaac, however, G-d mentions nothing about justice; He simply tells Abraham what to do. He has the right to His request: He is the ruler of our life (Sir. 23:1); He gives life and He puts to death (Deut. 32:39). Abraham...knows that G-d, for one of His unsearchable reasons, calls for this.

But we must ask: How does a human being know any of G-d's actions are for "unsearchable reasons" and not out of a commitment to justice? And prayer is not limited to questioning G-d's justice, What about Divine compassion – cannot one pray for mercy? Even in the Sodom episode, Abraham's intercession was not solely focused on the matter of justice; he also sought G-d's mercy. Moses and the later prophets beseech G-d to have compassion – it is one of His revealed characteristics. So why did Abraham not beseech Him regarding Isaac? Furthermore, why can Abraham not claim that such a sacrifice is unjust, even if G-d's reason in calling for it is not from the standpoint of divine justice? Can one not expect Him to abide by a standard of action that a human being with honesty and integrity, upon his deepest soul-searching, concludes is just? Is this not part of the lesson we learn from Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom?

The answer (adding to Dr. Pruss' second answer) appears to be as follows. As we pointed out earlier, to sustain the concept of a genuine test it must be assumed that G-d made absolutely clear to Abraham, beyond the realm of any possible reconsideration, that He desired this particular sacrifice. This includes having made clear that prayer requesting He revoke His command, whether from the standpoint of justice or mercy, would be to no avail. (This would be similar to G-d informing Moses that to further pray to be allowed to enter the land would be a violation of His will.) All other considerations would obfuscate the matter and are to be excluded. The test is simply this: will Abraham be obedient or not.

In addition, and perhaps alternatively, the following is relevant. In Abraham's days the understanding of a

child sacrifice, when deemed to be requested by the Deity, was different from what it was after establishment of the legislation of the Torah. If it was thought that G-d definitely desired the sacrifice of a certain child and communicated that desire to man, it was incumbent on that man to provide it. A prayer or any attempt to spare that child would be selfish and a violation of pure service of the Deity; it would be attempting to provide Him with less than He wanted. He had an absolute right to whatever it was He wanted. And the more valuable, the better the gift!

The test of Abraham with a command to sacrifice his son could only have been conceived before the far-reaching dissemination of the principles of the Torah. Once the tenet of man being created in the image of G-d was recognized, with its implication of the infinite value of each human life, human life was understood to be beyond the reach of another human being. When the categorical imperative of לֹא תִרְצֵחַ ("You shall not murder") was internalized by society, human sacrifice was understood to be a violation of the most fundamental law. G-d could then no longer be conceived of as requesting it. Indeed, He explicitly declared human sacrifice as absolutely prohibited, an abomination, "that which He hates" (Deut. 12:31).

The Torah's principles set in motion major modifications in thought. But it did not happen overnight. Jephthah had no recorded opposition when he sacrificed his daughter in fulfilling his vow to Hashem (Jud. 11:34-40), though there was a lapse of months during which others may have had the opportunity to dissuade him before he carried it out. Times were very different before the widespread promulgation and acceptance of the Torah.

### Endnote

\* The phrase, in an appropriately modified form, is used by Ruth when declaring to Naomi that she was determined to accompany her wherever she goes (Ruth 1:16). *Megillat Ruth* contains a goodly number of allusions to the narratives of Abraham and Isaac, as we point out in our study on the Megillah.