



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Vayera

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## The Akedah or the Binding of Isaac

By Alan Garfunkel

The *akedah* is one of the most widely known and troubling stories in the Torah. Why was this test needed? What did it prove? And most interestingly, why did Abraham acquiesce without strong objection?

Abraham had just negotiated with God to try to save the corrupt people of Gomorrah, and yet when God commanded him to sacrifice his favorite son Isaac, he did not object. Any parent who has had a sick child knows that after praying for the child's recovery, parents ask that if anyone must be taken, take me, the parent, and save the child. "Take me and let my child live." Yet Abraham does not say that. He just prepares to sacrifice Isaac.

While Abraham may hold a special position as the father of monotheism, at first glance, his record as a father may seem a little spotty. He reluctantly banished Ishmael from his household, and then he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac. Yet when Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael lead the funeral. Unfortunately, the Torah does not include their eulogies. What might Ishmael have said? "You kicked my mother and me out of your house, and we almost died." And what might Isaac have said? "You were prepared to sacrifice me, and when my mother found out about it she died."

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The purpose of the *akedah* seems unclear and is a matter of controversy among commentators. Was it really a test of Abraham's belief in God? Probably not, since God already knew Abraham would follow His instructions. It must be something deeper than that. Some view the *akedah* as a triumph of faith in God over the morality of not killing your offspring. While this is correct on its face, it is not a comforting thought. A more satisfying understanding is given by Maimonides: the *akedah* is meant to teach us what we ought to do or believe. That may point us in the right direction.

Maybe God was trying to show us that sacrificing your child, which apparently was not that uncommon in Abraham's time, was not necessary to show belief in God and, in fact, was forbidden. Under this explanation, the *akedah* was not a test but a lesson that God does not accept human sacrifice. Had Abraham refused God's initial instruction to sacrifice Isaac, the Torah would never have been able to teach this valuable lesson.

**Alan** is married to Lori Garfunkel and has lived in the Scarsdale community for a long time. He davens at the early minyan and leaves as soon as services are over, so most people don't know him. He has helped raise 4 children, Jonathan (now Pinchas), Michael (now Moshe), Danielle and Josh. Leading Orthodox authorities in the US advised Alan not to write *divrei Torah*. To quote Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz of blessed memory, "Alan, you will never write a Talmud." [Ed: Alan has a very dry sense of humor.]

## From the Lamm Heritage Archives at Yeshiva University

Condensed from "The Greatest Trial," the 1969 Rosh Hashanah sermon delivered by Rabbi Norman Lamm

אַל-תִּשָּׂא יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעַר וְאֶל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי וְעַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹהִים

*Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God* (Bereshit 22:12)

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, asks: why the emphasis on עַתָּה, *now*? If the binding of Isaac on the *akedah* was the act of sacrifice that marked Abraham as a יִרָא אֱלֹהִים, *a God fearing man*, the statement עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי, *now I know*, should have come earlier, when Abraham bound his son. It is not out of place now that Isaac is saved?

The Kotzker's answer is nothing short of amazing, even shocking. He says that for Abraham to take Isaac off the altar was much harder than for him to offer him up in the first place! It was more painful for Abraham to release Isaac than it was to bind him — that is why the angel said, now I know you are really a יִרָא אֱלֹהִים.

What can the Kotzker mean by this? Certainly not that Abraham had any special pleasure in sacrificing Isaac! To cast Abraham in the role of an idealistic sadist is to misread and undo the entire meaning of the *akedah*.

Rather, the Kotzker presents us with an awesome new interpretation of the *akedah*. It is the nature of man, once he has taken a clear position in life, especially if he has suffered for it, not to retreat from it, but to mold the future along the doctrines of the past in order to vindicate his past. It is part of our normal psychology: what we have invested in time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change, lest we thereby declare that our past has been invalid and inauthentic. Self-justification of our past dictates our future.

Who would have blamed Abraham for turning to God and saying: "God, are You playing with me? Once I had decided to stretch out my hand against my son, the entire story was over for me. Couldn't You tell me before it was only a game?" To be told to release Isaac at the last moment could very well have meant that Abraham, in his own eyes, would henceforth be the eternal fool: the man who hallucinated about God, the man who was ready to do something which he thought noble but which now seemed terrible. The angel's command not to sacrifice Isaac meant that Abraham must be prepared to embrace the role in history of a confused old man rather than, as Kierkegaard called him, "the Knight of God."

The Kotzker was right: binding Isaac on the altar was the act of *akedat Yitzchak*, the sacrifice of Isaac; taking him off was the act of *akedat Avraham*, the sacrifice of Abraham. Abraham said, הֲנִנִּי, "I'm ready," when he was told to stay his hand; without hesitation, he was willing to invalidate his past. We must do no less.

As a rabbi who does counseling as part of his professional duties, I can say that, objectively speaking, most of the personal problems brought to my attention can be solved fairly simply. What causes the most difficulty is self-justification. A wayward husband or a wrong-headed parent or child has followed one way so long that to change would call into question his past wisdom and judgment, and invalidate his character and "image" and reputation. True character requires the courage to admit that, despite best intentions, you were wrong, and must redirect your course of life. That is what the Kotzker is teaching us. That is the true message of the *akedah*.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?*

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