

The Akedah from Isaac's Point of View

Introduction

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read from the Torah about the birth of Isaac. [Genesis 21:1–34] On the second day, we read about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. [Genesis 22:1–24] Let us discuss the second from Isaac’s point of view.

Briefly, the Akedah, or “Binding of Isaac”, is the story of how God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as a test of faith. The Torah says, in Genesis:

וַיְהִי אֶחָד הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי
וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶשְׂרֶה־אֹתוֹ אֶת־יָצֶחֶק וְלֹד־לָךְ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה
עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלַי
And it came to pass... that God tested Abraham, and said to him,
Abraham! And he said, Here I am!
And [God] said, Take now your son, your only son, Isaac, the one you love,
and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon
one of the mountains which I will tell you. [Genesis 22:1-2]

Abraham proceeds as told, but at the last minute, God stops him.

This strange and disturbing story raises many questions. There is no reference to it anywhere else in the Bible. Why, if it's such a defining moment in Judaism? There are no lessons tied specifically to the Akedah. It's just there. What are we supposed to make of it?

We covered these questions in an earlier dvar. Today we will concentrate on Isaac’s point of view of the matter.

Isaac’s perspective

Isaac is a grown man (37), strong enough to prevent the elderly Abraham from tying him up had he wanted to resist. Why didn't he?

-The story is not called “The Testing of Abraham” but “The Binding of Isaac.” This tells us the focus must be on Isaac's acceptance.

The Torah continues, without transition:

So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his lads and his son Isaac. [Gen. 22:3]

The Midrash tells us:

-His two lads were [his son] Ishmael and [his servant] Eliezer. [Leviticus Rabbah 26:7]

-Isaac was 37 and Ishmael was 50...

Ishmael said to Eliezer: Now that Abraham will offer Isaac his son for a burnt offering ... and I am his first-born son, I will inherit from Abraham.

Eliezer replied: He has already driven you out ... but I am his servant ... so I shall be his heir.

The Holy Spirit answered them: Neither this one nor that one shall inherit. [Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 31:5]

Apparently, Abraham had called Ishmael back from exile at some point and made him part of his entourage, even though Sarah was afraid he would be a bad influence on Isaac.

Traditionally, Isaac was as willing to give his life as Abraham was to take it. The Talmud says:

-Ishmael said to Isaac: I am greater than you in [fulfilling] commandments, because you were circumcised at the age of eight days, [without your knowledge and without your consent], but I [was circumcised at the] age of thirteen years, [with both my knowledge and my consent].

-Isaac] said to [Ishmael]: And do you provoke me with one organ? If the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to say to me: Sacrifice yourself before Me, I would sacrifice myself. Immediately, God tried Abraham [to confirm that Isaac was sincere in his offer to give his life]. [Sanh. 89b]

-So, was it Isaac who was being tested?

-Note the mentality of the times. It was considered an honor to be sacrificed to the deity, and children were so taught by parents, teachers and leaders. Isaac was not so taught, but was influenced (by Ishmael?).

-Isaac is passive by nature. His wife Rebecca and son Jacob later manipulate him.

Did Isaac know of his father's plan?

The Torah says:

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"

And he answered, "Here I am, my son."

And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

And Abraham said, "God will see to the lamb for His burnt offering, my son." [Gen. 22:7-8]

Many commentators have argued that Isaac knew what was going on.

Kli Yakar comments:

Suspecting that Abraham intended to sacrifice him, but not realizing it was God's command, Isaac tested him to see whether he still responded to the name "Father."

[By responding] "Here I am, my son", Abraham assured him that he was still his loving father.

[By asking] "But where is the lamb" [Isaac was asking:] If you still love me, what are you planning to offer?

[By answering] "God will see to the lamb" Abraham hinted that [Isaac] was indeed to be the offering, but it was God who had chosen him.

Rabbenu Bahya comments:

Those who argue that Isaac's "sacrifice" was the greater of the two point to the difference between fulfilling a command by God and fulfilling a command by one's father. Abraham, after all, had been commanded to do what he set out to do by God Himself, whereas Isaac had to take his father's word for it that he had been so commanded. If, nonetheless, Isaac did not make an issue of the matter, this demonstrates his absolute faith both in God and in his father.

The Midrash offers a heart-rending account of Abraham and Isaac refusing Satan's intervention:

Satan came and appeared to Abraham as a very old man ... and said to him: Are you a fool or an idiot to do such a thing to your only son? ... God gave him to you in your old age, and now will you go and slaughter him without any wrong action of his part? Do you not know that this order could never have come from the Lord, for the Lord has never done such a great evil as to say to a man to slay his son? And Abraham knew at once that it was Satan attempting to lead him astray, and he rebuked Satan and sent him away.

Satan soon returned and came to Isaac as a young man of good figure and pleasant looks, and said to him: Do you know that your old and

foolish father is carrying you to the slaughter today without any cause? Now, my boy, do not listen to him and do not obey him, for he is old and foolish. Do not suffer your precious life and handsome person to perish from the earth.

When Isaac heard these words he turned to Abraham saying: Have you heard, oh, my father, the words of this man? And Abraham said: Beware of him, my son, pay no attention to him, for that is Satan, resolved to turn us this day from following the commandments of our Lord. And Abraham rebuked Satan once more...

Abraham ... then took Isaac, his son, and bound him in order to slay him. And Isaac cautioned his father, saying: Bind me securely before placing me on the altar, or else I may turn and move about, or even break loose out of fear, and the knife will touch my flesh, thus making the offering invalid. And Abraham did so.

And Isaac further said to his father: Oh, my father, after I am slain and burnt up, take the rest of my ashes to my mother, Sarah, and tell her: This is the pleasant savor of Isaac. But do not tell her this if she is seated near a well or on some high place, lest she cast herself down after me and die.

And when Abraham heard the words of Isaac he lifted up his voice and wept, so that his tears flowed down upon Isaac, his son, and Isaac, too, wept bitterly, and he said unto his father: Make haste, oh my father, and fulfill on me the will of the Lord our God as he has commanded you.

And the hearts of both Abraham and Isaac were full of joy in doing the will of God, but their eyes wept bitterly while their hearts were rejoicing. And Abraham finally bound his son, Isaac, and placed him upon the wood, and Isaac stretched out his neck upon the altar before his father, and Abraham put forth his hand to grasp the knife and slay his son for a burnt offering before the Lord.

In the meantime the angels of mercy assembled before the Lord pleading for Isaac, and saying: Oh Lord, full of mercy and compassion for all your creatures ... give a substitute for Isaac and have mercy and compassion upon Abraham and Isaac, who are today doing your will and command...

And Satan appeared to Sarah as a very humble and lowly old man and said to her: "Do you know what Abraham has done with your only son today? He built an altar and killed him as a burnt offering. Isaac wept and prayed before his father, but he never heeded his cries and he had no mercy upon him." ... And Sarah lifted up her voice and cried bitterly over the loss of her son and exclaimed: Oh, my son, Isaac, oh, my son, would that I had died today in your place!

[Sefer HaYashar Midrash on Genesis, Vayera 18,20,21; also Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 32:8]

-Satan makes relevant points: How did Abraham know it was really God making this demand? How would anyone ever know?

-If Isaac felt as he did, why didn't Abraham inform him of the plan ahead of time? Also, why didn't Abraham inform Sarah, since they were a team and equally devoted to God?

-The Midrash tells us that Sarah died of grief when she heard that Abraham had sacrificed her son Isaac. [Genesis Rabbah 58:5]

Conclusion

Tradition informs us that Isaac knew he was to be sacrificed, accepted it passively and obediently as God's will, and did nothing to oppose it. If there is a hero in this story, some have argued that it must be Isaac. Any way one looks at it, the story is disturbing.

Shabbat shalom and l'shanah tovah .