

## The Binding of Isaac. Why?

This week's Torah portion, *Vayera*, relates the story of when Abraham came close to sacrificing his son Isaac, on God's command, as a test of faith. The Torah says, in Genesis:

And it came to pass... that  
God tested Abraham, and said to him, Abraham!  
And he said, Behold, here I am!  
And he 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 right before Isaac is about to be killed. This is a strange and disturbing story. It is called the '*Akedah*', or 'Binding of Isaac'. It raises many questions. There is no reference to it anywhere else in the Tanach, 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?

First, we are told that God tested Abraham.

So, we ask: Did Abraham pass the test?

The traditional answer is, of course, yes. The Torah says:

And [God] said, "Do not lay your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him;  
for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your  
son, your only son, from me." [Gen. 22:12]

So, since Abraham was willing to sacrifice what he loved most, as a sign of submission to God's will no matter what, as a sign of faith, he must have passed the test. But there are clues in our tradition that suggest that in some respects Abraham failed the test.

-First, he did not ask questions or protest. Previously, in the Torah, we hear Abraham arguing strenuously with God that Sodom should not be destroyed. He extracts a promise from God that Sodom will

not be destroyed if ten righteous people are found there. So Abraham has a record of arguing with God, but here he did not argue.

-Second, right after this story, the Midrash tells us that Isaac's mother, Sarah, died of grief when she heard that Abraham had sacrificed Isaac. [Genesis Rabbah 58:5]

-Third, the Talmud records a tradition that patriarchs followed Jewish law, *halacha*, even before the Torah was given to all, because the Torah says:

Because Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. [Genesis 26:5]

Well, one of the most loathsome practices outlawed by *halacha* is child sacrifice. So Abraham wasn't \*supposed\* to obey, because God's instruction was against *halacha*. To counter this argument, the Talmud asserts the right of a prophet to suspend a law [Sanhedrin 89b-90a]. So, they argue, even murder would have been permissible to Abraham, as an established prophet, if it was really God's will.

-Fourth, God never speaks to Abraham again after the *Akedah*. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin explains that this was because God was unhappy with Abraham for being eager to obey the command to slaughter Isaac. (God can't very well tell Abraham he failed the test, since Abraham was obeying God in the first place, but He can think it!)

In a parallel teaching, the Hassidic masters say that the *Akedah* was punishment for Abraham's mistreatment of his elder son Yishmael, whom he expelled from his household. As Abraham failed to show compassion for his first son, so God punished him by ostensibly failing to show compassion for Abraham's second son.

There are other views. My personal one is that Abraham was stalling, and never intended to kill his son. At the last second, he would have stopped his own hand if God hadn't done it. So Abraham was, in a sense, also testing God. He and God were engaged in a game of chicken, as it were. What evidence do we have for that? Well, we read about Abraham's actions, but we don't know his thoughts. He takes his time, he cuts the wood slowly, he loads his animals slowly, he plods slowly toward the mountains. He hopes that God will

intercede! He never means to kill Isaac. That's why he tells his servants, "The boy and I...will worship and return to you."

Another view is that God never intended to let Abraham actually sacrifice Isaac. The Book of Jeremiah says:

And they have built... high places... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I [God] did not command them; nor did it enter My mind that they should do this. [Jeremiah 7:31]

Rashi interprets this verse as God saying, "Don't think for a moment that I, God, ever had any intention of actually having Abraham kill his son. This never even occurred to Me!"

Abraham Ibn Ezra, from 12<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, records an opinion that Isaac was killed by Abraham then resurrected. Why? Because the Torah says:

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba. [Gen. 22:19]

So Abraham returned together with the young men who accompanied him, but nothing is said of Isaac. However, Ibn Ezra himself rejects that view.

Many insightful observations have been put forth on the *Akedah*. Here are some of them.

-First, the *Akedah* refers to Jewish martyrdom. The Jewish people must be ready at all times to give up life itself *l'kiddush Ha-Shem*, for the sake of the sanctification of God's name.

-Second, if you place yourself or your children in harm's way for a higher cause (for example, by going to war, going on a risky mission, or just living in antisemitic societies), are you not doing essentially what Abraham did?

The Talmud tells the story of a woman who had seven sons. All seven were tortured to death rather than bow to an idol as commanded:

She said to [her last son, before he was killed]: My son, go and say to your father Abraham, "You did bind one [of your sons] to the altar, but I have bound [all seven of my sons to] seven altars [and they, unlike your son, did not survive!]." [Gittin 57b]

Was this different from the *Akedah*? To this one may answer: Yes, because we see a purpose. Did Abraham see a purpose?

-Third, does God really test us all the time? The Book of Job elaborates on that. Is our evil inclination, our *yetzer hara'*, a perpetual “test”?

-Fourth, was Abraham “just following orders”? Is that OK?

-Fifth, how did Abraham know it was really God making this demand? How would anyone ever know?

-Sixth, why is such a premium placed on faith, without proof, when we were given a mind that asks for proof?

-Seventh, Maimonides, in his Guide of the Perplexed, says:

“God tested Abraham” does not mean that God put Abraham through a test, but that God made the example of Abraham serve as a test case of the extreme limits of the love and fear of God. [Rambam, Guide of the Perplexed, 3.24]

-Eighth, the *shofar*, or ram's horn, is to remind us of the ram that was substituted for Isaac. That is why the story of the *Akedah* is always read on Rosh Hashanah.

-Finally, the Sages tell us that Isaac was really a grown man, strong enough to prevent the elderly Abraham from tying him up if he had wanted to resist. Why didn't he resist? Note that the story isn't called “The Testing of Abraham”, but “The Binding of Isaac”, so we must focus on Isaac's acceptance of his fate.

Perhaps that is the lesson of the *Akedah*: Acceptance of bad things, after doing all we can to avoid them, in spite of not understanding the reasons, with faith that in some mysterious fashion it's all for the best, and moving on with our lives to build a better tomorrow.

Shabbat shalom.