

Fri 14 Sep 2007 (2nd day of Rosh Hashanah), 8-10am
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Congregation Adat Reyim
Torah discussion

The Akedah

-No reference to Akedah anywhere else in Tanach. Why, if it's such a defining moment? Best forgotten?

No lessons are specifically tied to the Akedah. It's just there. What are we supposed to make of it?

God tests Abraham. Did Abraham pass?

YES

Traditional answer. He was willing to sacrifice what he loved most

-Submission to God's will no matter what, as a sign of faith.

NO

He should have protested (as he did before Sodom was destroyed)

Clues on why he failed:

-Right after this story, Sarah died

-Midrash: She died of grief when she heard that Abraham had sacrificed Isaac [Genesis Rabbah 58:5]

-Talmud: Tradition holds that patriarchs followed halacha:

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

Child sacrifice most loathsome practice outlawed by halacha, so Abraham wasn't *supposed* to obey because God's instruction was against halacha

BUT: Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b: The Akedah reflects right of a prophet to suspend a law. Even murder OK for Abraham, as an established prophet, if really God's will.

-God never speaks to Abraham again

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin: Because God was unhappy with Abraham for being eager to obey the command to slaughter Isaac.

-Hassidic masters: Akedah is punishment for Abraham's mistreatment of his elder son Yishmael (whom he expelled from his household).

As Abraham failed to show compassion for his son, so God punished him by ostensibly failing to show compassion for Abraham's son.

Other views

-Abraham was stalling. At last second, he would have stopped his own hand if the angel hadn't done it.

So Abraham was also testing God. He and God were engaged in a game of chicken, and it was God who blinked.

-We can read about Abraham's actions, but we don't know his thoughts. (Takes his time, cuts wood slowly, loads his animals slowly, plods slowly toward mountains. He hopes that God will intercede! He never means to kill Isaac; that's why he told his servants, "the boy and I...will worship and return to you.")

-God never intended to let Abraham actually sacrifice Isaac. (Meaning of 'test'.) Rashi says Jeremiah 7:31 alludes to the Akedah:

-And they have built ... high places ... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this. ["lo alta al libi," meaning "it didn't go up on my heart."]

i.e., don't think for a moment that I ever had any intention of actually having Abraham kill his son, this never even occurred to me!

-Abraham is said to have returned together with the lads who accompanied him, but nothing is said of Isaac. Abraham Ibn Ezra (12th century Spain) records an opinion that Isaac was killed by Abraham then resurrected. (Ibn Ezra rejects that view.)

Observations

-Akedah refers to Jewish martyrdom; the Jewish people are ready at all times to give up life itself for the sake of the sanctification of the divine name (Kiddush Ha-Shem).

-If you place your children (or yourself) in harm's way for a higher cause (war, risky mission, just living in antisemitic societies, etc.), are you not doing essentially what Abraham did?

-Answer: You see a purpose. Did Abraham see a purpose?

-Does God really test us all the time? (Book of Job). Is the yetzer hara' a perpetual "test"?

-Was Abraham 'just following orders'? Is that OK?

-How did Abraham know (how do we ever know) it was really God making this demand?

-Why is such a premium placed on faith (without proof), when we have a mind that asks for proof?

-Rambam (Guide of the Perplexed, 3. 24): "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.

-Shofar (ram's horn) is to remind us of the ram that was substituted for Isaac

-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 isn't called "The Testing of Abraham", but "The Binding of Isaac."
Focus must be on Isaac's acceptance

-Muslims celebrate the Akedah: Eid al-Adha (4 days); substitute Ishmael for Isaac! (In Egypt, also called Eid el Kebir - the Big Holiday.) Dress well, sacrifice and eat best animals, give to poor, visit relatives. Comes after period of pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).

-Woman and her Seven Sons (2Macc), every one of whom suffered death by torture rather than bow to the idol. Woman enjoins her last son:

Go and tell Father Abraham: Let not your heart swell with pride! You built one altar, but I have built seven altars and on them have offered up my seven sons. What is more: Yours was a trial; mine was an accomplished fact! (Yal. Deut. 26).

Parallel passage in Talmud (Gittin 57b):

She said to him: My son, go and say to your father Abraham, You did bind one [son to the] altar, but I have bound seven altars. Then she also went up on to a roof and threw herself down and was killed. A voice thereupon came forth from heaven saying, A joyful mother of children.

Related Quotes

Torah on Akedah - Genesis 22

1. And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, Abraham; and he said, Behold, here I am.
2. And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom 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.
3. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him.
4. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away.
5. And Abraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you.
6. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.
7. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?
8. And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; so they went both of them together.
9. And they came to the place which God had told him; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.
10. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.
11. And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham; and he said, Here am I.
12. And he said, Lay not 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.
13. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son.
14. And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of the Lord it shall be seen.
15. And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven the second time,
16. And said, By myself have I sworn, said the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son;
17. That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;
18. And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice.
19. So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

Midrash - Genesis Rabbah 58:5

5. AND ABRAHAM CAME TO MOURN FOR SARAH (XXIII, 2). Whence did he come? R. Levi said: He came from Terah's funeral to that of Sarah. Said R. Jose to him: But Terah's burial preceded Sarah's by two years?' In fact he came from Mount Moriah, (Sarah having died of grief. Therefore the account of Isaac's binding comes close to the passage, AND THE LIFE OF SARAH WAS, etc.).

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Jephthah's daughter - Judges 11

30. And Jephthah vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, If you shall without fail deliver the Ammonites into my hands,

31. Then it shall be, that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the Ammonites, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

32. So Jephthah passed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord delivered them into his hands...

34. And Jephthah came to Mizpah to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances; and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter.

35. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back.

36. And she said to him, My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has come from your mouth; seeing that the Lord has taken vengeance for you of your enemies, of the Ammonites.

37. (K) And she said to her father, Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my friends.

38. And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her companions, and wept for her virginity upon the mountains.

39. And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel,

40. That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.
