

Parshat Vayera 5779

The dual challenge of the Akeida

The story of the Akeida (chapter 22) begins with the words, *“And it happened after these things...”* This suggests that the story is connected in some way to the preceding chapter. However, in the preceding chapter we find two narratives, the banishing of Yishmael and the forging of the covenant between Avraham and Avimelech. We must therefore ascertain which of these two events is alluded to in the opening pasuk of the Akeida story.

Close examination of the text would seem to indicate that the episode that the Akeida is said to follow is the banishing of Yishmael. This conclusion is based on several thematic and linguistic connections between them:

1. In both stories, Avraham is required to part from a son.
2. In both instances, he fulfils Hashem’s command early in the morning: *“And Avraham got up early in the morning...”* (21:14; 22:3)
3. In each instance, the son, referred to as a *“lad” (na’ar)*, faces mortal danger, but is ultimately saved.
4. These are the only two stories in which we find an angel calling *“from the heavens”* (21:17; 22:11-15). The angels described in Biblical narratives are more commonly found on earth.
5. In both instances, following the call of the angel, something new is perceived: *“And Hashem opened her [Hagar’s] eyes, and she saw a well of water”* (21:19); *“And Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns”* (22:13).
6. There is a Divine promise that the lad in each story will become *“a great nation”* (21:18) or have a multitude of descendants (22:17).
7. The conclusion of each narrative points in the direction of marriage. In Yishmael’s case, there is explicit mention of marriage (21:21), while the genealogy presented at the end of the story of the Akeida hints to the future marriage between Yitzchak and Rivka (22:23).

The connections between the two stories would seem to emphasize the difficulty of the test that Avraham faces. Hashem’s command to him includes four different references to Yitzchak: *“Take, now, 1) your son, 2) your only one, 3) whom you love – 4) Yitzchak.”*

The pasuk emphasizes two different dimensions of the test. First of all, there is the difficult demand made of Avraham, as a father, to sacrifice his beloved son. In addition, there is the fact that Yitzchak is his “only one,” which itself presents a dual challenge. On the practical

level, if his only son dies, Avraham himself will be left with no continuation in this world, and this amplifies his personal anguish.

In the realm of faith, the challenge might be summed up as the apparent contradiction between Yitzchak as his only son and the promise made to him in the previous chapter – *“for through Yitzchak shall your seed be called”* – which was also the basis for banishing Yishmael. How does Avraham deal with this dual challenge? In keeping with the dual aspect of Hashem’s command to him, his response also seems to display a certain duality. While he accepts the command and is willing to carry it out in full, he appears to maintain his belief that the monumental contradiction between the promises he had received thus far and this new command will somehow be resolved, and that through Yitzchak he will indeed merit a multitude of descendants.

Towards the end of the story of the Akeida, at the dramatic moment when Avraham is about to offer up Yitzchak, the angel is revealed to Avraham: *And an angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven and said, “Avraham, Avraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”* (22:11).

This call to Avraham is doubled: *“Avraham, Avraham!”* It seems that one call would not have been enough. For the third time in this narrative, Avraham answers, *“Hineni,”* expressing his commitment, beyond any personal consideration, to whatever Hashem will now ask of him. Now Avraham is granted the resolution to the great contradiction: *“And he said, “Do not lay your hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him, for now I know that you fear Hashem, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”* (22:12). Once again, we are reminded that the test was a dual one: *“your son, your only son.”* But now Avraham is told that it was only a test; it was never meant to be given practical expression.

Let us now return to the parallel with which we began, between the Akeida and the banishment of Yishmael, which serves to demonstrate the sharp contrast between Avraham and Hagar. In contrast to Avraham, Hagar had an explicit promise from the angel in chapter 16 assuring her: *“I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude”*. Nevertheless, Hagar does not maintain her faith, as Avraham does. Rather, she later falls into complete despair: *“She went and sat herself down at a distance, some bowshots away, for she said, “Let me not see the death of the child.” And she at a distance, and lifted up her voice, and wept”*. (21:16). The angel tells Hagar, *“Arise, lift up the lad and hold him in your hand, for I will make a great nation of him”* (21:18). This is meant as a rebuke; she should never have cast him down and distanced herself from him. She should have remained next to him, as indeed Avraham did in the episode of the Akeida.