

Rosh Hashanah 5770

Kol Sasson

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And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him: 'Avraham'; and Avraham said: 'Here I am.' And God said: 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go into the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of.'

And Avraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven and said: 'Avraham, Avraham.' and Avraham said: 'Here I am.' And the angel said: 'Do not lay your hand upon the lad, don't do a thing to him, for now I know that you are a God-fearing-man, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'

Genesis, Chapter X, Verses 1-2 and 10-12

Is there a more dreadful story in the Bible?
What parent reads these words and thinks
Avraham did the right thing? This Avraham,
this giant of a man, who begged God to spare
the worthless citizens of Sodom, this Avraham,
this father of us all, did not utter a word
of protest to try to save his only son, the son
of his old age, the son whom he loved, Yitzchak.
Torah scholars, searching for meaning,
tell us: This is the faith to which we must
aspire. Unshakable faith. Unquestioning faith.
Faith primordial. Faith eternal. Merciless faith.
Murderous faith. Don't ask me to be faithful,
for all I see is Avraham, pressing the knife
against his son's throat. I imagine myself,
at that moment, standing over my own son.
The knife in my hand is hot, radioactive,
and deep within me cancer cells spontaneously form
in mitotic frenzy. I am dying from the inside out,
and yet I know salvation is at hand. *In my hand.*
With a flick of the knife in my hand, I can save
this miserable world, I can save my miserable self.
With a faithful flick of the knife, my troubles will end,
for all God needs to know is that I am a "God-fearing-man."
The decision, I realize, is obvious, and before the angel
can stop me, I plunge the knife into my broken heart.
Falling to my knees, my bound child's awful cry
the last sound I will hear on this earth, I try to speak the
defiant words that do not come:

"Here I am. Here I am."

I am hardly the first Jew to write an angry poem about the Akeidah. In fact, there is a canon of such poetry, as well as stories, essays, fiction, rabbinic responsa, prayers, and midrashim going back to Mishnaic times and continuing through every generation thereafter, including into our own. The central theme connecting them all is the portrayal of the Akeidah as a metaphor for Jewish suffering. The suffering of Avraham and Yitzchak, the suffering of Sarah, even the suffering of the ram that replaced Yitzchak on the sacrificial altar; all this suffering foreshadows the seemingly endless physical and existential trials that God imposes upon His people.

And if you think my poem is a harsh indictment of Avraham, consider the derisive words of Israeli poet Yitzchak Laor in his poem “This Fool, Yitzchak”:

Pity the sacrifice? The commandments? The donkey?
Trust such a father? Who would get up early to kill him.
Let him lock his father up
His only one, Avraham, in a prison,
In a mental hospital, in the basement of the house...
Remember what your father did to Ishmael, your brother.

Or another Israeli poet, Azila Talit-Reisenberger in her poem, “In the Wake of Yitzchak’s Sacrifice”:

He who justifies Avraham the just;
“Oh, he merely followed an order”
Let him know, I forfeit this forefather
Mine is a private one,
A dad who gave me life, never asked it back as a sacrifice
A dad who believes that even a small cog, steadfast
Can bring a mighty machine to a halt.

Or, the well-known section from Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir, *Night*, in which God's righteousness and integrity are questioned. As Wiesel and a group of Jewish prisoners arrive at Auschwitz, unaware of what they are about to experience, one of the women prisoners, delirious, screams: "Jews, listen to me, I can see a fire! There are flames, it is a furnace!" And later, when the horror of the camp is revealed, Wiesel, in a unmistakable allusion to the Akeidah story says, "Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever...I did not deny God's existence, but I doubt his absolute justice." Even more damning, is one prisoner's dismissive comment about faith in the camps: "I've got more faith in Hitler than anyone else. He's the only one who has kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people."

These are but a few examples of how deeply felt and deeply embedded in the collective Jewish consciousness are the lessons of the Akeidah. As Jews, we learn from the time we are little children that God chose us to be His people, and that if we are faithful to Him, He will sustain and protect us, and we shall be holy, a light unto the nations. And yet, even as people of faith, we cannot escape the troubling questions that the Akeidah raises. For example: How can a just God require Avraham to murder his son? Why does an omniscient God need to test Avraham, since he knows exactly what Avraham will do? Why did God promise Avraham that He will make the Jews a great and powerful nation, numerous as the stars, and then threaten to undermine it all by eliminating the next link in the generational chain? And what of God's cruelty to Sarah; can any mother be expected to survive the shock of hearing that her husband has murdered their son?

But for me, as the father of sons, the central question isn't as much about whether God has the right to act as He chooses—after all, He's God, He can do whatever He wants—but, what most troubles me, is Avraham's complete acquiescence to the murder of his beloved son.

I simply cannot comprehend Avraham's passivity, his utter lack of emotion. The Torah text should read: "And when Avraham understood what God was asking of him, that he was to bind Yitzchak on an altar, slaughter him like an animal, and then set his lifeless body on fire; when Avraham understood all of this, he pleaded with God for mercy and when God refused to reconsider, Avraham got sick to his stomach, he fell to the ground, and wailed throughout the

night.” But instead, we are told: “Vayashkem Avraham ba-boker”—“Avraham woke early,” so as not to tarry from the sacred, bloody task.

Avraham’s equanimity is especially inexplicable to me, because I am certain my own father would not have accepted such an evil decree. My dad would have argued, he would have begged. He would have flung himself onto the altar in my place. Unlike Avraham, my father would have tried to protect me. And this is how it should be. A boy needs to believe that his dad can save him from any calamity, though we fathers know, in this world, the notion that parents can shield their children by force of love, is an illusion.

But our Avraham accedes to God’s demand, never wavering from his awful mission. In fact, one of the many midrashim associated with the Akeidah tells us that Satan repeatedly tries to convince Avraham to turn back during the three-day journey to Moriah. Among his insidious tactics, Satan taunts him, “You will have to return to Sarah and tell her that you have murdered her son. It will be the death of her.” In the list of burdens the Akeidah imposed upon Avraham, this was perhaps most onerous, for he knew Satan was right. His wife would not survive the news, and her blood, as well as Yitzchak’s, would stain Avraham for eternity.

Yet Avraham’s resolve is only strengthened with every challenge. We are even told, in another midrash, that when Avraham presses the knife against Yitzchak’s neck, both he and Yitzchak cry tears of joy; so privileged do they feel to be given the opportunity to obey the divine decree. The angels watch this heartbreaking scene, and cannot hold back their own tears, which fall into Yitzchak’s eyes. They plead with God, saying the words that Avraham cannot: “Master of the Universe, didn’t Avraham glorify Your name as You demanded? Didn’t You restore Sarah’s fertility to create a line of succession? Didn’t You promise Avraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars? Please, call this off, before it is too late!” According to the midrash, it was at that instant God instructed one of the angels to call out “Avraham, Avraham,” and it was over.

But fathers of sons know that it is never really over; the danger, that is. We bring our boys into the world, spilling our love onto them like some holy, anointing oil. They are new and improved versions of us, or so we hope. We want to recreate ourselves in these unknowing, unsuspecting creatures, who will desperately want to believe that their fathers are supermen.

But, we are not, of course. And even though we love our boys more than our own precious selves, even though we'd do anything for them, sometimes a father is powerless as compared to the forces of nature and the randomness of chance. Sometimes, sons are in the wrong place at the wrong time, sometimes they get sick, sometimes they are soldiers lost in battle, sometimes they are simply lost, and there is nothing a father can do, but wonder what went wrong.

And therein lies the central message of the Akeidah. Life and knife are one, and the blade rests precariously against all of our necks. We sense its presence, and hope that angels intercede on our behalf, but no human or celestial appeal for mercy really affects the final outcome. God's plan for the world exists beyond the scope of human imagination or comprehension, and the best we can hope for is to please Him in the short time we are granted in this world. While no one can ever know why God demands sacrifices, when the time comes to present an offering, we can see it as an opportunity to satisfy the meaning of our existence.

Soren Kierkegaard, the 20th century Danish philosopher, wrote about the Akeidah in his book *Fear and Trembling*. He, too, was troubled by Avraham's seeming indifference to being asked to perform what he must have believed to be an immoral act. Kierkegaard suggests a surprisingly satisfying explanation: Avraham had what Kierkegaard calls an "absurd" faith, believing that if God wants him to sacrifice Yitzchak then that is what he must do, but at the same time believing, with complete conviction, that God could never allow him to carry out the act. In Kierkegaard's absurd faith, these two seemingly irreconcilable outcomes can co-exist. To Avraham, the manner in which God would end the drama was irrelevant; all that mattered were the realities of God's command, God's moral character, and Avraham's unassailable belief that the two would never be in contradiction.

Such faith does seem absurd, impossible even, but it does help to explain that which seems inexplicable. Instead of faith borne out of love, gratitude, intellect, loyalty or fear, perhaps it is absurd faith to which we ought aspire; specifically, faith in a world filled with infinite possibilities.

A few Decembers ago, we were in Israel on vacation, and I had my own encounter with faith and its absurdities. We were in Mitzpeh Ramon to see the machtesh. A massive hole in the ground, 28 miles long by 5 miles wide, it is an absurd reminder of God's omnipotence. But as impressive as the machtesh is, something happened in our small hotel room the night before we descended into the crater that moved me as no scene in nature ever could. As a father of sons, the absurdity of that evening's events and the realization that God, in his unfathomable wisdom, has created this world for us, took hold of me and, of course, led me to write a poem. It's called *Watching a Football Game Before Dawn With My 10-Year-Old Son*.

At 3:30, I wake Joshua and turn on the TV
in our small hotel room, just outside the Ramon Crater.
We have traveled thousands of miles to see this hole,
the product of 300 million years of inexorable forces.

In a few hours we will be deep inside, beneath
the shadows of limestone walls, looking for fresh dung,
hoping to see a gazelle climbing the sheer cliffs,
to snap its picture, to capture a moment of grace.

But now, a satellite dish, defying the remoteness
of this place, and with no respect for time zones
or circadian rhythms, beams the Chicago Bears and
Atlanta Falcons onto the television screen.

Joshua climbs into bed with me, his bare feet cold.
I should say a prayer. I should thank God for
bringing me to this moment, for this world of wonders:
for the crater, for the gazelle, for satellite television.

But my son's toes are cold, and the game is starting.
Perhaps I will pray later. Perhaps I will write a poem.

As we enter the Year 5770, let us pray for the best of everything: health, happiness, prosperity, poetry, peace. And let us pray for our faith. In an absurd world, we are lost without it.