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בס"ד

## Parashat Vayera Part III Testing Abraham: The `Aqeda

### 1. Backdrop

Abraham had strongly disagreed with Sarah's request to "send away this maid and her son," that is Yishma'el, Abraham's son by Hagar, "because the son of this maid should not inherit with my son, with Yishaq" (Gen. 21:10). Indeed, "the matter was exceedingly bad in Abraham's view," but G-d intervened, instructing him to comply with Sarah's request, "for through Yishaq shall seed be called to you" (v. 12). Undoubtedly with great pain, Abraham disinherits and sends away Ishmael for the benefit of Yishaq. Though the text does not comment on it, the reader is aware that Abraham has withstood a great test. Subsequently, G-d tests him with the ultimate test, "take your son, your singular one, whom you love, Yishaq, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering" (22:2).

These two narratives concerning Abraham's sons are separated by one passage, introduced with "At that time" (21:22), a phrase that reflects the relevancy of the passage to its specific location in the text. The local king Abimelech, in the presence of His chief of the military, expresses to Abraham his concern for the welfare of his children and descendants and for the future of the inhabitants of the region. He acknowledges that Abraham has been successful and has become an important factor in the region. Accordingly, he requests that Abraham take an oath that he, of course standing for his progeny, would deal kindly with the future generations of Abimelech and of the local populace. How ironic that right after disinheriting Yishma'el and just before G-d commands him to sacrifice Yishaq, Abraham is finally told that he and his children were accepted as a permanent presence in the land and that the king

desires assurance from him concerning the treatment his children will give them.

The text does not specify Yishaq's age at the `aqeda. Ibn Ezra compellingly argues that the Midrash that states he was then thirty-seven years of age cannot be *peshat*. Had Yishaq been an adult his own perspective would have had to be taken into account; the text would have noted his submission to G-d's command and he would have been directly included in the statements of prominent recognition and reward. Ibn Ezra also rejects the opinion that Yishaq was about five years of age for he then would not have been able to carry the firewood. He presumes he was a pre-teen. However, the previous considerations would also apply to a pre-teen. From the tenor of the narrative, especially as Yishaq did not ask about the lack of a sheep for the burnt-offering until the third day when alone with his father, he surely does not appear to be much more than five or six years of age.

The test is transmitted with the words *קח נא את בנך*, which may be translated, "take, please, your son," leading some commentators, trying to soften the harshness of G-d's order, to assume that it is not a standard command but an expression of G-d's desire, a preference He has. Some understand Rashi (based on BT *San.* 89b) in this manner. "Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt" (Sarna, JPS Commentary, p. 151). Passing the test, presumably, is that much greater. However, it is not at all clear that even with such an understanding G-d's preference and request is not a command, since it nonetheless expresses G-d's desire, and that is what counts. Non-compliance would still stigmatize the individual as not possessing the highest level commitment.

In any event, the particle “*na*” is probably employed as a matter of courteous speech, suitable even when giving a command; it does not necessarily indicate an optional dimension. Indeed, the more difficult the demand one is making of another, especially when addressing a “friend,” the more a gentle expression is appropriate; it informs the recipient that the order does not stem from personal ill-feeling. In addition, “*na*” is also used in other senses, taking the meaning of “now,” or to call attention to the importance of what is being stated, such as when Moshe said to the people, “*shim`u na hamorim*” - “listen now you rebels” (Num. 20:10). Thus, it does not appear indicated to complicate the dilemma presented to Abraham with the concept of an optional choice and open the issue of evaluation of his decision.

## 2. Formulation

The order to sacrifice Yishaq is formulated with use of the phrase “*לך לך*” (“go you forth”), recalling G-d’s opening instructions to Abraham that began with that phrase (Gen. 12:1). These are the only two “*לך לך*” attestations in Tanakh. The linkage between the two is extensive with many artistic devices, including correspondences of both chiasmus and parallels.

In both cases “*lekh lekha*” is attached to a cluster of terms that progressively point to the magnitude of the challenge: “go you forth from your land, your kinfolk and your father’s home” in the first case and “take your son, your singular one, that you love, Yishaq, and go you forth” in our case. In the first statement, the phrase “go you forth” precedes the multiple terms of progression, while in the later one the “go you forth” follows the multiple terms. In both cases, with the “*lekh lekha*” G-d directed Abraham to an unknown destination, either that He “will show him” (with the first *lekh lekha*) or that “He will tell him” (with our *lekh lekha*). The concluding blessings in our passage reflect the blessings associated with the other *lekh lekha*.

The first “*lekh lekha*” passage follows the genealogy that traced Abraham’s forbears while the second “*lekh lekha*” passage precedes that genealogy’s continuation, tracing the progeny of Abraham’s brother Nahor. The latter, most significantly, culminates with the birth of Ribqah, who was destined

for Yishaq, thereby preparing the transition to the second generation. With the first test Abraham was to sever himself from his past to build a glorious future while the last test required that he do away with any hope for that future.

Thus, an envelope is formed around the life saga of Abraham. After passing the climactic *`aqeda* test there are only concluding narratives: the death and burial of Sarah, finding a wife for Yishaq and brief statements summarizing details of Abraham’s later life. Significantly, no further Divine communication to him is recorded.

## 3. Concerning the Test

In the passage’s first verse, before the command is articulated, the reader is informed that what follows is a test; there is to be no misunderstanding even for an instant that the Deity may possibly have truly desired a human sacrifice.

The classical commentators have questioned the concept of G-d testing man; does He not know man’s inner thoughts, making a test unnecessary? In our case some have suggested that the test was intended to provide proof to others of the extent of Abraham’s commitment to G-d’s command or to reveal to Abraham himself the depth of his faith.

The more straightforward explanation, however, appears to be connected to the principle that G-d granted man free will. To sustain that principle while acknowledging G-d’s prescience many have posited an accompanying corollary. In His creation of man, G-d chose to limit His foreknowledge in areas governed by that free will and discover how man acts only when he actually exercises his choice. So although Abraham led an exemplary life up to the time of the test, G-d did not know how he would act in the most extreme of cases such as the *`aqeda* represents. As Satan said to G-d in the allegory at the beginning of the Book of Job regarding that exemplary individual whom G-d considered “My servant...blameless and upright...”: “Is it for no reason that Job fears G-d? Do You not protect him, his household and all that he has all about; the work of his hands You have blessed and his possessions have increased in the land!” (Job:1:9-11).

Not knowing that he was being tested, what could have been going through Abraham's mind? Beyond feelings stemming from his personal love for his son, the considerations of justice for an innocent child who did not deserve to die, who would have to submit to the cruel fate of being slaughtered at the hands of his father at the request of G-d, renders the situation impossible to comprehend. The single son from Sarah, for whom Abraham had faithfully waited so long, whose birth was miraculous and regarding whom G-d promised that he would carry on the Covenant and transmit it to his progeny, who was to be the vehicle to bring the repeated Divine assurances of blessing to the new nation and to the world, should now be turned into ashes? G-d cannot be renegeing on His commitments!

But all such thoughts and questions had to be suppressed, for Abraham knew, absolutely knew without a doubt, that G-d was asking for the sacrifice of his son. To make the test valid we must posit that G-d had made it absolutely clear to Abraham that He wanted Yishaq sacrificed.

The site of the sacrifice required a three-day trip. In this way Abraham had the opportunity to thoroughly review and mull over his situation and cannot be thought to be reacting without due consideration.

Is it possible that Abraham had an inkling that somehow, though without any idea how, after all, things might turn out all right, silently hoping, because he knows he is fulfilling the Deity's will and the Deity is compassionate and just? Abraham's instructions to the servants to remain with the donkey while he and the lad will worship, "and we will return to you," gives us some slight indication of this. Likewise, his answer to Yishaq's poignant question, "father...where is the sheep for the *'olah*?" with "G-d will see for Himself the sheep for the *'olah*, my son." Perhaps even his deportment, steadily moving forward without the slightest hesitation, suggest this. But it can be no more than an inkling, connected to recognition of the human incapacity to fathom G-d's ways.

Consistent with Biblical style, details of the agony of father and son, Abraham's inner thoughts as well as considerations of Sarah and her reaction, are all left to the reader's imagination. Through artistic use of such and many other literary devices this narrative is

considered a leading instance of exquisitely portraying a man of faith remaining resolute in his commitment to G-d in the face of the most wrenching temptation to deviate.

When Abraham passed this test, G-d strengthens and expands His previous promises of blessing to him, for his progeny as well as to all the nations. For the first time, G-d explicitly made an oath to give him the blessings. (Although the previous covenantal commitments implied an oath, an explicit declaration to that effect surely adds a dimension to it.) The blessing of progeny is made more comprehensive by formulating it for the first time with comparison to both the stars of heaven and the sand by the seashore. Abraham is now told that his progeny will possess the gates of its enemies, thus sharpening the focus of previous generalities. The foundation of the blessings is now broadened; whereas previously it was conceived as resulting only from the standpoint of a Divine purpose, now it was expressly linked to Abraham's having obeyed G-d's voice *עָקַב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעַתָּ* *בְּקוֹלִי* (Gen. 22:17-18). The cluster of G-d's intensified blessings serves to increase His involvement in fulfillment of the vision than otherwise would have been, helping Abraham and his progeny overcome unpredictable happenings.

#### 4. A Question

Why did Abraham not beg G-d to spare his son as he did on behalf of the people of Sodom when he heard of the impending decree upon them? (Gen. 18:23-32). Why did he not argue as he did then that, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

First, it must be stated that it is unacceptable to interpret the passage as implying that G-d considered Abraham's response to sacrifice his son as less than ideal, that the test was to see if Abraham would protest and resist. Clearly, the test was to see if he would be obedient and proceed. G-d's praise of Abraham upon stopping him at the last moment emphasizes that point and the immediately following expansion of the promises to him are consistent only with such a basic understanding.

Some assume that Abraham did pray that G-d should reconsider His command, but was rejected; it was not

mentioned in the text because it was something that should be taken for granted. When Moshe reveals that he had prayed to be allowed to enter the Promised Land, he quotes G-d having told him, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!" (Deut. 3:23-26, NJPS). Evidently, he had previously been praying for rescission of the decree and was refused although the text had not mentioned it. Had he not seen fit to inform Israel of this matter shortly before his death for whatever reason he did it would not have been mentioned in the Torah!

However, the cases are different. The decree concerning Moshe was punishment for his sin, a matter he acknowledged and could resign himself to. Had Abraham prayed for G-d to spare Yishaq, an innocent child, and been rejected, it would have been a relevant detail that the narrative would reveal.

In Judaic Seminar (2:2), Alexander Pruss addresses our question and presents two possible answers.

1) Through his interaction with G-d in the Sodom case, "Abraham has come to a fuller understanding of divine justice. He now knows that G-d's punitive action is precise: it does not sweep the innocent with the wicked. He understands and believes more fully that G-d is just." G-d had never intended to kill the righteous with the wicked, it was only Abraham's lack of knowledge of G-d's justice that prompted him to intercede. When subsequently G-d asks him to sacrifice Yishaq he does not intercede, since he "by then knows that G-d's will is not contrary to justice..., he can trust that the command is good even if it does not seem to be so at first sight." Intercession "would have been a sign of doubt in G-d's justice," subject to criticism.

However, this approach does not appear to reflect the straightforward meaning of the text that narrates the episode of Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom, nor its context or implied meaning. As explained in our Vayera Part I study, it appears that G-d wanted Abraham to pray, and hinted as much, similar to the case with Moshe after the golden calf episode. And the significance of the lengthy dialogue of Abraham's intercession does not appear to be limited to an educative session but a real argument that Abraham proffers and that G-d accepts. G-d's

introductory communication to Abraham regarding His plans could have included the statement that if there are ten righteous men I won't destroy the city, teaching a lesson about justice, but that was not G-d's plan. G-d's responses to Abraham on the progressively lower numbers of righteous that would be required to save the city seem to be concessions to the prayer. Abraham achieves a tempering of divine justice with his prayer.

As the narrative is presented, at the point of Abraham's prayer G-d is in the "investigative" mode, so it cannot be asked, "Does He not know if there are fifty righteous men in the city?" With their prayers, later prophets mitigate the severity of G-d's retributive intentions, as depicted throughout Scriptures, such as, "I threw myself down before Hashem as the first time... for ... He was going to destroy you, and Hashem heeded me that time also" (Deut. 9:18-19). That is part of the mystery of how the world is governed. To allow prayer to have meaning and real impact G-d must not conduct the world the same way with or without it.

2) Dr. Pruss' second answer is that G-d's reason for commanding the sacrifice of Yishaq was not one of justice as it was in the case of Sodom. In the latter case Abraham could express his view that true justice would not be served if certain conditions of wickedness would not be met and he asks G-d to reconsider to a certain degree. Regarding Yishaq, however, G-d mentions nothing about justice; He simply tells Abraham what to do. He has the right to His request, "He is the ruler of our life (Sirach 23:1); He gives life and He puts to death (Deut. 32:39). Abraham... knows that G-d, for one of His unsearchable reasons, calls for this."

But how does a human being know any of G-d's actions are for "unsearchable reasons" and not out of a commitment to justice? And prayer is not limited to questioning G-d's justice, what about Divine compassion, cannot one pray for mercy? Even in the Sodom episode, Abraham's intercession was not solely focused on the matter of justice; it also had a component of requesting compassion. Moshe and the later prophets beseech G-d to have compassion; it is one of His revealed characteristics. So why did Abraham not so beseech Him? Furthermore, why can

Abraham not claim that such a sacrifice is unjust, even if G-d's reason in calling for it is not from the standpoint of Divine justice? Can one not expect Him to abide by a standard of action that a human being with honesty and integrity, upon his deepest soul-searching, concludes is just? Is this not part of the lesson we learn from Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom?

The answer (adding to Dr. Pruss' second answer) appears to be as follows. As we pointed out earlier, to sustain the concept of a genuine test it must be assumed that G-d made absolutely clear to Abraham, beyond the realm of any possible reconsideration, that He desired this particular sacrifice. This includes having made clear that prayer to countermand His command, whether from the standpoint of justice or mercy, would be to no avail. (This would be similar to G-d informing Moshe that to further pray to be allowed to enter the land would be a violation of His will.) All other considerations would obfuscate the matter and to be excluded. The test is simply will Abraham be obedient or not.

In addition, and perhaps alternatively, the following is relevant. In Abraham's days the understanding of a child sacrifice, when deemed to be requested by the Deity, was different from what it was after establishment of the legislation of the Torah. If it was thought that G-d definitely desired the sacrifice of a certain child and communicated that desire to man, it was incumbent on that man to provide it. A prayer or

any attempt to spare that child would be selfish and a violation of pure service of the Deity; it would be attempting to provide Him with less than He wanted. He had an absolute right to whatever it was He wanted. And the more valuable, the better the gift!

The test of Abraham with a command to sacrifice his son could only have been conceived before the far-reaching dissemination of the principles of the Torah. Once the tenet of man being created in the image of G-d was established, with its implication of the infinite value of each human life and of life being beyond the reach of another human being, and the categorical imperative of לֹא תִרְצַח ("You shall not murder") was internalized by society, human sacrifice was understood as a violation of the most basic law. G-d could then no longer be conceived of as requesting it. Indeed, He explicitly declared human sacrifice as absolutely prohibited, an abomination, "that which He hates" (Deut. 12:31).

The Torah's principles set in motion a major modification in thought. But it did not happen overnight. Yiftah had no recorded opposition when he sacrificed his daughter in fulfilling his vow to Hashem (Jud. 11:34-40), though there was a lapse of months during which others may have had the opportunity to dissuade him, before he carried it out. Times were very different before the widespread promulgation and acceptance of the Torah.