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AVRAHAM'S FAITHFUL BINDING OF YITZCHAK 2.0¹

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In the following events which are described in the Hebrew Bible and other sacred Jewish literature, we encounter a significant narrative of Jewish moral history.² It aims to teach the essentials of our relationship to God, the Creator and Mastermind of Creation, especially in regard to the spiritual and physical lawfulness of God's Creation.³ It is a history populated by personages, events, and archetypes that need not have any scientifically verifiable historical existence.

It's not uncommon to come to High Holy Day services while struggling with difficult questions and decisions about one's life. It's also true that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services often leave us with more questions than answers. However, our Torah reading (Bereshit 22) for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the *Akedah*, offers some insights for our thinking about unanswered questions.

The *Akedah* is about Avraham's faithful binding of Yitzchak, so that he might sacrifice him as a "burnt offering," or at least that's how it's often understood.

The Backdrop

God had given Yitzchak to Sarah and Avraham in their old age (Bereshit 21:1-3). When Yitzchak was weaned, Avraham made a great feast (21:8). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) describes a seemingly fanciful conversation that followed:

After the feast, Satan spoke evil of Avraham to God. Satan said that God had given a child to Avraham and Sarah in their old age, but Avraham had failed to sacrifice to God even one turtledove or pigeon at the feast. Satan accused Avraham of honoring his son but not God who gave him the son.

God answered Satan, asserting that Avraham would sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, for God's sake, if God asked him to do so. Then, according to the tradition, God "challenged" (נִסָּה) Avraham, telling him to offer up Yitzchak as a sacrifice.

Rabbi Shimon ben Abba, a Babylonian-born Amora (a Talmudic sage in the 4th century CE), teaches that

God entreated Avraham to make the sacrifice of Yitzchak as a king would entreat a great warrior to uphold his name and crown in battle. That is, Avraham was challenged in a way that would allow him to think he was doing great good if he would sacrifice his son. And God made the request indirectly, using circumlocution, to avoid overwhelming Avraham with the shocking nature of what he was being asked to do.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105),⁴ who authored the first comprehensive commentary on the Hebrew Bible, teaches on Genesis 22:2: when God says Avraham would sacrifice Yitzchak if God asked him to, we should read this as, Avraham would *offer* to sacrifice Yitzchak. God *asks* rather than commands Avraham to offer up Yitzchak: God makes the request using the expression *na*, "I pray thee," and God asks that the sacrifice be made in the future. The request was to offer up Yitzchak after Avraham reached the mountain. It was not a demand to sacrifice him at that moment.

While Avraham is on his way to Mount Moriah, following God's instructions, Satan—his "adversary" and "accuser"—approaches him. Satan has no independent existence or power but derives entirely from God. That is, Avraham encounters his own *yetzer hara* (יֵצֶר הָרָע—evil inclination) (Baba Batra 16a). This part of the story gets somewhat convoluted, so keep in mind, *Satan is nothing more than Avraham's own evil inclination*.

Satan asks Avraham if he will be "grieved" by talking with him. He reminds Avraham that while Avraham has taught and strengthened many other people, he

himself is now feeling faint from the trial of sacrificing Yitzchak.

Avraham responds: I am ready to be tested—heart and mind (Psalm 26:2)—in my trust of God.

Satan retorts: Shouldn't your awe of God give you confidence [in what you believe, that human sacrifice is evil]?—but you're preparing to sacrifice your son.

Avraham replies: When did God ever take an innocent life? He adds, he has secret knowledge from God that Yitzchak is not to be sacrificed.

Satan then says: Because I am a liar, even when I tell the truth I am not listened to.

What's happening here?

Avraham's evil inclination is clamoring for attention. In effect, he is taunting himself with the question of whether he can face his own fear about the outcome of the journey he has embarked upon—that is, whether God will eventually require him to physically take Yitzchak's life.

He answers himself bravely that he is ready to be tested. He is ready to do everything God asks of him—short of actually killing Yitzchak, presumably, because it could only be a false god that would ask for such a sacrifice, not Avraham's One God.

When his evil inclination says that he should be confident, and he is not, Avraham affirms his faith by stating that his God does not demand the ritual sacrifice of innocents. Having quieted his evil inclination, he reminds himself further that his intimate knowledge of God assures him that Yitzchak is not to be a "burnt offering."

This reaction isn't surprising because, as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches, the idea of the *Akedah* as human sacrifice is "blasphemous nonsense"—which presumably it would have seemed to Avraham. Similarly, Rashi comments (Bereshit 22:2): "(God) did not say to him [Avraham], 'Slaughter him' [שחטתהו]; because the Holy One Blessed be He did not desire to slaughter him, but only to bring him up to the mountain in order to prepare him as an elevating offering [עולה]. But after (Avraham) had brought him up, He said to him, 'Take him down [הורידתהו]'."

Avraham was almost certainly doing what we all do—carrying on an internal debate between his *yetzer ha tov* (יצר הטוב) and his *yetzer ha ra*, between his good and bad inclinations.

Despite momentary doubts, he refused steadfastly to believe that God would ever require the actual sacrifice of Yitzchak. God had already assured him "... for in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you" (בְּיִצְחָק יִקְרָא) (Bereshit 21:12). Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1085-1174) tells us this is a reference to the covenant between God and Avraham regarding his seed, a reminder that the promise referred to Yitzchak, not Ishmael (commentary on Bereshit 21:12). Avraham would have understood יִקְרָא לְךָ as a reaffirmation of the covenant.

Rashi says Avraham prophesied to the youths with him that both he and Yitzchak would return from the mountain, saying "we will come back" to you [*nashuvah*—נָשׁוּבָה], (Bereshit 22:5). Because of Avraham's

faith in God, his implicit trust that the seal of God is truth, he would not listen to the voice he believed to be God when that voice told him a lie, even for a good purpose.

But, obviously, Avraham was receiving mixed messages. Rabbi Amnon Bazak (liv.) notes that, "Even if on the personal level Avraham is willing to sacrifice literally everything, the inexplicability of the opposite commands remains, appearing to point to deception." By definition, both voices could not be true, which would compel Avraham to consider which might be false. Was the voice of this god calling for Yitzchak's death by ritual the same as his One God? How could he be sure, one way or the other?

The parsimonious answer, certainly, would be "no." This could not be the voice of the One God, since his God abhorred human sacrifice. Ironically, our traditional commentators acknowledge that God would never require human sacrifice in the form of a ritual burnt offering, yet they seem unable to grant Avraham the same conviction.

Avraham is Tested

But suppose Avraham decided to resolve his conundrum of the mixed messages *as if* the voice asking him to sacrifice Yitzchak was that of his One God: What would he, or anyone, be likely to imagine it would mean that this God, who abhorred sacrifice, would ask that he kill his son?—not command, but *ask*.

One conclusion would be that it was a test—God was encouraging Avraham to do what was forbidden, to test his faith. What might Avraham imagine that God would require of him to pass or fail the test?

If, on the one hand, he was in fear and reluctant to offer up his son on the altar, that would seemingly demonstrate a failure of his faith in the One God, because it would indicate a fear that his son was *actually* going to be physically sacrificed. If, on the other hand, he had absolute faith in his God, and a conviction that no other god or gods had any power over him, might he not go to the very moment of taking his son's life, confident that his God would not require the ultimate act? And wouldn't he also be confident that if such an abomination were asked of him, it would not be *his* God making the request. So he could not only refuse the request, he could also reject the god who was making it?

While we know that Avraham's *hineni* (הִנְנִי—Here I am!) on the altar in response to the angel of God (Bereshit 22:11) indicates his readiness to be completely obedient, we certainly would not expect Avraham to be mindlessly obedient to what he believed to be a false god. At what point might Avraham conclude without any doubt that he was *not* prepared to be absolutely obedient? Presumably, that would only come at the moment he was commanded to actually slay his son—which, of course, never came. Avraham never abandoned his faith in God and he remained obedient.

How can we understand *why* and *how* God is "tempting" Avraham?

It would seem that Satan, in telling Avraham a "lie," that is, implying that God will yet ask for the

physical sacrifice of Yitzhak, God is testing Avraham for a good purpose, to see whether he can discriminate between offering Yitzhak's lifelong dedication as a spiritual servitor as opposed to actually killing him. The first, dedicating Yitzhak to service required by God, which may call on him to give up his life to uphold God's Name (i.e., the attributes we ascribe to God) is pleasing to God. The second, actually taking his life in a rite comparable to pagan sacrifice, is abhorrent. Seemingly, Avraham was being prompted to believe the evil thought that his God would desire *actual* human sacrifice.

It may have been a lesson to Avraham about his own evil inclination, which no longer had to be listened to, even if occasionally it told the "truth" for an evil purpose. As it says in Bereshit Rabbah (22:6): "When Avraham arose and saw how really feeble, he [the evil inclination] was, he began to crush him, as it is written: And I will beat to pieces his adversaries before him (Psalm 89:24)."

The Take-Aways

What emerges from the mists of doubt about the meaning of the *Akedah*—by or to what is Yitzhak bound?—begins to clear when we see that both *Kiddush Hashem* (קדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם) and *Chillul Hashem* (חִלּוּל הַשֵּׁם), both the sanctification and the desecration of God, are encompassed in the travelogs of our lives. In the history that follows the *Akedah*, Yitzhak is a stand-in for each of us individually and all of us as Am Yisrael.

We are all called to the sacred mission of Am Yisrael—to study and to know, to teach and to do, the Torah of God in the world. That as a people we unfailingly choose to be servants of God rather than servants of idols. The glitch in this picture is how easily we can mistake one for the other. Israel is called upon for all time to follow the path of *Kiddush Hashem* (service of God) and resist the path of *Avodah Zarah* (עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה—serving foreign gods, idolatry).

As servants of God, we dedicate ourselves to bring God's righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and compassion to the forefront of human life, because they singularly enable the greatest happiness and fulfillment in life. As servants of idols, we betray God's unique gift to us, our moral free will, to idolize and monopolize our lives with every sensual and material pleasure one can imagine, captivated by the delusion that in them we can achieve the satisfaction of our appetites and reach perfection.

Reinforcing Moral Wisdom

The tradition reminds us on many occasions that these are the features of the life we all travel and the choices and consequences they entail.

For example, on Yom Kippur, in the ancient life of Israel, the High Priest performed a sacred rite that involved two identical male goats as an atonement offering (and a ram as a burnt offering). Lots were cast to determine which one of the goats would be "for God" and which one "for Azazel." The one for God would be an atonement offering, giving up its life to

bring us closer to dedicating our own lives to God. The other would be sent into the wilderness, the wild place, to live as it pleased. In the wilderness, relying on its own will, it chose to stand proud on a high place and, losing its balance, fell backward to its death.

In yet another instance, we are reminded of the dynamic characteristics and consequences of our free-will choices when the people finally enter the promised land. In Devarim 11:26-28, we read: "See, I place before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you listen to the commands of God.... And the curse, if you do not listen...." Then the scripture goes on to say: "And it shall come to pass when God, your God, has brought you into the land where you are going to take possession, that you will present the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eval." (Devarim 11:29). If your tribe is Simon, Levi, Judah, Isachar, Joseph or Benjamin, your mountain will be to the south of the valley. Climbing in a spirit of blessing, the sun will smile down, the climb will be in the shade of fruit trees on a smiling green slope. If your tribe is Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, or Naftali, your mountain is on the north side of the valley. You will find your place at the foot of Mount Eval.... There you will ascend in the spirit of a curse. For the climb will be without shade on a slope that is steep and bare and bleak, and the sun beats down." The priests, crowded together around the ark in the valley between the two mountains, called out the blessings and the curses to those on the two mountains, reminding the people that *we* chose which mountain to climb.

Our rabbis have said this ceremony constituted a renewed acceptance of the Torah. The blessings and curses were actually 12 commandments prohibiting such things as cursing a parent, causing a blind person to go astray on the road, moving a landmark, perverting justice for a proselyte, orphan or widow, the worship of idols, sexual crimes such as incest, striking a fellow, taking a bribe to kill an innocent person, etc. But why would the nation need such a ceremony? According to the rabbis, these 12 subjects of the blessings and curses are acts of the sort that transgressors could do secretly. Thus, by this ritual, the entire nation would inaugurate its occupation of the Land by declaring there can be no contradiction between public and private morality. The people were to see that a nation which considers it acceptable to sin in private will inevitably see erosion in its public moral integrity.

Withal, we cannot imagine a more dramatic means than the *Akedah* to call our attention to the dynamic experience we have in discerning and responding to *Kiddush Hashem*, serving God, and *Avodah Zarah*, the idolatry of serving foreign gods. Like Yitzhak, our lives, individually, and collectively as a people, stand or fall, achieve limitless happiness or permanent discontentment from pleasure-seeking which never fulfills. It's our choice. Either we thrive or we die prematurely.

Endless Questions

We may also learn from all this that God tests us through various aspects of the creation, some of which we ourselves co-produce, to believe that our worst inclination is God's own truth.

We can imagine that God was testing Avraham to see if he would believe that his worst evil inclination, the idea that God wanted him to physically take the life of his son, was in fact the Divine Will. We may also learn from this reading that we have been endowed with the capacity to choose to stifle the voice of our conscience, our good inclination, so that we can carry on a conversation with our evil inclination, which is what Avraham was doing.

Some still ask: How far would Avraham have gone if the angel of God had not intervened? And some say he would have slain his son. But that hardly seems plausible, considering the confidence he had that *his* God would *never* demand human sacrifice.

Did Avraham have questions about God and God's *mitzvot*, God's commandments?

Absolutely! Who wouldn't under such circumstances? Can there be any more serious questions than about the life and death of our children?

There's a story about a man who abandoned his Judaism because of his questions.

The man was asked by an old friend, who was still a practicing Jew, "Why did you give it up?"

The man replied, "I had a lot of questions."

The friend then asked, "Were they questions or were they answers?"

"What do you mean?" the man replied.

"Well," said the friend, "maybe they were really the excuses you used to explain away why you abandoned your heritage. If so, such questions are really answers already—and so, of course, they can't be answered."

One cannot live a Jewish life, or a life based on any moral vision and law, without questions. Human life is full of contradictions, which prompt endless questions. But the more we study the Torah, all of the sacred Jewish literature, the more answers we find. Inevitably, with each new set of answers comes new understanding, intellectual and spiritual growth, and new questions. So, if we're living a *Jewish* life, "We live from question to question."

Avraham certainly had questions, compelling questions, but he didn't use them as excuses to abandon his God. He had faith that the answers to his questions would emerge in time.

In this context, we understand "faith" as his unwavering commitment to God's goodness, regardless of his immediate experience and reason. He was willing to act on the assumption that goodness would emerge and increase in the world, even if at any particular moment that possibility seemed contradicted by his reason and experience.

Imagine where we would be if Avraham had not struggled faithfully with his questions. In all likelihood, *we* wouldn't *be*.

¹ This devar Torah has been substantially updated since originally published in the *Post & Opinion*.

² That the Torah is not meant to be a scientific text but to teach God's law and covenant with the Jewish people, morality and ethics, and the *moral history* of Israel is affirmed by many traditional sources. For examples, see: Pesachim 94b, Bereishit Rabbah 1:1, Rambam, Guide II:25 and II:30, and Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bereishit 1:1 and 1:14.

³ The two *lawful* realms, physical and spiritual, are *not* independent of one another but an integrated, unitary system, such that the violation of God's spiritual law ordinary fails the intended purpose when it encounters God's lawfulness of the physical creation. In effect, immoral purposes affect the physical world, which reacts according to its own lawfulness. For example, that's what happens with lying, which is a violation of spiritual lawfulness. It's a lesson most of us learn in childhood: one lie inevitably leads to another lie, and another, and another, until the corrupt edifice of deceit crumbles when its effects eventually encounter the lawfulness of physical life and results in harm to ourselves and others, and we're caught in the blowback of our wrongdoing, sometimes immediately, sometimes long-delayed. And it's equally true that immoral behavior can stimulate and reinforce immoral intentions in others, because often we acquire behavior in cognitive form through observational learning before acting it out.

⁴ Rashi wrote the first comprehensive commentary on the *entire* Tanakh (Five Books of Moses). His style blends literal interpretation (*peshat*) with midrashic (aggadic) insights. His Torah commentary is the basis of nearly every subsequent Jewish study. It appears in virtually every printed Hebrew Bible. Rashi's commentary on almost every tractate of the Babylonian Talmud is essential for understanding it. He explains complex legal arguments in clear, accessible Hebrew and Aramaic, often clarifying obscure terms and logic. His work became the standard companion to the Talmud. It's usually printed on the inner margin of the page in all traditional Talmud editions. Rashi made Jewish learning accessible to both scholars and laypeople. His commentaries became a basic requirement at every level of Jewish education.