

Summary: Parashat VaYera

Redeeming the Akeidah, Halakhah, and Ourselves—בני אברהם אוהבך

The *Akeidah*—the story of the binding of Isaac as told in this week's parashah—is one of the most central narratives and texts in the Jewish tradition. Not only is it in the Torah, not only is it the culmination of the cycle of narratives around Avraham, but it is also a key liturgical piece. It serves as the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, and it is the inspiration for countless religious poems, especially the *Selihot* said during the High Holiday period. As Jews, we invoke this chilling story of Avraham's near sacrifice of his son with pride on a daily basis, as we contrast our human worthlessness with our covenantal worthiness:

...מה אנחנו... הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך, ואנשי השם פלא היו, וחכמים ככלי מדע, ונבונים ככלי השכל.
כי רוב מעשיהם תהו, וימי חייהם הכל לפניך, ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין, כי הכל הכל:
אבל אנחנו עמך, בני בריתך, בני אברהם אהבך, שנשבעת לו בחר המוריה, זרע יצחק יחידו, שנעקד על גבי
המזבח...

What are we?... Are not all mighty men like nothing before you, the great ones as if they had never been, the wise as those without knowledge and the intelligent as those without understanding? For most of their actions are worthless and the days of their lives are like breath before you. The advantage of humans over beasts is naught.

And yet, we are your people, members of your covenant, the descendants of Avraham who loved you, to whom you made promises on Mount Moriah, the offspring of Yitzhak, his only son, who was bound on the altar...

The Akeidah is thus a proud banner that we wave when we try to get God's attention, perhaps most pointedly in the climactic midpoint of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Ha-Shanah:

ותראה לפניך עקדה שעקד אברהם אבינו את יצחק בנו על גבי המזבח וכבש רחמיו לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם
כן יכבשו רחמך את כעסך מעלינו ובטובך הגדול ישוב חרון אפך מעמך ומעירך ומנחלתך... ועקדת יצחק
היום לזרעו ברחמים תזכור

May the Akeidah be visible to you, how Avraham our father bound his son Yitzḥak on the altar and controlled his mercy in order to do your will with a full heart. So too may your mercy control your anger with us... In mercy, keep in mind the binding of Isaac when thinking of his descendants today.

The Akeidah, however, also seems to be an act of attempted murder of an innocent, and anyone today who would claim divine sanction to kill his own child would be locked up, left for mad, and hounded out of any sane religious community. And beyond dealing with Avraham's willingness to carry out this task, how can we deal with the fact that God commanded this seemingly immoral act? How do we respond to this basic dilemma?

The Akeidah cannot be deleted from the Bible; heretofore, no branch of Judaism has yet suggested writing a Torah Scroll censored of "inappropriate" material. Avoiding the message of this text entirely is thus not an option.

Some have tried to address the moral dilemma presented by the Akeidah by declaring that Avraham failed the test given to him by God. Where Avraham ought to have resisted out of moral courage, he blindly followed an immoral command. This, too, is an untenable response. It cannot be squared with God's blessing of Avraham in Bereishit 22 for his willingness to carry out the task, nor can it be squared with our constant liturgical lionization of our first ancestor for his willingness to piously fulfill God's command. One could, theoretically, surgically remove this image from the liturgy, but, as we have seen, the incision would be very deep and very painful, leaving behind significant scar tissue.

The only tenable readings of the Akeidah for contemporary Jews are therefore those that preserve its centrality and ongoing vitality. In this week's longer essay, I will attempt to sketch out two possible models for interpreting the Akeidah, highlighting their consequences for how we think about serving God. In the end, I will turn us to what I believe to be the only tenable reading of this story, not only for historical and literary purposes, but philosophical and religious ones as well.

One option is to view the Akeidah as a model for moral surrender. Perhaps the central point of the Akeidah is precisely this: Do not trust your moral instincts when confronted with what you understand to be a divine command. Indeed, God's command to Avraham was, at least in

human terms, immoral. Nonetheless, Avraham was willing to heed this command and thereby passed the test of the Akeidah.

You should be able to feel the power and allure of this approach. It seems to exude humility, an ethic of service and duty, piety and deference to God and the Jewish tradition. The “knight of faith”, as philosopher Søren Kierkegaard labels Avraham, is willing to doubt any personal conviction, no matter how deeply cherished, in favor of an authority whose thinking may be beyond their grasp.

The ramifications for halakhic thinking should be clear as well. One taking this position, would never question authoritative sources based on potentially flawed personal opinions. Indeed, how else could one imagine learning *anything* from the written and oral Torah? To truly learn, all of our preconceptions must be up for negotiation and reevaluation. Without the willingness to reject my assumptions in favor of a more sophisticated picture, I cannot truly be said to be engaging in anything resembling learning.

But this approach is also fraught with difficulties. Is there really that big a difference between proclaiming fealty to God and Torah *despite* its immorality and jettisoning its strictures *because* they are immoral? Or, in other words, is the supposedly humble approach of the Akeidah outlined here just deep cynicism and alienation masquerading as piety? And how long before submissive obedience steeped in alienation gives way to revolutionary rebellion? If we only obey God because of God’s authority—and not because of deep identification with the message God delivers—why would we expect our long-term relationship with God to be any different than our relationship with Par’oh and other tyrants, whose repressive regimes we escaped at the first opportunity? This reading of the Akeidah is not only incomplete, in my view; it is religiously dangerous and irresponsible.

Another approach is outlined by R. David Hartman, which attempts to reconcile the Avraham of the Akeidah with the Abraham of Bereishit 18—one of them submits to a morally atrocious action, the other will not stand by and let God violate the laws of justice by destroying S’dom if there are ten innocent people to be found therein. Hartman presents these two Avrahams as a religious dialogue, two approaches to our relationship with God at loggerheads with each other. Why are we choosing the Avraham of chapter 22 over chapter 18? Couldn’t we just as easily mute the voice of the Akeidah’s Avraham and amplify the one arguing with God about the fate of S’dom?

Hartman's God longs for us to engage the divine command from where we sit as human beings, with ethical instincts of our own, and thus does not abusively demand that we self-negate in order to serve. Hartman emphasizes God's partnership with humanity and sees engagement with conflicts between the divine will and human ethics as a joint endeavor spanning heaven and earth. The corollary approach to *halakhah* is thus a quest for human creativity to help God match the divine law to the moral needs and instincts of human beings. Hartman was not primarily a halakhist himself, so the details here are few. But the thrust of the matter is that God wants human beings, when they find aspects of *halakhah* to be morally troubling, to use the language of the tradition to rearticulate its norms in a way that resolves the conflict. And this holds out hope that people will embrace this *halakhah* as willing servants of God rather than chafe at its sometimes apparently callous and inhuman demands.

But this approach only sidelines the problem, it does not eliminate it: Hartman's Bereishit 22 still denies human ethics a place at the heart of the religious conversation. We can attempt to drown out that chapter with the louder voice of Bereishit 18. But to the extent that the Akeidah is not shouted down by other louder paradigms, the still small voice of Avraham at Moriah continues to beckon us to serve God in spite of our ethical selves. Once it is possible to say that God is entitled to turn us against our own ethical instincts because God knows better, how can we force God to limit this ethical override to a relatively small number of experiences? Aren't we left with a God who is still abusive and unethical, just only some of the time?

To move forward to a solution that fits all the criteria laid out above, we need make only one simple assertion: *Avraham would not have understood the command to sacrifice his son as immoral, because in the world in which he lived, child sacrifice was not immoral.* Indeed, narrative (Shoftim 11:30-40, II Melakhim 3:26-27), prophetic (Mikhah 6:6-8), and even some legal (Shemot 22:28-29) passages in the Bible confirm this cultural and religious background.

Robert Gordis articulated this reading in 1976. His answer is that, in Avraham's time, child sacrifice was different in degree, but not in kind, from other forms of material devotion to God. "To be sure, offering up one's child was an infinitely more painful gift to one's God than sacrificing the firstborn of one's cattle or the tithing of one's crops." But at root, Avraham would not have been ethically scandalized by God's request. At the Akeidah, Avraham "was being subjected to the most painful test possible, but he was not being asked to violate the moral

law as he understood it.”¹ Gordis argues further against the proposal that the Akeidah is a story itself teaching about the evil of child sacrifice. He rejects this, given that there is no context for it in the story of the Akeidah, and because Avraham is explicitly rewarded by God precisely *because* of his willingness to sacrifice his son, not despite it.

Kierkegaard’s ethical monster is only created by retrospectively writing the later (Rabbinic) rejection of child sacrifice into Avraham’s consciousness, and then lauding him for ignoring later ethical qualms. This disrespects Avraham, divides him against himself, and distorts his relationship with God. Instead, we should see Avraham as a holistic, ethical being willing to challenge God, and to serve God even when it is exceedingly difficult to do so.

This reading not only recaptures the ethical Avraham, but it redeems the narrative of the Akeidah as a central religious text that can motivate us in ongoing ways. The Akeidah stands as an eternal reminder of the periodic need to make very painful sacrifices to serve God and to do what we know needs to be done. Avraham lived in a world in which child sacrifice was an integral part of the religious framework of life. No man longed to sacrifice his firstborn, and yet he knew that doing so was an act of appropriate gratitude to God, who enabled him to have children in the first place, and that showing such devotion to God might also bend the divine will to do great things in the world.

Why can’t we embrace this in our own world? I think there are a few factors. We no longer have animal sacrifice as part of our lived experience and most Jews, I think it is fair to say, have doubts as to its efficacy were we to renew it. We also have a strong notion of individual rights and serious limitations on what parents are allowed to do to their children without their full consent. Against this backdrop, what was once seen as an act of holy sacrifice would today be rightly seen as a deranged act of murder. Avraham would never have agreed to murder his son, just as he was horrified that God was set to murder the innocent people of S’dom. But human sacrifice was not murder to him, even if it seems so to us.

And yet, we have many analogues today to the sacrifice Avraham was ready to perform, and these are not in conflict with our broader ethical commitments. Who would think that the parents who sent their children to certain death on the beaches of Normandy were ethically lapsed? When we believe a cause is just and is of ultimate significance, the willingness to

¹ Robert Gordis, “The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard’s Teleological Suspension of the Ethical”, *Judaism* 25 (1976): 414-419

die—and even to put others at risk—is rightly understood as heroic, not immoral. No one who believes in a culture of life can *celebrate* such choices, but these painful choices are in fact part of the moral fabric of being committed to ideas and agendas that are larger than oneself.

It is in this spirit that Jews have invoked the Akeidah over the centuries. Those who risked teaching Torah in public under the Romans, those who died in martyrdom in the Crusades, those who invested their life's resources and lived in poverty to give their children a Jewish education, and those who sacrificed home, hearth, and life to create the State of Israel all continue the tradition of Avraham at the Akeidah. This last model of reading the Akeidah allows us to celebrate this heroic moment in our liturgy as we aim to emulate Avraham, albeit with important translations and modifications for our own time.

The consequences for how we approach *halakhah* are clear. God would not command Avraham—and does not command us—to do things that we understand to be immoral. When we experience a gap between our understanding of the divine will and the ethical imperative, something is in need of fixing. It is possible that our ethical instincts are wrong and must be refined. Alternatively, we may have incorrectly understood the divine will or incorrectly applied it to our lives. A deep process of learning and searching may be required to narrow that gap to zero, but eliminated it must be. The process of *halakhah* can never end in a place where God and morality are in conflict and the job of the learner—and certainly the *posek*—is to understand how apparent conflicts are incomplete understandings. There is no possibility of rebellion against God's word, because God's human servants know that the divine word is meant to be fully compatible with who they are meant to be. Observing *mitzvot* is at times exceedingly hard and requires great sacrifice and investment. But the figure of Avraham, properly understood, provides no support for the notion that God's command is ever meant to supersede our ethics. *Mitzvot* come to tame the *id*, not to override the *superego*.

With this understanding, I believe we can call out with pride: “We are the descendants of Avraham who loved you... the offspring of Yitzḥak, his only son, who was bound on the altar!”