



Father, Son, and Angel of God: Parents, Children, and Obedience in the Story of the Binding of Yitzhak

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This week, I would like to discuss two readings—essentially two interpretations—of the story of the *Akeidah*, the binding of Yitzhak. One of them emphasizes making the ultimate sacrifice for God, while the other sees the central moral of the story as focused on the value of relationships.

At the heart of the story of the binding of Yitzhak is God's command to Avraham: "God said: Please take your son, your only one, the one you love, Yitzhak, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the hills I will show you" (Genesis 22:2). Avraham hears God's voice clearly and is ready to act immediately, rising early in the morning to perform God's will. Over the generations, Avraham's behavior in the story of the *Akeidah* has often been seen as a paradigm for what the divine-human relationship could be: Human beings should be prepared to make sacrifices for God, the posture of voluntary surrender being the height of the religious ideal. This classical reading of the story has been translated over time into a general statement that the pinnacle of religious faith is expressed in moments of absolute acceptance of divine commands.¹ Avraham subdues his own will, erases what seem to be even his deepest desires, subjugates

¹ For R. Soloveitchik, this refers to performing religious actions out of obedience, no matter how difficult they may be. For Yeshayahu Leibovitz, this produces sharp criticism of any religious act performed from a stance of identification with its supposed substantive message. This, for Leibovitz, is a form of idolatry, since it is ultimately a worshipping of the self and not of God.

himself in order to fulfill God's will as he understands it. Avraham's greatness emerges from this act of self-erasure in the presence of God's command.

Various *midrashim* emphasize this aspect of Avraham's greatness, as in the case of this imagined dialogue, "reported" in Bereishit Rabbah:

Bereishit Rabbah 56:4

[The angel] Samael came to our father Avraham and said to him: Has the old man lost his mind? You are going to slaughter your son that was given to you at the age of a hundred? He said to him: "It was all for this."

Samael, an angel who functions as a kind of Satan figure in Rabbinic literature, attempts to incite Avraham to reject God's command, but Avraham's response is unequivocal: "It was all for this." What was "all for this?" What events and processes are culminating in the *telos* of the *Akeidah*? It is not entirely clear. Perhaps Avraham means that Yitzḥak was only born so that he could ultimately one day be sacrificed to God. Perhaps Avraham means that the entire purpose of his relationship with God was so that he could one day make this sort of ultimate sacrifice. However we read his words, Avraham's acceptance of God's command is absolute.

The *midrash* describes Yitzḥak identically, in perfect parallel to his father. Just as Avraham accepts God's command, so Yitzḥak accepts his father's command:

Samael came to Yitzḥak and said to him: You poor boy, your father is going to slaughter you! He said to him: "It was all for this."

The *midrash* emphasizes the parallel stance of father and son, oblivious to their different roles in the story: "The two of them went together: one to slaughter and one to be slaughtered." This joint journey to absolute fulfillment of God's command is the greatness of both the

father and the son. In this reading, Samael represents the forces of evil that attempt to sap the spiritual strength of the knight of faith and prevent him from completing his journey.

Verses and *midrashim*, however, are multivocal, and this multivocality always reveals itself when we pay close attention and allow ourselves to hear familiar voices anew. There is another, distinct interpretive possibility here, one we can detect if we return to the *midrash* and read between the lines. We can then uncover an additional layer, a layer that is attentive to familial and interpersonal relationships, a layer that is in fact identifiable in the verses themselves.²

This careful reading of Samael's words allow his voice to be heard in an entirely different way. Perhaps he ought not to be seen as a wicked angel who attempts to divert the knight of faith from proceeding on his straight path towards God. Perhaps instead he is an angel who is attentive to interpersonal relationships and is advocating for them.

This is first and foremost evident in the surprising way that Samael addressed Yitzḥak, even though, in retrospect, her presence should have been essential, natural, and expected. This character is Sarah. Samael addresses Yitzḥak as *bara de-aluvata*; translated idiomatically above as "You poor boy," this is more literally rendered as "You son of a wretched woman!" Samael essentially calls on Yitzḥak to realize that the *Akeidah* is a kind of betrayal, a betrayal of the "wretched woman," Sarah, a betrayal of Yitzḥak's relationship with his mother, and a betrayal of Avraham's relationship with her as well. The mother and wife are left behind at the *Akeidah*. So too we can understand Samael's call to Avraham himself, a call that tries to illuminate a relationship cast into the shadows by the *Akeidah*: "You are going to slaughter your son that was given to you at the age of a hundred?" Samael emphasizes one specific dimension of the identity of the victim: "Your son that was given to you." This is your son!

² For a broad investigation into this idea, with examples, see the sharp and wide-ranging reading of Tova Hartman and Charlie Buckholtz, *Are You Not a Man of God?: Devotion, Betrayal, and Social Criticism in Jewish Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

How can you slaughter your son? How can you burn up your responsibilities to him on the altar you are binding him on?

The terms Samael uses in the *midrash*—“your son that was given to you” and “son of a wretched woman”—that emphasize connections between the characters and essentially clarify that the relationships of father, mother, and wife are completely sidelined in the moment of blind faith that is the *Akeidah*, in the pious blindness of one who seeks to fulfill the divine command. Perhaps this is also the sense of Samael’s question, “Have you lost your mind?”, which is phrased in the original as “Have you lost your heart (*lev*)?” The heart is the seat of the intellect, both in the Bible and in Rabbinic literature, but it undeniably carries an emotional connotation as well, as when sources speak of a broken heart. Samael says: You are acting in a heartless fashion.³

Samael, as is the way of the Satan, presents the truth in a *mostly* accurate fashion; it is the slight perversion of the truth that makes it impossible for the believer to respond effectively. In the *midrash*, Samael succeeds to ensnare Avraham in a dichotomous trap: You must choose between God and your human relationships.

But in fact, the reality of the divine-human relationship is more complex. Even though Samael’s question succeeds in confusing Avraham, Avraham himself frequently displays awareness of this complexity. Avraham, the knight of faith, is frequently in dialogic relationship with God. Sometimes, his faith is most acutely expressed in moments of dialectical tension with God. Again and again in Lekh Lekha last week, Avraham tells God of his struggle to accept the divine promise that he will become a great nation: he has no

³ A subtle reading of the verses reveals this perspective in the verses themselves. “Yitzḥak spoke to his father Avraham, he said: ‘My father!’” The above *midrash* continues and asks about this verse: “Why ‘to his father,’ ‘my father?’” In other words, why is Avraham’s fatherhood referred to several times in these verses? The *midrash*’s answer: “So that he would be overwhelmed with mercy for him.” According to this reading of the verses, in the throes of the joint journey to the *Akeidah*, the journey that embraces the divine command, there is also a voice that seeks to awaken the father and the son to their mutual relationship.

children! And Avraham also turns to God to protest the planned destruction of S'dom.⁴ In this sense, the *Akeidah* obscures another relationship: the one between Avraham and God. Avraham obeys, but there is no dialogue here, no communication or discussion.

The *midrash* involving Samael in the *Akeidah* thus highlights two different voices that emerge from the story of the binding of Yitzḥak, two different insights into the underlying meaning of the *Akeidah* for Avraham's rich and varied relationships with God and people. The first interpretation places obedience to God's command at the center. Avraham and Yitzḥak both choose this path, representing the path of believers who submit to the divine will. In contrast, a subtle reading of Samael in the *midrash* reveals a voice calling on Avraham to pay attention to his relationships. Even though one might think that obedience is the zenith point of a relationship, that absolute acquiescence through silence, performed with the enthusiasm of getting up early in the morning, represents a perfect relationship with God, this is a mistake. There is another way. The *midrash's* reading of the verses as emphasizing the connection between father and son, the *midrash's* mention of the Scripturally missing connections between Yitzḥak and Sarah, the unusual silence that we find when Avraham stands in front of God here, all of these suggest a different reading. These elements push us to think about the place of a different model, one in which relationships culminate in dialogue, communication, and discussion, one in which silence in the face of evil and quiet obedience allow the curtain to fall on discursive relationships.

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this piece to offer a full comparison of the way Avraham reacts to the planned destruction of S'dom with the way he reacts to the command to sacrifice Yitzḥak. But we can simply note that Avraham's heart moves him to argue with God for the sake of S'dom, whereas he is silent when it comes to the *Akeidah*. In this vein, consider that "God says: Will I conceal from Avraham what I am about to do?" (Genesis 18:17). God's fundamental assumption is that, when God is in relationship with Avraham, nothing is hidden from him. Openness, transparency and sharing are fundamental assumptions. The motivation for transparency is knowing someone: "For I have known him." Clearly, the need for God to say this surfaces the tension God is, as it were, experiencing, knowing that Avraham will most likely object to the plan to destroy S'dom. Perhaps this is the meaning of the opening of the story of the *Akeidah*: "And God tested Avraham," this time without sharing His intentions openly.

Perhaps we can learn from both models about our relationships with other people, as well as with regard to what is possible when we think about our relationship with the Creator of the world.