

Redeeming the *Akeidah*, *Halakhah*, and Ourselves

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The Akeidah—the story of the binding of Isaac—serves as the inspiration for countless religious poems, especially the *Selihot* said during the High Holiday period, and is the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Liturgical texts that evoke the chilling story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son take pride in our forefather's selflessness. For example, at the climactic midpoint of the Musaf Amidah of Rosh Hashanah, we trace our covenantal worth back to Abraham and wave the Akeidah as a proud banner:

ותראה לפניך עקדה שעקד
אברהם אבינו את יצחק בנו על גבי
המזבח וכבש רחמיו לעשות רצונך
בלבב שלם...ועקדת יצחק היום
לזרעו ברחמים תזכור.

May the Akeidah be visible to you, how Abraham our father bound his son Yitzhak on the altar and controlled his mercy in order to do your will with a full heart... In mercy,

keep in mind the binding of Yitzhak when thinking of his descendants today.

In this description Avraham is lauded for conquering his emotions, his fatherly love, in order to follow God's command with a full heart. And his merit, we pray, will protect us too.

The Akeidah, however, appears to be an act of attempted murder of an innocent; anyone today who would claim divine sanction to kill their own child would be locked up, left for mad, and hounded out of any sane religious community. Beyond reckoning with Avraham's willingness to carry out this task, we must wrestle with the fact that God commanded this seemingly immoral act. What does this story, and its central place in our liturgy, say about the individual's ability to evaluate moral choices and follow one's own intuitive sense of right and wrong in the face of a divine command?

This question is fundamental to

making our way in the modern world as observant Jews. Do we submissively follow traditional texts and halakhic rulings from the past, disconnected from our individual and modern sentiments, or is there a way to be fully present in relation to divine law? There are several avenues of approach to these questions; each carries unique halakhic and theological implications, which we must evaluate.

Let us begin by saying, the Akeidah cannot be deleted from the Bible; heretofore, no branch of Judaism has yet suggested writing a Torah Scroll censored of "inappropriate" material. One could, theoretically, surgically remove this image from the liturgy, but the incision would be very deep and painful, leaving behind significant scar tissue. Thus, avoiding the message of this text entirely is not an option.

Some have tried to address the moral dilemma presented by the Akeidah by reinterpreting the plain meaning of the story, declaring that

Avraham failed the test given to him by God. Where Avraham ought to have resisted sacrificing Yitzhak 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.

The only tenable readings of the Akeidah for contemporary Jews are, therefore, those that preserve its centrality and ongoing vitality. We will explore here three possible models for interpreting the Akeidah and highlight the consequences of each one for how we think about serving God. Ultimately, I will argue in favor of understanding the Biblical story in context, not only for literary or historical accuracy, but for philosophical and religious reasons as well.¹

Submission or Partnership?

The Akeidah has traditionally been read by many as a model for moral surrender. Perhaps the central point of the Akeidah is precisely this: Do not trust your own moral instincts when confronted with a divine command. Indeed, God's command to Avraham was, at least in human terms, immoral.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz describes Avraham's reaction thus: "Avraham's silence demonstrates that his faith

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is not a conditional faith and is not limited by the limitations of human morality."² According to Leibowitz, Avraham recognizes the immorality of the request, but he is silent about

it because he trusts God unconditionally. Avraham's repression of his own sense of right and wrong, for Leibowitz, is generated by love and devotion. He notes that Avraham is called "a lover of God," because he is able to transcend the limits of his own needs, his own narcissism, in order to fulfill the request of the God he loves.

You should be able to feel the power and allure of this approach. It exudes humility, an ethic of service and duty, devotional 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 rationale may be beyond human grasp.

The ramifications for halakhic decision making should be clear as well. One taking this position would not question authoritative sources based on potentially flawed personal opinions. To truly learn Torah, all of our preconceptions and moral intuitions must be up for negotiation and reevaluation. Without the willingness to reject my assumptions, I cannot truly be open to learning from the source.

But this approach is also fraught with difficulties. Is there really

1 At the Hadar website you can find a longer essay which delves into more depth on these various approaches. Find the essay at <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/redeeming-akeidah-halakhah-and-ourselves>.

2 Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Abraham and Job," *Judaism, The Jewish People and the State of Israel*, p. 393.

that big of a difference between proclaiming fealty to God and Torah *despite its immorality* and jettisoning its strictures *because they are immoral*? In both cases I am employing human judgment to proclaim child sacrifice immoral. Even the supposedly humble approach toward the Akeidah may hide deep cynicism and alienation that masquerades as piety. Since it is nearly impossible for us to detach ourselves from our current sense of morality, how long will it be 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.

R. David Hartman outlines at great length an alternative approach, which attempts to reconcile the Avraham of the Akeidah with the Avraham of Bereishit 18—the former submits to a morally atrocious action of child sacrifice, while the latter will not stand by and let God violate the laws of justice by destroying S'dom. In Bereishit 18:25, Avraham brazenly critiques God for planning to “deal death to the innocent along with the guilty,”

a far cry from his silent acceptance of the Akeidah! Hartman presents these two Avrahams as representative of a religious dialogue, two approaches to our relationship with God at loggerheads with each other. The two exist simultaneously, reflecting two sides of the religious life.

This view may cause us to question, why do we continue to choose the Avraham of chapter 22 for our liturgy instead of chapter 18? Hartman, in fact, chooses to lower the volume on the Akeidah and amplify the voice of Avraham arguing with God about the fate of S'dom:

The forefather of the great monotheistic traditions contained within him two incompatible realities: One of heroic self-affirmation, and one of self-denial...The ultimate question for me, then, is which story do we embrace?...The most important lesson we learn from our forefather Abraham is the legitimacy of personal moral intuition.³

Despite our Rosh Hashanah liturgy, Hartman's God prefers our self-affirmation. God longs for us to engage with the divine command and does not abusively demand that we self-negate in order to serve.

If God and humanity are partners, then instances of conflict between

the divine will and human ethics are opportunities for change and growth, a process spanning heaven and earth. The corollary for halakhic thinking becomes clear: When we find aspects of *halakhah* to be morally troubling, God invites human creativity and moral instincts to play a role in the halakhic process. Using the language of the tradition, we rearticulate its norms in a way that resolves the conflict. Hartman holds out hope that through this world view people will still embrace *halakhah* as willing servants of God rather than chafe at its sometimes callous demands. He thereby combines the humble and brazen stances of Avraham.

To my mind, this approach of seeing Avraham as an unresolvable “paradox,” in Hartman's words, 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 the still, small voice of Avraham at Moriah continues to beckon us to serve God in spite of our ethical selves. If God is entitled to turn us against our own ethical instincts at certain extreme moments, like the Akeidah, aren't we left with a God who is still abusive and unethical? And how would we know when to employ our ethical override and when to accept the divine will silently?

3 R. David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic*, pp. 160, 164, 227.

Avraham on His Own Terms

To move forward to a solution that is both true to the text and religiously viable, 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 has argued cogently 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."⁴ But at its 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." This view solves the literary problems we raised: There is no hint within the Biblical story of the evil of child sacrifice and Avraham is explicitly rewarded by God precisely because of his willingness to sacrifice his son, not despite it. Leibowitz's humble, loving servant

and Kierkegaard's ethical monster—the Avraham who negates his human ethical logic—is only created by retrospectively writing the later (Rabbinic) rejection of child sacrifice into Avraham's consciousness

God does not command us to do things that we understand to be immoral.

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 when necessary 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 even 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

4 Robert Gordis, "The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Judaism* 25 (1976): 414-419.

human sacrifice was not murder to him, even if it seems so to us.⁵

Now we can also recognize that there are many analogues in today's world 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 die—and even to put others at risk—is rightly understood as heroic, not immoral. Today, for example, we value and praise members of the medical profession, first responders, and providers of essential services for their willingness to put themselves at risk on behalf of others. No one who believes in a culture of life can celebrate death, but these painful choices are in fact part of the moral fabric of being committed to ideas 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* now also come into focus. 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. Sometimes 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, in fact, incomplete understandings. There is no possibility of moral 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. The figure of Avraham, properly understood, reminds us to do what is right even when it is painful; it does not provide support for the notion that God's command should 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 Yitzhak, his only son, who was bound on the altar!” ♦

⁵ For more on this point, see A. Koller, *The Unbinding of Isaac*.