

Echoes of Eden

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It Never Crossed my Mind

The killing of any child is grotesque, the killing of one's own child - obscene. But the challenge of Akeidat Yitzchak ("The Binding of Isaac"), in which God calls upon Avraham to bring his beloved son as an offering, is compounded when we recall all the years that Avraham and Sarah waited for the birth of this child. It seems cruel to finally give this elderly, devout couple a child - just to take him away. And if the child must die, death at the hands of his gentle father is unfathomable. Avraham, after all, is the paragon of hesed, the first to have recognized God as the source of loving kindness. From Avraham and Sarah's perspective, God's request seems unspeakably cruel. Even worse, in light of the covenant God had made with Avraham, this new commandment seems impossible, outrageous, absurd: God had promised that Yitzchak would be the progeny through which the covenant would come to fruition. Calling for Yitzchak's death is illogical.

From our own perspective, the commandment to sacrifice Yitzchak does not sit any better. Subsequent portions of the Torah and Prophets contain powerful polemics against human sacrifice and particularly child sacrifice. The "test" which God throws as a gauntlet before Avraham not only goes against our most basic human emotions and sensibilities, but it also contravenes God's own laws.

All of this makes this one of the most difficult episodes in the Torah. So much discussion and debate and so much spilt ink have been dedicated to this section of our parashah over the generations that it is easy to lose sight of some of its most important aspects. Let us consider some of the important background information we all know, but tend to overlook in the face of God's shocking request. First, we should read the text very carefully, to re-sensitize ourselves to what is there - and what is not.

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At no point in the narrative of the Akeida does God command Avraham to bind Yitzhak, nor is there any mention of taking his life. While this may seem like semantic nitpicking, it is important to note that up to this point in the Torah, Avraham has constructed other altars to God, but has never sacrificed anything on these altars. Perhaps our familiarity with later sacrificial practices unnecessarily colors our reading of this text.

Another important element is the introduction to the entire episode: “After these events, God tested Avraham.” In fact, it seems that Avraham knows that he is being tested. How else are we to understand Avraham’s complete silence in this most extreme situation, when in previous episodes he was so outspoken on behalf of those he perceived as innocent victims? In the previous chapter, when Sarah demands that Avraham’s son Yishmael be banished, Avraham is quite troubled; here, there is no mention that Avraham experiences distress of any kind. When Avraham is told that the city of Sodom is to be destroyed, he engages God in elaborate negotiations, and stops just short of accusing God of committing injustice. Avraham’s silence now, when his beloved son is to be brought as an offering, speaks volumes.

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We must conclude that Avraham knows much more than we do: Avraham knows that this is a test – and he rises to the challenge.

There is something else that Avraham knows: He, too, was “sacrificed” by his own father. Avraham was thrust into a fiery furnace – and escaped unscathed. In fact, this is a central element of Avraham’s relationship with God: “I am God who took you out of Ur (the fire) of Casdim” (Bereishit 15:7). God rescued Avraham when Terah handed him over to Nimrod to be killed for spreading monotheism and rejecting the idolatry and paganism of the society in which he was raised.

Having experienced salvation from a near-death experience, and knowing that God is just and faithful to His word, Avraham sensed that he was being tested. He saw no need to engage God in debate. This was not like Sodom, a corrupt and violent society that, in fact, had earned its death sentence and could only be saved if Avraham interceded. The case of Yitzhak was completely different than that of

Sodom, or of Yishmael: God had made a covenant with Avraham, and Avraham had no doubt that the story would have a “happy ending.” Just as he had been saved from death, so would Yitzchak; if God had saved him, a young former-pagan who had no covenant, surely Yitzchak, a monotheist and the son of a monotheist, and the subject of a holy covenant, would be saved as well.

Yitzchak’s death was never a possibility – not as far as Avraham was concerned, and not as far as God was concerned. God’s commandment to Avraham was very specific, and Avraham understood it very precisely: Yitzchak was to be “raised up as an offering,” and God would use the opportunity to teach humankind, once and for all, that human sacrifice, child sacrifice, is not acceptable.

This is precisely how the sages of the Talmud (Taanit 4a) understood Akeidat Yitzchak. Citing the Prophet Jeremiah’s exhortation against child sacrifice (Chapter 19), they state unequivocally that such behavior “never crossed God’s mind” - referring specifically to the sacrificial slaughter of Yitzchak.

Though readers of this parashah throughout the generations have been disturbed, even horrified, by the Akeida, there was no miscommunication between God and Avraham. The thought of actually killing Yitzchak never crossed their minds.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/essays-and-lectures-parashat-vayera.html>