

# Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

## “Practice What You Preach”

Oh God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son”  
Abe says, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on”  
*Bob Dylan; Highway 61 revisited*

The narrative of the Binding of Isaac, Akeidat Yitzchak, is introduced with one terse statement: “After these events, The Almighty tested Avraham.” Unlike the protagonist in Bob Dylan’s version, our patriarch Avraham does not engage God in conversation or argument, nor does he offer a (glib) rejoinder. He silently marches on to his cruel destiny. Perhaps Avraham’s uncharacteristic silence indicates that he knew he was being tested. This leaves us with one glaring, yet often ignored question: What are “these events” that precipitated the test? What context could possibly shed light on Akeidat Yitzchak?

In general, things were not easy for Avraham. As an island of monotheism in a sea of paganism, his life was complex and his interpersonal relationships often strained. In so many instances, not only was Avraham in mortal danger,

**Avraham...an island of monotheism in a sea of paganism**

his wife Sarah was caught in the crossfire. And yet, this week’s portion illustrates that Sarah was not merely a long-suffering partner in Avraham’s wanderings and a stalwart supporter of her husband’s cause.

In more than one instance, Sarah was the focus of the conflict, the object of the carnal desires of others – including powerful monarchs who were accustomed to having their way. In these instances, Avraham had a pre-arranged cover story. He instructed his wife to play along with his claim that he and Sarah were siblings and not spouses. While this strategy saved Avraham on more than one occasion, it turned Sarah into a human shield of sorts (and created a moral quandary for us, the reader). Remarkably, Sarah escaped each of these sticky situations unscathed.

Perhaps Avraham sensed that Sarah's holiness, or the Divine blessing he had received, would protect them both from the hostile world in which they lived.

One such powerful adversary was Avimelech. Upon Avraham's arrival in his jurisdiction, Avimelech sends his henchmen who simply take Sarah to their leader - no questions asked, no courtship, no consent. That night, Avimelech receives a stern message in a dream: God informs him that his indiscretion renders him a "dead man". To save his life (and kingdom) he must return the woman to her husband.

In the morning, Avraham is summoned; Avimelech, furious at the deception, demands that Avraham explain his behavior. The dialogue is fascinating. Avimelech bellows: How could you have misled me, leading me to almost sleep with a married woman? Avimelech seems sincerely upset, and his moral outrage is poignantly conveyed in the text:

*Avimelech summoned Avraham and said to him, 'How could you do this to us? What terrible thing did I do to you that you brought such great guilt upon me and my people? The thing you did to me is simply not done!'*

Avraham does not respond; perhaps he thinks the question is rhetorical. Yet Avimelech continues; he changes his tone and seems genuinely interested in learning something from Avraham:

*'What did you see to make you do such a thing?'*

At last, Avraham speaks. He explains that as Sarah's husband, his own life was in danger. While in his own mind Avimelech was a moral man who would never sleep with a married woman, his morality was skewed: If he found a desirable woman who was married, he would, without hesitation, kill the husband and "free" the widow. A married woman was off-limits, but murder was a normal part of the power structure of pagan society in which 'might makes right.' In one single, seemingly extraneous phrase, Avraham's response points out to Avimelech the absurdity of the pagan system of values:

*“The only thing lacking in this place is fear of God.”*

This, Avraham explains, is the crux of his predicament: Avimelech is moral – but his morality is local and subjective. Avraham, on the other hand, lives by morality of a higher order, an objective morality whose source is God. In Avraham’s system, God defines morality, and whatever God commands is, by definition, moral. Avraham attempts to impart this understanding to Avimelech, but we may imagine that his sermon falls on deaf ears.

It is in this context that Avraham is tested: When God calls upon him to offer up his son, Avraham finds himself in a self-created quandary. He had preached absolute morality based on “fear of God”; now, God has commanded him to commit an act that may have seemed to him the antithesis of morality, of kindness, of every Divine attribute that Avraham had come to know and emulate. Could Avraham live up to the standards he had

**Could Avraham live up to the standards he had so recently demanded of others?**

so recently demanded of others? Could he behave differently than Avimelech and his nation of pagans? Could he set aside his own subjective understanding of morality and obey the word of God unquestioningly?

As he marches forward, silently focused on his mission, Avraham proves that he is prepared to fear and obey God no matter what the cost, no matter what the task. As the knife in his hand descends toward his son’s neck, the episode comes to an abrupt conclusion, as a heavenly voice calls out, “Now I know that you fear God” - not love God, not emulate God – fear God. Now I know that you are willing to set aside your own subjective and limited human understanding and moral constructs in the face of God’s commandments, as they represent absolute morality. Now I know that you practice what you preach.

This aspect of Akeidat Yitzchak is a frightening one, especially for rabbis and all those who preach to others: Beware when you preach, we are warned, for

God may hold you to the same standards that you espouse. As in the case of Avraham's words to Avimelech, God just may call upon each and every one of us to practice what we preach. Let us hope that this lesson of Akeidat Yitzchak affects both what we preach, what we demand of others, as well as what we do to live up to the standards to which we hold our fellow man.

<http://echoesofeden.rabbiarikahn.com/>

For a more in-depth analysis see:

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