

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vayeira

The story of the Akeidah occurs repeatedly in our Siddur. The Zohar encourages one to read the whole story daily (Genesis Chapter 22), as this invokes mercy from G-d when Jewish lives are threatened. Arizal also endorses reading this portion daily, asserting it brings atonement to one who sincerely repents. The long Tachanun (“supplication”) prayer said on Monday and Thursday, which repeatedly asks G-d to have mercy on the Jewish people and save them from all of their troubles, also asks G-d to remember the binding of Isaac. In Tachanun we say, “May the binding of the only son (Isaac) appear before you, for the sake of (the nation) Israel.” Similarly, we ask G-d in the special Amidah silent prayer of Rosh Hashanah to remember the binding of Isaac and have mercy on the Jewish people. Why is the binding of Isaac so significant?

The Mishna (Avot 5:3) says G-d tested Abraham ten times and he passed every test, and it does not single out any particular test as being greater than the others. In their commentaries on the Mishna, Maimonides and Rashi both delineate the ten tests and agree the Akeidah is the tenth and greatest test. In our prayers, if we constantly refer to the Akeidah as a source of mercy and do not mention even one of the other nine tests, this test must stand in a league of its own. What is the uniqueness of this test?

Let’s look at the text to determine what is unique about this test that makes it extraordinarily important. When Abraham and Isaac reach Mount Moriah, they tell their attendants Ishmael and Eliezer to stay with the donkey because they have to go further by themselves. Abraham prophetically says to them (22:5), “We will bow and will return to you.” Yet in the continuation of the narrative, the Torah does not mention any particular prostration or kneeling. It would seem that the entire process of binding Isaac and preparing him to be slaughtered on the altar was, metaphorically, a form of prostration. We need to understand how Abraham and Isaac metaphorically bowed before G-d.

If we listen carefully to the special Nishmat prayer of Shabbat morning, it teaches us how to serve G-d through bowing. This will then help us understand how Abraham and Isaac bowed to Hashem through the story of the Akeidah. Towards the climax of the Nishmat, we say “Every erect spine shall bow before you.” R’ Yitzchak Hutner (20th Century) pointed out the language indicates a person’s bowing to serve G-d is only as great as his posture. He used to say that the bowing of the hunchback is not nearly as pronounced as the bowing of a person who typically stands upright. Posture is a metaphor for human will. Some people are naturally submissive to authority, so they do not find it incredibly difficult to follow the instructions of the Torah. But when a person has a very strong sense of self and independence, he finds it more difficult to bend his will and acknowledge a higher authority. Such a person finds it difficult at times to squash his ego to do the will of G-d and His Torah. But, when he overcomes his natural inclination and “bows” to follow the mitzvot, his observance is far more profound than the observance of the submissive one. Real service of G-d requires one to have the flexibility and willingness to curb his natural desires and “bow” to the will of the Torah.



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The Sages characterize Abraham as a man of *chesed* (kindness), as his desire to give to others permeated his whole being. His expansive heart enabled him to see the bigger things in life, to reach out to G-d and love Him, and to share with others. His natural inclination drove him to pursue others and teach them about the one G-d, to save Lot in his time of peril, and to hospitably provide the needs of travelers. When G-d commanded him to sacrifice his only son and prized progeny, this command clashed with his whole nature. He needed to subdue his love for his son and his desire for a legacy. He needed to negate his expansive desire to give and to help, and he had to act contrary to his noble trait of loving kindness. Abraham demonstrated his greatness by breaking his will to do the will of G-d.

While Isaiah (41:8) describes Abraham as the one who loved G-d, Abraham earns the title of one who fears G-d by passing the test of the Akeidah. Upon seeing his readiness to do the will of G-d at all costs, the angel of G-d says to him (Genesis 22:12), "Now I know that you are a G-d fearing person." Abraham demonstrated that while a person should serve G-d according to his own nature and disposition, sometimes he needs to go against the grain to do the right thing. Even an expansive, loving, and giving person must exercise discipline and repress his nature to do G-d's will. While all ten tests required Abraham to remain steadfast in his beliefs, none of them required his self-sacrifice and negation of will as much as the Akeidah.

But, in addition to being as an example for Abraham's descendants, the Akeidah serves as source of merit for the Jewish people. We ask G-d on Rosh Hashanah to go against His attribute of strict justice and have mercy on us, in the merit of our forefather who went against his own attribute of mercy to do G-d's command. That is why the Akeidah plays an important role in davening throughout the year, and an especially central role on Rosh Hashanah when G-d judges us and determines our fate for the upcoming year.

The legacy of Abraham's self-sacrifice inspires us, his descendents, to do the same and show our full dedication to serve G-d. As difficult as it can be to bow before G-d, we know that as children of Abraham we have this ability in our spiritual DNA.

Shabbat Shalom!

