

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayera

In this week's Parsha we have one of the most famous and, at the same time, one of the most puzzling biblical events. The Akeida, or the Binding of Isaac, challenges us to mine its depths and reveal its secrets. Here we offer a discovery from this marvelous quarry.

Later on in Isaac's life we find that he was blind. "Isaac had grown old. His eyesight faded and he could not see" (Bereishit 27:1). The Midrash reports an extraordinary incident that initiated Isaac's deterioration into blindness, "When Isaac was bound on the altar and his father intended to slaughter him, at that moment the heavens opened and the ministering angels saw and cried. Their tears descended and fell into Isaac's eyes. This caused a dimming of his vision."

How strange! Isaac survives the Akeida by the skin of his teeth only to have his vision impaired by a freak accident? This is akin to someone surviving a major car crash only to slip on a banana peel and break his neck as he crawls out of his car. Funny, isn't it, that Abraham is unaffected by these hazardous falling tears?

What is this Midrash trying to tell us?

Everybody knows what the Zohar says about the different natures of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is the embodiment of chesed (kindness). The doors of his home are open to all. He is the host par excellence, even when he's not exactly up to entertaining. It is Abraham who argued with God over the fate of the evil inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, knowing full well that they had more than earned what was coming to them. Abraham's kindness takes him beyond law. Isaac, on the other hand, is the embodiment of din (strict justice). The need to uphold the law is what he stands for. There is little room for chesed in Isaac's world of din. The worldviews of father and son were diametrically opposed. Yet Abraham and Isaac were united in striving to emulate the ways of God. Each of them focused on the aspect of God that they best related to and appreciated. This is what we refer to when we call out to "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac."



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Let us attempt to see the Akeida through the eyes of Isaac. To Isaac, the Akeida was perfectly understandable. Isaac knew well that every moment of life is a gift from God. There is no such thing as a right to life. Nobody can claim that they have earned the right to exist at all. When your time is up you can only be thankful for whatever you got. That is the attitude of din. The Akeida was not a test for Isaac. It was a test for Abraham, whose perception of God was focused on God's kindness and not His exacting law.

What Isaac could not comprehend was the vision of crying angels. Angels are messengers of God. What could they possibly be crying about? Isaac could not reconcile these tears with his understanding of the God of strict justice. Abraham understood, for Abraham is chesed, but Isaac, the man of din, couldn't accept crying angels. Isaac was blinded by this vision.

How about us? We are just the opposite of Isaac. We cannot accept din. We have more in common with our father Abraham; we are comfortable with God's attribute of kindness. I don't know anyone who wonders where God is when good things happen. Nobody asks, "Where is justice? I never did anything to deserve this. How could God let this happen?" However, when we are confronted with episodes of judgment, then we ask the question, "Where is God?" We need to synthesize the character of both Abraham and Isaac and recognize that there are different attributes of God. He is the God of Abraham and also the God of Isaac. There is both kindness and judgment. An episode of either one should not blind us to the reality of God's presence and divine providence in all the events of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!

