

The story of the Akeda: Its meaning in the Torah and in the modern world

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The story of the Akeda, or Binding of Isaac, is one of the most famous of all stories in the Torah. But what is it about? Does it teach the value of sacrifice, or the opposite? The love of God, or fear of God, or love of family – or something else entirely? And does it matter what we think the story is about, or is it, after all, just a story from a long time ago?

A (somewhat unfair) summary of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (Copenhagen, 1841)



In Kierkegaard's reading of the story, the central conflict is between universal ethics and an individual call of God. Abraham opted to depart the realm of the ethical, the realm of the universal in which life is governed by laws which can be articulated for the benefit of everyone, and enter the realm of the individual, in which man responds directly to the personal call of God. "By his act he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher *telos* outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former."

"The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac." Most importantly, note that Abraham is said to have intended to murder Isaac. The act was (would have been) murder, for in the realm of the universal ethics, there is no justification for it – this is what divides Abraham from the other figures in literature and history who sacrifice themselves or their children. Despite the fact that it was murder, Abraham was prepared to act on it. "Why then did Abraham do it? For God's sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake." Why? Here the rational explanations must end, says Kierkegaard.

“Abraham cannot be mediated, and the same thing can be expressed also by saying that he cannot talk.” This is why Abraham is alone. He is alone in the story, and knows he must be alone: “The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others. ... The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher, and therein lies his deep humanity.”

But he is also alone eternally. Abraham can be admired and revered, but not learned from. “Abraham keeps silent—but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and the anguish. For if I when I speak am unable to make myself intelligible, then I am not speaking. ... Now Abraham is able to say the most beautiful things any language can express about how he loves Isaac. But it is not this he has at heart to say, it is the profounder thought that he would sacrifice him because it is a trial. The latter thought no one can understand, and hence everyone can only misunderstand the former.”

Maimonides

1. *The purpose of the ‘trial’ (Guide 3.24)*

“The purpose and the meaning of every ‘trial’ that appears in the Torah is only that people should know what is proper to do, or what they are obligated to believe.”

The Aqeda contains two major themes which are fundamental to the Torah. The first is “to make known to us the limits of the love for God and fear of Him, to what extent they reach.” The second:

“To inform us that *the prophets accept as true* whatever comes to them in revelation. One should not think that because it is a dream or a vision, as we have explained, and mediated through the Active Intellect, it may be that what appears to them or that they hear is taken to be uncertain, or that any wasteful imagination is mixed in. Therefore, He wanted to inform us that all that a prophet sees in a prophetic vision is *certain truth in the eyes of the prophet*. ... The proof is that [Abraham] turned to slaughter his only son, whom he loved, just as he was commanded, even though this command was in a dream or a vision. If the prophets were at all doubtful regarding the veracity of prophetic dreams, or if they had any doubt about what they learned through prophetic visions, they would never do what nature forbids, and [Abraham]’s soul would not have responded to the multiply dangerous deed because of the uncertainty.”

2. *How does prophecy work (Guide 2.36)?*

“Know that the true reality and veracity of prophecy consist in it being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty.”

3. *The different levels of prophecy (Guide 2.45):*

“I will note that a revelation may arrive to a particular prophet on a particular level at one point, and at another time a revelation may arrive to him at a lower level than the first revelation.”

The seventh level: that he sees in a prophetic dream as if He, may He be exalted, speaks to him, as it said with regard to Isaiah, “I saw the Lord...and he said, ‘Whom shall I send?’” (Isaiah 6:1-5), and as it says with regard to Micaiah b. Yimla: “I saw the Lord...” (1 Kings 22:19).

...

The tenth level: that he sees a person speaking to him in a prophetic vision, also like Abraham, in the terebinths of Mamre (Genesis 18:1), and like Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 5:13).

The eleventh level: that he sees an angel speaking to him, like Abraham at the time of the Aqedah. This is, in my view, the highest level of prophets that the books testify about their states....

4. *Two questions*:

- a. Is it possible that a *true* prophecy can be, in a sense, wrong?
- b. Is it true in *any* sense, even a partial one, that God wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Ibn Kaspi, *Gevia' Kesef*, chapter 3

'When he [= the biblical narrator] began the stories of Abraham, he began, "And the Lord said to Abram, Go for yourself," because Abraham was the first who developed the belief in the existence of the separate intellect. This opinion took him away from his land, and because of this he did all that he did. ... And therefore, in the stories of Abraham, he is always very careful to say "the Lord," with the exception of some very few places.

In the Aqedah, he did very well in using "God" when he commanded him to bring his son as a burnt offering, *because this is in fact not desired by the Lord*. Therefore in the preventing the act, he said "the angel of the Lord," and not "the angel of God," because the desisting is necessary for us by virtue of our apprehension of the existence of the separate intellect, and our clinging to it.'

Jeremiah 7:30-31: The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, says the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

Exodus 22:28-29: You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (tr. Michael B. Smith; London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 76-77:

"The ethical means the general, for Kierkegaard. ...Now, it is not at all certain that ethics is where he sees it. Ethics as consciousness of a responsibility toward others..., far from losing you in generality, singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as *I*. Kierkegaard seems not to have experienced that, since he wants to transcend the ethical stage, which to him is the stage of generality. In his evocation of Abraham, he describes the encounter with God at the point where subjectivity rises to the level of the religious, that is to say, above ethics. But one could think the opposite: Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential."

Now after these events it was that God tested Avraham and said to him: "Avraham!" He said: "Here I am."

He said: "Pray take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzhak, and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya, and offer him up there as an offering-up on one of the mountains that I will tell you of."

Avraham started-early in the morning; he saddled his donkey, he took his two serving-lads with him and Yitzhak his son, he split wood for the offering-up and arose and went to the place that God had told him of. On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

Avraham said to his lads: "You stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad wish to go yonder;

we wish to bow down and then return to you."

Avraham took the wood for the offering-up, and placed them upon Yitzhak his son, while in his hand he took the fire and the knife. Thus the two of them went together.

Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, he said: "Father!" He said: "Here I am, my son." He said: "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering-up?"

Avraham said: "God will see-for-himself to the lamb for the offering-up, my son." Thus the two of them went together.

They came to the place that God had told him of; there Avraham built the altar and arranged the wood and bound Yitzhak his son and placed him on the altar atop the wood.

And Avraham stretched out his hand, he took the knife to slay his son.

But YHWH'S messenger called to him from heaven and said: "Avraham! Avraham!" He said: "Here I am."

He said: "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, do not do anything to him! For now I know that you are in awe of God—you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.

Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw: here, a ram caught behind in the thicket by its horns! Avraham went, he took the ram and offered it up as an offering-up in place of his son.

Avraham called the name of that place: YHWH Sees.

As the saying is today: On YHWH'S mountain [it] is seen.

Now YHWH'S messenger called to Avraham a second time from heaven and said: "By myself I swear —YHWH'S utterance— indeed, because you have done this thing, have not withheld your son, your only one, indeed, I will bless you, bless you, I will make your seed many, yes, many, like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the shore of the sea; your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies, and all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your seed, in consequence that you hearkened to my voice!

Avraham returned to his lads; they arose and went together to Be'er-Sheva. And Avraham stayed in Be'er-Sheva.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּת אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ אֵל אֶרֶץ מוֹרִיָּיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

וַיִּשְׁכֵם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֵשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אֹתוֹ וְאֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּבְקַע עֲצֵי עֹלָה וַיִּקֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל נַעֲרָיו שְׁבוּ לְכֶם פֹּה עִם הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנַּעַר נִלְכָּה עַד כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁוֹבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֲצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת הַמֵּאֲכָלֶת וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֲלֵהִים יִרְאֵה לּוֹ הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת הַמֵּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחַט אֶת בְּנוֹ:

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מֵלֶאדָּה ה' מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנַּעַר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֵתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי יִרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יִצְחָק מִמֶּנִּי:

וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאֲחָז בְּסֻבָּבָה בְּקִרְבָּיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא ה' יִרְאֵה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמֶר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר ה' יִרְאֵה:

וַיִּקְרָא מֵלֶאדָּה ה' אֶל אַבְרָהָם שְׁנֵית מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם:

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם ה' כִּי יַעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יִצְחָק:

כִּי בְרַךְ אֲבִרְכֶךָ וְהִרְבָּה אַרְבֵּה אֶת זַרְעֶךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׁפַת הַיָּם וַיִּרֶשׁ זַרְעֶךָ אֶת שַׁעַר אֲבִיבֵי:

וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעֶךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עֲקֵב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקִלְיִ:

וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל נַעֲרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיִּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע: