

Vayera Davar Torah

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In Vayera the story of the Akeidah is considered the “supreme test of Abraham’s faith in God.” The Silverman Machzor says in its commentary that “We do not truly live for our ideals unless we are ready, if necessary, to die for them. There is not a single noble cause, movement or achievement that does not call for great sacrifice and matrydom.”

We don’t have to look any further than the creation and defense of the state of Israel to see how important it is to be willing to sacrifice ones’ life for a noble cause. While this may be true is that really the sole message of the Akeidah? What was the noble cause worth sacrificing Isaac for?

According to Abarbanel “This section epitomizes the Jew’s determination to serve God no matter how difficult the circumstances, the very reason for Israel’s existence.”

But is that what the Akeidah is all about? Is it just about Abraham’s willingness to do whatever God asks? I believe that there another lesson to be learned from the Akeidah.

Earlier in the parsha of Vayera Abraham pleads with God to spare Sodom and Gemorrah if there are fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty and then ten righteous people there. However, when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham says nothing. He doesn’t try to bargain with God or beg for mercy. The Stone Chumash referring to the Akedah says “this test was especially difficult because Abraham could not rationalize that Isaac deserved to die because he had somehow been found unworthy or that he had become evil. This was decidedly not the case.” The rabbis say that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac due to the strength of his faith in God. Why wouldn’t Abraham, an elderly father, offer his own life in exchange in order to save Isaac? Earlier in the parsha when Hagar and Ishmael are sent away God says to Abraham “Of the son of the handmaid will I make a nation”. Neither Ishmael nor Abraham needs to go through a special test to be granted a nation. Yet it is only after Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac and goes through this test that Abraham is promised a great nation descending from Isaac. Why is Abraham put through this test? Why is he asked to sacrifice Isaac rather than to give his own life for a truly noble mission such as fighting against idolatry or fighting against evil? Why doesn’t Abraham plead with God to take his life instead of Isaac’s? Isn’t that what we would do in the same situation?

The answer may be connected to the birth of Isaac. At the beginning of this parsha Abraham and Sarah host three visitors. One says “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” When their son is born, he is given the name Isaac, which comes from the

preceding parsha of Lech L'kha where God actually names Isaac, which means 'he laughs'. There is a lot of laughter from both Abraham and Sarah over the idea that this elderly couple would give birth to a child. Rabbi Hirsch says "this name, which God had commanded Abraham to give, is derived from the word laughter, for by all the laws of nature the very idea of his birth was 'laughable'." The Eitz Chaim chumash in Lech L'Kha says "Isaac's birth represents the triumph of God over the limitations of nature." The name Isaac is a daily reminder that Isaac's birth is a gift from God. It is a constant reminder of how Sarah and Abraham laughed at the idea of even having a child. The message from these verses is that it would not have happened without God.

The Stone Chumash commentary says "God could just as easily have given a child to Sarah in her prime, but that would not have been perceived to demonstrate Divine intervention".

Abraham and Sarah realized that the birth of Isaac was a gift from God. That is why I believe that Abraham didn't offer his own life instead of Isaac's. That is the reason he didn't argue with God. Isaac was a miraculous gift and Abraham accepted the limits of that gift. If God wanted to take Isaac's life how could Abraham argue? Isaac wouldn't have existed except for the intervention of God. The test from God was not just that Abraham would do whatever God asks without question. The test was to see if Abraham realized that his son Isaac was a gift; that man doesn't own his children; that ultimately one's child belongs to God and that God can take away that child. Today we don't think that way. We can create children with in vitro fertilization. We can look into the womb to see the sex of a child and even operate on the fetus.

We feel like we are in control during the birth of our child except when we're not.

Complications occur. A child is born and is immediately swept away by the nurse and brought to the NICU. The doctors tell you that the child is having trouble breathing but as long as the numbers stay above a certain baseline all will be well. However, each day that baseline number is reduced as the test results decline. Each day your child's condition worsens. Then on Friday night the doctors arrange for a family meeting where they tell you that there is a very good chance that your child will not survive the weekend. The doctors are doing the best that they can. What do you do? What can you do? Things look bleak. You pray that your child survives. You pray that you can watch your child grow. You pray to God to at least let your child celebrate a 13th birthday or maybe even a 25th birthday. Those were my prayers; my prayers for our youngest daughter; prayers that were answered.

The Akeidah teaches us that we need to sacrifice to carry out God's wishes. In this parsha Abraham is asked to give up Isaac, a child he would never have had without divine intervention. Yes, we may need to sacrifice to carry out God's commandments, but the Akeidah also teaches us that your child is a gift from God and that this gift must be treasured every day.