



Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Vayera: The Akeida's Contrary Commitments

This week we read the formidable story of the Akeida. I have frequently avoided this great story in my teaching precisely because its questions are so great, the challenges so deep; after all, why does Abraham argue to save Sedom but does not question the command to sacrifice his son? Why does God ask Abraham to kill his son, and then reverse the command at the very last moment? What is to be learned from this story?



This week, I share a short passage from a book by Uriel Simon, one of Israel's leading Modern-Orthodox bible professors. I have found his reading of the Akeida quite powerful and it resonates with me:

The Biblical Abraham: The Blessing of Contradictions

The contradiction [of the Akeida] is, to use a contemporary phrase, the tension between "religious obligation" on the one hand, and "human obligation" on the other; between Abraham's commitment to God and his commitment to his son, Isaac. Do we genuinely entertain the thought that in the episode of the "Akeida" Abraham reached his highest religious achievement as a servant of God by denying his human duty as a father to his son?

Abraham expresses his absolute dedication to God by means of a single word: "Hinneni!" (22:1). Even before he hears the mission of which he is being charged, he proclaims his total adherence to God: "Here I am before you with all my soul, with all my might." And though this absolute commitment would seem not to leave any space for any other commitment, when Isaac begins tentatively to ask questions, as he and Abraham ascend Mount Moriah, Abraham doesn't hesitate to respond to his son, Isaac, with the self-same word: "Hinneni", adding in a loving tone: "my son". One might think that a person who is proceeding to sacrifice his child by divine command, would not be allowed to respond to his son with the word "Hinneni" which clearly implies the willingness to be fully responsive to his child's request. Nonetheless, Abraham takes himself to this terrifying point of tension, with this double commitment that is a contradiction in terms. To Abraham it is obvious that he continues to be a father to his son, until the moment that Isaac is taken from him. The sacrifice that God has demanded is formidable precisely

because Isaac is, in God's words: "Your only son, who you love" (22:2). Abraham's total love for Isaac expresses itself in his response "Hinneni", precisely in the same manner that he answered "Hinneni" to God.

... When Abraham lowered the slaughter-knife to the neck of his son, he was addressed a second time from the heavens, and he answered yet again: "Hinneni!" This statement confirmed Abraham's complete commitment to God. Abraham was unable to free himself from the conflict of the double commitment, but the angel freed him from that contradiction by categorically forbidding him from harming the boy. From this moment forth, the "Hinneni" of divine commitment is not contradictory to the "Hinneni" towards his son, because it has been clarified that in truth, God has no desire for human sacrifice, and He even commands Abraham in the strongest terms to desist from it. Once Abraham had decided in favor of his religious commitment, the angel of God gave divine credence to his human commitment.

...the blessing of Abraham to his descendants throughout time, is in a large way, the blessing of contradictions; the phenomenal ability to take polar emotions, antithetical values, and fuse them into a dialectical perfection that produces a religious-ethical Torah of Life." (Uriel Simon, "Seek Peace and Pursue It" [Hebrew] pg.54)

Please Discuss

The Akeida is a challenging story:

- Uriel Simon says that God knew exactly how difficult this was for Abraham. He says: "Take your son; your only son; Isaac" emphasizing that this is an impossible task. What was God trying to achieve by asking Abraham to perform this act?
- Abraham reaches a point where he has the knife ready and then an angel of God commands Abraham to desist, to stand down, to save the child. How might Abraham have felt at that moment?
- What is Uriel Simon trying to communicate when he speaks of Abraham's dual and contrary commitments? What does his message mean for us?

I have at times heard people suggest that Abraham "failed" the test of the Akeida; that he should have refused or argued. I don't feel that is consonant with the tone of the text of chapter 22 nor with our Jewish tradition which views this moment as a peak-moment in Abraham's history, albeit a painful and terrifying one. Likewise, the story does not champion the murder of children. Instead, the message of the story is paradoxical. Abraham reaches the point at which he is willing to kill his son for God's name, but then, God informs Abraham that he repudiates human sacrifice; and Abraham "discovers" the idea that animal sacrifice is a perfect surrogate, and a symbolic token to his absolute dedication.

For Prof. Simon, the Akeida is about the fact that we are fully committed to God and fully committed to our humanity, and though these commitments seem to be mutually exclusive, we do hold them with equal tenacity. At times, we do have to make a choice. In Jewish history, there have been moments when communities faced with forced-conversion opted for martyrdom, to sacrifice their lives, to express their God commitment over their human commitment. That is the essence of our religious dedication. And yet, human compassion has always been a hallmark of Judaism, Shabbat

for example, is pushed aside when a life is in peril, and Judaism has always abhorred human sacrifice. The beauty and power of the Akeida is this paradox, this contradiction, which Jews have always carried with them.

Shabbat Shalom!