

CLASS 26 - VAYERA

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AKEIDAS YITZCHAK

After a wait of many years, Avraham and Sarah have finally received a gift from G-d, a son to follow in their footsteps, spreading the word of G-d throughout the world.

Sarah was in her nineties, physically unable to conceive a child, much less nurture it to birth. Yet, a miracle occurs, and Yitzchak carries the destiny of the Bnai Yisrael.

Why was it necessary for the child of Avraham be conceived in such a startling manner?

Yitzchak, as well, will face a similar test, and he will be sixty years old, wed for two decades, before he has a child of his own.

True, G-d anticipates the prayers of the righteous, their suffering an incentive to turn towards Heaven for help. However, this idea alone cannot answer our question. Any number of troubles would suffice to induce a heartfelt prayer, the particular difficulty of the Avos in producing children needs an explanation of its own.

It is not easy to raise a Jewish child.

1

Rising from the depths of despair, Yosef emerges from the dungeons of Mitzraim with two sons who are destined to be tribes in Israel.

"And the name of the second he calls Ephraim, for G-d has given me to multiply, in my affliction" (Breishis 41:52)

"By the name of the forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, as it says, regarding them: 'Eifer' (ashes). Avraham: "V'Anochi Ofor V'Eifer"; and Yitzchak was 'Eifer' on the altar. Ephraim implies twice 'Eifer'. For this reason, Israel is called by the name Ephraim, as it says: "HaBen Yakir Li Ephraim". (Da'as Zekeinim, ad. loc.)

But, when were Avraham and Yitzchak burnt to ash?

Actually, they never suffered even minor physical damage, but in their willingness to be sacrificed for the name of G-d, they transform their lives, consumed by the heavenly fire.

Consider: Avraham might have been ash, but he is saved from the furnace of Nimrod, revealing to all the truth of One G-d.

Yitzchak ascends the altar, taking this process one step further: "Our Sages say that his soul left him at the time of the Akeida, subsequently, it was returned to him." (Rabbeinu Tzaddok HaKohen)

Let us explain.

The name Yitzchak spells the words 'Ketz Chai' - the end of life.

From a G-dly perspective, Yitzchak did give up his life on Har HaMoriah. The balance of his years mark a different type of existence, a life in which he sees only the will of Hashem.

This was his own Tchas HaMeisim, his deeper look at G-d's world made possible by the sacrifice of everything he once knew.

It is only from this point on that Yitzchak fathers children of his own.

Meaning this: the very existence of the Jewish people, their past, present, and future, stands on the life that emerges from the ashes.

The creation of the Jewish people, and their continued existence, is a supernatural phenomenon, undeterred by the normal flow and pattern of human history.

This is true not only of the Bnai Yisrael as a whole, but for each individual Jew as well. Hence, though the wait of the Avos is nearly interminable, from the depths of darkness illumination shines, a new child is born.

G-d is suddenly seen, peering through the cracks, infiltrating the armor of an indifferent world.

The Avos relinquish all claim to a physical spot in this world, exchanging their mortal existence for an eternal transcendence. This home that they create stands on Har HaMoriah. It is the foundation of our Temple, birthplace of our nation.

These are the ashes of Efraim, the child G-d holds dear.

2

The Shofar of Rosh HaShanah connects us to the ram of Yitzchak, our reminder to G-d of the animal offered in his place.

"And the Rishonim have written, the idea is for man to appear as if he were bound up for sacrifice, giving his life for G-d, and with intent, in trembling and fear, as if he is being led to the slaughter, to be offered upon the altar" (from the introduction to Tekias Shofar, Siddur Ishei Yisrael)

This concept finds a striking parallel in our own prayers - the words of Tachanun, recited twice weekly:

"Look from heaven and see that we have become an object of scorn and derision among the nations, we are regarded as sheep led to the slaughter, to be killed, beaten, destroyed, and humiliated."

Klal Yisrael is born at the altar, and there they remain. The ashes of Yitzchak are more than the merit of our fathers - they are the basis of our existence.

Yitzchak achieved much more than a moment of glory. His sacrifice was not a one-time affair, but the dedication of his life, the balance of his days offered in devotion to the service of G-d. It is here that the Jewish people find life, and to wander from this altar puts their very existence at risk.

It is true.

We are sheep led to the slaughter.

We can do this in one of two ways:

We can walk happily, together with the Avos, bound for the sacrifice of Har HaMoriah, sanctifying our lives for His Avodah. In our wake, Yishmael and Eliezer will lag behind, their future bound up with the donkey, oblivious of the mountain of G-d.

Or, we can be led to the slaughter in any case, dragged against our will to a fate we cannot ignore.

All this explains the puzzling question of the Jewish role in history, a wandering nation, driven from home wherever they turn.

We have no life on this world.

Nothing but dust and ash.

"And I will remember the covenant of Ya'akov, and also the covenant of Yitzchak, and also the covenant of Avraham I will remember....." (VaYikra, 26, 42)

".....and why is memory not mentioned in regards to Yitzchak? For the ashes of Yitzchak appear before Me, piled in place upon the altar." (Rashi, ad. loc.)

".....U'B'Chol Zos, Shimcha Lo Shachachnu, Na, Al Tishkacheinu"

".....But, despite all this, we have not forgotten Your Name - please, don't forget us."

Is it necessary to pray that we not be forgotten?

Perhaps it is we who have forgotten, losing sight of the sacrifice of Yitzchak, a life turned to ashes upon the altar.

So long as we remember, G-d Himself will never forget.

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