

# JUST SAY "YES"

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And it was after these things that G-d tested Avraham, and he said to him 'Avraham,' and he responded, 'here I am.'" [22:1]*

Thus begins the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Akeidah -- the test of Abraham.

Many people today are perplexed by this story [and it is to one of those people that we owe this week's Dvar Torah]. How could Abraham, our holy forefather, have even contemplated such a revolting act? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for him to refuse, to protest, to fight for Isaac's life?

The question is strengthened because we know to what extent Abraham promoted the value of life, in an era when others did not. Why do we believe that child sacrifice is revolting? Because Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov promoted that belief! Today, through Christianity and Islam, this has spread throughout much of the world, but child sacrifice was something practiced by other nations when Abraham was alive.

So how could Avraham have abandoned all of his teaching, and gone off so quickly to sacrifice his own son?

First of all, we must get past the erroneous idea that Abraham might have refused. G-d spoke to Abraham directly and instructed him to do this. Abraham was not an unstable individual having delusions, nor was he a false prophet. He lived his life acknowledging that G-d's understanding of the world is greater than his or any human being's. Saying "no" to a mitzvah, a Commandment of G-d, was not an option!

This is actually the crucial difference between the Sacrifice of Isaac, and the earlier account of Abraham's "debate with G-d" concerning the inhabitants of S'dom and Amorah. In that situation, Abraham was not called upon to act, and thus he was free to pray to G-d and argue on behalf of those people, although he well knew that the cities were snake pits of evil. But concerning the direct order to go and sacrifice his own son -- he exhibited the trait of "na'aseh v'nishmah", we will do even before we listen, before we understand, which his descendants later pledged at Mt. Sinai.

But if we look more deeply into the story, we will realize that the strongest point of our question, is the answer. It is the idea that Avraham had promoted an ideology completely at odds with the surrounding cultures, and was now called upon to adopt their practices in the most dramatic

possible way -- one which would destroy his family as well as his career -- that made the Akeidah such a tremendous, heroic act. This was the test.

Avraham was very old. One would imagine that his legacy, his posterity was tremendously important to him -- both his children, and his ideas. His entire teaching career had been spent doing G-d's will, and drawing the idolators around him away from idolatry and towards G-d and Jewish values -- including, of course, the belief that sacrificing children is revolting.

That, of course, presents a question: how much did Avraham do because it was G-d's will, and how much did he do because he got to be the big Rabbi? Avraham, the great teacher, with thousands of students, had become a celebrity because of his religious outlook. So how could one know that he was really a servant of G-d, rather than a televangelist huckster trading prayers for fame and fortune?

G-d Knew the answer, of course, but Avraham needed to demonstrate that commitment in order to reach his spiritual potential. "Matters of the heart do not matter" -- potential is realized through action. So G-d asked him to destroy everything -- his life's work, as well as his own child, his "unique one" whom he had understood would succeed him in that life's work, in order to demonstrate that Avraham was not motivated by glory, fame, or even his own perception of humanitarian values. The test had to be something which Jewish values -- Avraham's teaching for a lifetime -- found repulsive.

Avraham's logical reaction, instinctive reaction, emotional reaction, and, yes, humanitarian reaction to the Akeidah -- all were exactly our reaction, because we inherited Avraham's values. G-d was demanding that Avraham uproot his every other instinct to demonstrate his adherence to G-d.

So the complaint that Avraham should have refused reflects a tremendous misunderstanding of what was demanded of him. He was tested to see whether he would abandon his life's work, the teaching of Jewish values, and his son's life, in order to demonstrate that he did everything for G-d and not for his own glorification.

When we do good deeds of whatever nature, we too must always attempt to do what G-d wants of us, rather than acting for our own honor, or our own personal sense of what we imagine to be good. We have the potential to do good even when it will prove embarrassing to us personally -- and that is true greatness.