

IN G-D WE TRUST

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

After all these events, G-d tested Avraham and said to him, "Avraham," and he answered, "I am here."
(Bereishit 22:1)

This week's parshah is, for the most part, famous for the Akeidah, because it is symbolic of the extent to which a Jew is supposed to trust G-d and His plan for Creation. Though I have heard from some frustrated parents of teenagers, "What was the big deal? If G-d asked me to sacrifice my child, I'd do it in a second," I don't think they mean it, or understand what it truly meant for Avraham.

Imagine starting up a business from scratch and watching it grow after many years and much hard work into a thriving business, until it becomes your pride and joy. Day-after-day you go to work and marvel at how the business has grown from a tiny little operation in some cheap rented office space to a large commercial building that bears the name of your company, a symbol of quality. You muse to yourself, "This is the kind of business a father usually hands over to his child at some point in time."

But that thought only saddens you, since unfortunately until that time you and your wife have yet to be blessed in that area of life. Friends of yours without businesses to give over to their children already have several children, but not you and your wife. And, as the two of you start to age, you wonder if your business, into which you have invested so much of your life, will merely be sold to the highest bidder. The idea only depresses you.

Then, all of a sudden, a miracle happens. You come home and your wife is smiling like never before. You can't imagine why, having almost given up all hope at the prospect of having a child, so you almost fall flat on the floor when she tells you the good news: she's going to have a baby. "A WHAT?" you exclaim as a tear of joy forms in the corner of your eye.

All of a sudden your lives have turned around completely, and with each passing month the anticipation of a long-awaited addition to the family grows, as does the meaning in your life. Even going to work each day is a new experience because it becomes your gift to your future heir when he finally grows up and is ready to step into the shoes of his father.

Thank G-d, both the pregnancy and the birth go well, and the child is born healthy. The Brit is on time and a source of great celebration, not just for you and your wife but for the entire community who knew of your situation and had prayed on your behalf. For everyone, the birth of a child was a

dream come true.

And what a child he is. From an early age he shows great promise, which makes you feel relief since he remains to be an only child and your wife is now past the age that most women become pregnant. With each passing year, your son becomes your true source of pride and joy, until one day there is bad news.

At first there is total shock. A small accident results in a trip to the doctor's office, but a routine test unexpectedly reveals a life-threatening disease in your young son, G-d forbid, and just like that the carpet is pulled out from under the feet of you and your wife. Your mind races as the doctor speaks of the odds of surviving the illness, which are very slim. As the doctor explains the procedure for children with such an illness, you drift off as you consider how all the meaning in your life has drained out of you like blood from your veins.

Dejected, you skip work that morning and instead head for shul. You can't bear to walk through the door of the building that once meant continuity for your family. You even wonder if you wouldn't be better off dying with your son, G-d forbid. Indeed, as the tears start to stream down your face and you break out in a sob, somewhere in the darkness of the corner of the empty shul, you plead with G-d to take you instead of your son.

"Why?" you plead. "Why? Why give us a child just to take him away again?"

Seconds become minutes, and minutes become hours, as you wonder if your life can ever have meaning again. You recall Iyov's words, whose tragedy was surely greater than you own, as he said, "G-d gives and G-d takes away." But, you think to yourself, He has given so much to your friends, and taken away so little from them. True, you have success that they might envy, but what does it mean to you without someone to continue on what you started?

SHABBAT DAY:

He said, "Please, take your son, your only one whom you love, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as a burnt-offering there on one of the hills that I will show you." (Bereishit 22:2)

As you bend lower to put your face into your hands, you knock something which falls to the ground. Realizing that it is a Chumash that has fallen you quickly bend over to pick it up and give it a kiss. As you do so, you notice that the Chumash has opened to this week's parshah, to the section in which G-d commands Avraham to bring his son up as a sacrifice, and the irony is not lost on you. A Divine sign, perhaps?

As you recall the story of the Akeidah and what you learned over the years through the eyes of the many commentaries, you all of a sudden realize that you are going through a similar experience. True, you did not receive a Divine command to bring a perfectly healthy son up as a sacrifice, so you never had a choice in the matter. But, that doesn't change the fact that your son is being taken back by G-d, just as Yitzchak was about to be taken back by G-d after his miraculous birth in his time.

"Maybe this is only a test ..." you think to yourself, but quickly add out loud, "Who am I kidding? I am no Avraham Avinu, and if anything, I probably deserve a punishment, not a test."

As you put your face back into your hands once again and resign yourself to your horrible fate and what lies ahead, you hear the words, "Does it really make a difference?"

A few seconds pass before you realize that those words were not your own, and startled at the realization that you are not alone as you had thought you were, you quickly turn around to see the rabbi of the shul standing behind you, smiling sympathetically.

Seeing your shock and embarrassment, he gently places a comforting hand on your shoulder and says, "I'm really sorry for intruding. I'm sure you would rather be alone. But when I heard crying from across the shul I couldn't help but to see what was the matter. When I saw it was you, I knew why you had come. Your wife had already called me with the news. I am so sorry for the two of you. I know how much your son means to you ... to all of us..."

At which point, you burst out crying all over again. The rabbi sits down next to you and waits what seems like hours, patiently, knowing that there is nothing he can say at the moment that will make things better. Calming down a bit, you say in a barely audible whisper, "For a moment, I was insane enough to compare my situation to Avraham's, if you can imagine that..."

"And why not?" the rabbi answers surprisingly.

"He was a Forefather," you answer. "He was righteous ... and the Jewish people were just starting out at the time ... I am just a simple Jew, probably with a whole list of sins in need of punishment. Can I blame G-d for taking back that which is precious to me and my wife when I have not served him as faithfully as I probably could have throughout the years? Who says I even deserved my son in the first place?"

"What you say may be true," the rabbi answers. "Only you and G-d can know that for sure, and perhaps only G-d in the end. However, regardless," he continues after a slight pause, "you are still being forced to sacrifice your beloved son, just like Avraham Avinu almost did."

"But no one asked me!" you blurt out. "I never chose to do it!" you cry. "I'm not worthy ... or capable of such a holy test..."

"Apparently you are..." the rabbi intones. "And they ARE asking you ... right now."

As you take your face from your hands to look into the rabbi's eyes, you ask, "What do you mean?"

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

Avraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took his two young men with him, and Yitzchak his son. He split wood for the offering and got up and left for the place about which G-d had told him. (Bereishit 22:3)

"I mean," the rabbi continues, "that, how you got to this point may be different than the way that Avraham brought Yitzchak, his beloved son and heir to his legacy, up to Har Moriah. Who knows? Maybe Avraham also thought he had erred and was worthy of punishment, forcing G-d to relent on giving him a son and was now taking him back."

"I never thought of that," you say.

"In fact, in this respect you are the same as Avraham Avinu, and every Jew since the Akeidah who had to give up that which is precious to him for one reason or another."

"And what's that?" you whisper, submissively.

"In the way that you accept the finality and wisdom of the Creator."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, do you remember when we learned the Mesechet Avodah Zarah in the Daf Yomi shiur not too long ago?

"Yes."

"Well, do you remember how at the beginning of the masechta it talks about how the nations of the world, at the End-of-Days, are going to ask G-d for a mitzvah to prove themselves in order to get a portion in the World-to-Come, and how G-d complies by giving them the mitzvah of succah to do?"

Recalling the unusual story, you smile for the first time and add, "And then He makes it blistering hot and forces them out of their succot ..."

"That's right," the rabbi agrees and then asks, "And what happens after that?"

You think for a moment, and then forgetting your own pain, you say with the enthusiasm of a child who has the correct answer for his teacher, "They kick the succah on the way out!"

"Yes they do," the rabbi says approvingly. "And you remember why they kick the succah on the way out?"

"For the very reason that a Jew does not kick the succah on the way out, if it also happens to him."

"Which is?" the rabbi prods.

"Because Hashgochah Pratit has worked against him. The gentile tried to do the mitzvah, and G-d made it impossible for him to do it!"

"Yes he did!" the rabbi rejoins. "Now, what kind of G-d is it that goes ahead and gives you a mitzvah to do and then blocks you from doing it?"

As you ponder the question, it starts to occur to you what kind of connection the rabbi is making to the Akeidah, so you cleverly answer, "The same kind of G-d, I suppose, Who gave Avraham a son at

the age of 100, and then asked for him back 37 years later..."

"Exactly," the rabbi cuts in giving you a friendly pat on the shoulder, "and in a way that is antithetical to the way you have lived your life and taught the world yet!"

There is silence as you absorb the words of the rabbis and contemplate the implications of the comparison.

"So the Akeidah wasn't really about losing a son in the end," you now surmise. It was about whether or not Avraham would kick his succah, so-to- speak, on the way out ... whether he would be uneasy about the task on any level."

"Look," the rabbi qualifies, "it would have been inhumane if Avraham danced with joy the entire way to the Akeidah. Nevertheless, G-d wants partners to help Him complete Creation. And like with any relationship, one with G-d is built upon trust, perfect trust. So, before G-d took Avraham on board for good, He wanted to see, or at least prove to Avraham, just how much he was prepared to trust in G-d's decisions ..."

"Wow," you whisper, truly amazed. "I never thought about the Akeidah in those terms."

"Or," the rabbi added, "what you are going through as well?"

There is a moment of silence, as you consider the wisdom of the rabbi's words, and adjust your way of thinking to incorporate his perspective.

"Do you think," you ask cautiously, "that there is a chance that, just as Yitzchak got a reprieve, that my son ... will ..."

Seeing you struggle with the words, the rabbi jumps in with encouragement, "Who knows? But one thing we know for sure, and that is if we pass our tests in life, we don't always have to go the full distance with them. Miracles are always possible. Sometimes there is an eleventh hour solution to a problem. Sometimes, it turns out that there was no problem to begin with ... After all, there is always the possibility that the doctors misdiagnosed ..."

All of a sudden, your cell phone rings. It's your wife with very important news...

MELAVE MALKAH:

Nefesh HaChaim, Chapter 8

The rabbis taught regarding the Keruvim:

How did they stand? Rebi Yochanan and Rebi Elazar differed; one said, face- to-face, and the other held toward the Bait HaMikdosh. Now, according to the one who said face-to-face, does it not say "toward the House"? This is no question, since here refers to when Israel fulfilled the will of G-d, and there when they acted contrary to the will of G-d (see Rashi). According to the one who says they

stood facing the House, is it not written "toward each other"? [He can answer that it means that] they stood angled to the side, that is, partially toward the House and partially toward each other (see Rashi). (Bava Batra 99a)

The latter opinion could not answer that one verse refers to "when they did the will G-d," since it holds that the main position was toward the House; this would fix the Keruvim in a position emphasizing Israel's disobedience. Tosfot concurs that it makes sense that their main position was to reflect the people's obedience to the will of G-d. If so, then the question is, why did Shlomo have them face off to the side as opposed to directly at each other?

This answer to this question comes from the following discussion:

The rabbis taught: The Torah says, "You will gather in your wheat..." (Devarim 11:14), whereas elsewhere it states, "This Sefer Torah shall never leave your mouth ..." (Yehoshua 1:8). You might think that the latter verse is literal, yet the verse says, "You will gather in your wheat ..." According to Rebi Yishmael, this indicates the need to be involved with mundane activities somewhat. Rebi Shimon bar Yochai says: If so, what will happen to the Torah if a man has to plow, sow, reap, etc.? Rather, when Israel does the will of G-d, their work is done for them; when they don't, then they have to do their own work. (Brochot 35b)

It is difficult to accept that the verse of gathering in wheat refers only to times of disobedience, because the paragraph starts off by saying, "If you listen to My mitzvot ... to love ... and to serve with all your hearts ..." after which it then continues, "You will gather in your wheat". Therefore, what it must mean is as follows.

Rebi Yishmael was not saying that a Jew can forsake Torah altogether even for a moment, G-d forbid, and become involved with a profession. Rather, what Rebi Yishmael was indicating through his holy words was that, during the minimal amount of time a man must tend to his livelihood, his thoughts should still be in Torah.

This is how Rava used to instruct his students when he told them, "During the months of Nissan and Tishrei do not come before me ..." (Brochot 35b). That is, before me specifically, i.e., to his Bait Midrash. For, certainly the students of Rava would not lose time from learning while away in their homes during these periods.

The Talmud says that many tried to follow the way of Rebi Yishmael and were successful, whereas, many tried to follow the way of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai, and were unsuccessful. The emphasis is on the word "many", because it is not possible for the masses in general to spend all their time learning Torah and not be involved somewhat in earning a living. This is what the rabbis have taught:

Any Torah that is not combined with work will not last (Pirkei Avot 2:2).

However, for the individual who finds it possible to spend all of his time learning Torah and serving G-d, it is an obligation for him to do so. For someone like this, it is not correct for him to leave his

learning and service of G-d even for a moment, like Rebi Shimon bar Yochai taught.

If fact, the verse, "You will gather in your wheat" is written in the singular, though it is part of the paragraph beginning, "If you will listen ..." which is written in the plural. In this way the verse alludes to the idea that such individuals are not doing the will of G-d when they unnecessarily leave their Torah learning.

It is well known that one of the Keruvim represented G-d, while the other, His treasured nation. The closeness and adherence of Israel to G-d, or, G- d forbid, the opposite, was indicated by the positioning of the Keruvim, a great miracle. If the Jewish nation "faced" G-d, so would the Keruvim face each other. If they turned away from G-d even a little, this would be reflected by the Keruvim immediately. And, G-d forbid, if they turned their backs toward G-d, then immediately the Keruvim would face back-to- back.

Thus the rabbis taught:

When the Jewish nation came up [to the Temple] on the holidays, [the kohanim] used to role up the Curtain and show them the Keruvim facing each other and say to them, "Look how dear you are to G-d." (Yoma 54a)

Likewise, the Zohar says:

When is He in a state of mercy? When the Keruvim turn ... and face each other ... and since the Keruvim are looking into each other's face everything becomes perfected ... As Israel rectifies its relationship with G-d, thus it is with all of existence. (Terumah 152b)

Later on, it reiterates:

"How nice and pleasant it is when brothers dwell as one." (Tehillim 133:1). With regard to when they face each other, the verse says, "How nice and pleasant it is ..." Woe to the world when they face away from each other ... (Zohar, Acharei Mot 59b)

And again, as long as Israel merited it, the Keruvim cleaved face-to-face; but when they sinned, they turned away from each other. Thus when Israel merited it they faced each other, and through this miracle they knew if they had merit or not ... The verse, "Serve G-d in joy ..." (Tehillim 100:2) ... refers to the joy of the two Keruvim ... since G-d dwelled among them, they could know joy and the world was treated with mercy. (Terumah 43a)

Investigate the source thoroughly ...

Have a great Shabbat,
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Text

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