

TAKING GOD'S COMMANDMENTS SERIOUSLY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God. You have not held back your son, your only one from Me." (Bereishis 22:11)

As Rashi explains, the angel had to add the words, "Do not do anything to him," because Avraham insisted on at least inflicting some kind of wound on Yitzchak, to at least prove his willingness to go through with the Akeidah.

But, to prove what to whom? He knew that God already knew his heart better than he himself knew it. Perhaps he wanted to prove to himself his willingness to sacrifice his beloved Yitzchak, so that he would not doubt his resolve in the future. However, if God is satisfied, shouldn't we be too?

All I know is that if it had been me bound on the altar, and after hearing the angel, on behalf of God, tell my father that he can pack up and go back home with me alive, and I saw a glint in my father's eye that said, "I'm going to do it anyhow," I would have have looked up worried-like at my father and said, rather nervously, "Ah, Dad?"

Why did Avraham Avinu insist on going through with the Akeidah on some level, and if for a good reason, why did Heaven stop him?

To appreciate the answer, we have to first appreciate the time period in which the Avos lived. We tend to assume that history hasn't changed all that much over the millennia, but the truth is, it has changed plenty, especially spiritually.

This is clear by the way earlier generations worried about certain spiritual dangers that don't seem to concern us at all. This is not unusual from a secular point of view, since man was far more superstitious in earlier generations than he is today. However, the rabbis we are talking about were not superstition, just more spiritually sensitive; they knew things we don't know, saw things we don't see, and sensed things we can't sense.

Indeed, the Leshem explains, Nimrod was a mighty trapper, but not only of animals, but specifically of angels, knowing the proper Kabbalistic names to compel Heavenly beings to do his bidding. In fact, when the Tower of Bavel went up, it did so based upon Kabbalah, and with an understanding of man's spiritual potential for evil.

The Ramchal calls the Period of the Avos the Period of Roots, a time in history when what you did

could have a great impact on all future generations. It was a unique period of time when a person not only chose a direction in life for himself, but for all of his progeny as well. That is why only Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov are called Avos—Forefathers, because they really were in every sense of the term.

We see this clearly in last week's parshah. After Lot, Avraham's nephew, was captured in the war, Avraham was forced to gird his loins and fight a battle that was not really his just to save his relative. He did, and was victorious, but not without having to pursue the enemy north and south.

However, while chasing down his enemies, Avraham Avinu ended up passing through locations in Eretz Canaan that his future descendants would also pass through, but not without first experiencing some kind of trouble. And, as Avraham entered various different cities, and had a premonition of what the Jews of the future would encounter there, he prayed to strengthen his future descendants. He made sure that his victories in such places would make possible their victories, hundreds of years later.

That was the power of the Forefathers living in the Period of Roots. Everything they did created a potential for failure or success all through the generations until Yemos HaMoshiach. This was true not just in terms of the example they left, but in terms of the energy they put into the world to be tapped into by all future generations of Jews.

Which brings us back to the Akeidah, and Avraham Avinu's zealous desire to carry through with the Akeidah even after God had freed him of any such responsibility. Just as God knew from the start that Avraham Avinu would pass this tenth and final test, Avraham himself probably also knew that he would pass the test of his life. He had to, if his life was to have any meaning after the Akeidah.

But that was because Avraham Avinu was Avraham Avinu, who lived to serve God, who trusted God so emphatically and completely that he could not imagine doing anything if it was not the will of God. Whatever God would ask Avraham Avinu to do, Avraham Avinu would do it.

However, as time marches on towards the end of history as we know it, up until the transition to Yemos HaMoshiach, the generations would continue to become increasingly spiritually weaker. If the Jews who would eventually witness the miracles of the exodus, and actually hear God speak at Mt. Sinai would also allow a golden calf to be built at the base of the mountain, only 40 days after watching Moshe Rabbeinu ascend to receive the rest of Torah on their behalf, then how much better could the generations after them fare?

Even the ones who would survive that test would soon after reject the gift of Eretz Yisroel failing, effectively, the test of Lech-Lecha. As God told Moshe Rabbeinu on top of Mt. Sinai when comparing him to the Avos, "The don't make them like they used to make them" (Sanhedrin 111a).

Avraham Avinu foresaw that, and wanted to project an energy of self-sacrifice that would carry his descendants until the time when self-sacrifice will no longer be needed. His own willingness to kill

his beloved Yitzchak on command from God was enough to prove himself to God and himself, but would it be enough to inspire and energize his children to do the same when history required it?

The Akeidah was a singular historical opportunity to make sure that it would be, and he was wary of letting it pass without being fully utilized. So he pushed himself beyond what God had demanded, until he could push no further, at which time the angel said, "Don't even harm the boy!"

That's on the level of Pshat. Sod understands this episode a little more deeply.

Kabbalistically, Avraham represented the trait of Chesed, or Kindness, and Yitzchak, the trait of Gevurah, or Strength. They are opposites, literally like fire and water. On our level of reality, Chesed is usually the result of most of the good in Creation, whereas Gevurah is the basis of evil and strict judgment.

Nevertheless, not only can Gevurah be an important ally, it is often what makes people great, because it is also the basis of being strict upon oneself, what we call self-discipline, the key to achieving one's potential in life. When properly applied, it takes Gevurah to have self-control, to keep the yetzer hara in line, and when this is the result, there is nothing that brings greater pleasure to God than this.

Hence, the goal of life is not to destroy Gevurah in Creation, but to harness its power for good. It is to take the same energy that can drive a person to sin, and use it instead to drive the person to accomplish holy things. This result is what Kabbalah calls Mituk HaGevuros, or the Sweetening of the Gevuros, the basis of world rectification and therefore, one's reward in the World-to-Come.

Looking at the Akeidah on this level, we see a rare historical moment. Gevurah, which usually does the binding, is bound. Chesed, which is usually the victim of Gevurah, is in the slaughtering position. That's a lot of symbolism and it was probably not lost on Avraham Avinu who happened to have been one of the greatest astrologists of his time, if not of all of history, and probably a Kabbalist to boot.

After all, as mentioned before, the Tower of Bavel was designed based upon Kabbalah. Why should his generation be privy to such Godly secrets and not the man of God himself? Hence, more than likely, Avraham recognized the position of the Akeidah for what it actually was: the chance to rectify the Gevuros of Creation and usher in Yemos HaMoshiach. Was he to simply abandon such a historical opportunity because he proved himself a loyal follower of God?

Yes, but not because he was not worthy to be Moshiach, or that Yitzchak was unworthy of being the vehicle through whom history would come to its proper end. Rather, it was the world around them that was unworthy of living to see the Messianic Era. Moshiach is always waiting to come in every generation; it's usually the generation that is not ready to welcome him that holds off the final redemption, as it did that fateful day of the Akeidah.

Avraham called the place Hashem-Yireh, after which people said, "On the mountain God will be seen." (Bereishis 22:14)

As Rashi explains, the simple meaning of this verse is: God will select and see for Himself this place to rest His Divine Presence in, and to have offerings brought here. This shows, again, how the actions of the Avos laid the tracks for future generations and events.

However, Rashi also provides another explanation: "God will see" this binding to forgive the Jewish people every year, and to save them from punishment, so that it will be said on this day, "On the mountain of God there will be seen" the ashes of Yitzchak still piled up for atonement. Hence, "this day" refers to Yom Kippur.

Thank God for the ashes of Yitzchak! Only one problem: Yitzchak didn't die, so he certainly wasn't burned. Which ashes are we talking about then?

According to the Talmud, if someone wants to perform a mitzvah but is prevented from doing so for reasons beyond his control, as far as Heaven is concerned, the mitzvah was done, and the reward for doing it is forthcoming (Brochos 6a). Had it not been for extenuating circumstances, father and son would have carried out the Akeidah to its last detail, which would have included the burning of Yitzchak's body as is the case with every Burnt-Offering. Therefore, as far as God is concerned, it is as if the Akeidah actually occurred.

Hence, though we never saw Yitzchak's ashes piled there, or any other place for that matter, God did, and still does. As far as God is concerned, the Akeidah really happened, so-much-so that God forgives us as if it did.

This is probably what Avraham had in mind as well when he insisted on carrying out the Akeidah on some physical level. If he was not going to actually carry out the Akeidah to every last detail, he wanted to make sure that it was for reasons beyond his control, for reasons to do with others, not to do with him or Yitzchak. That way, in Heaven, where it counts the most, the reality of the Akeidah would be real, and count for the Jewish people all through the generations when they need it the most. That was the way the Avos thought; that was the way the Avos worked.

Today, we are long past the Period of Roots, long past the period of the trunk, and even past the period of branches, so-to-speak. At this late period of history, we're the leaves on the tree in full blossom. Indeed, many seasons have already come and gone, with leaves growing and then falling off, only to be replaced by new leaves the next season.

How many more seasons are left? How many more times must the leaves dry up and fall off the tree, only to be replaced by new and fresh one? After three millennia, we're still waiting to find out.

In the meantime, as spiritually ineffective as we may seem to be compared to our ancient ancestors, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that what we do still makes a difference to the world. We are a

spiritually-handicapped generation, but that may just warrant additional Heavenly help to get the job done.

Who knows if the reason why a Jew's plane was forced to stop over in some God-forsaken place was so that he would have to pray there, and leave behind a spiritual impression in that particular place. Perhaps a secular Jew is destined to walk through that place shortly after, and be impacted by the impression of holiness left behind, causing him to start his journey back to Judaism. It's not as far-fetched as you think.

Or, perhaps, by going the extra distance to perform a mitzvah that you knew from the outset that you might fail at, not only will it count for you as a mitzvah, but it will impress Heaven enough to help others you care about with the spiritual energy you created, also not so far-fetched.

In other words, just because we cannot see the impact of our physical actions on the spiritual world does not mean that there isn't great impact. Just because we cannot detect the energy waves emanating out from a mitzvah we either performed, or attempted to perform, does not mean that they are not rippling out into space and affecting realities, ours and those of others.

And, it works both ways, both for good and for bad. As the Ramchal points out, during the Period of Roots, there were some negative Avrahams in the world as well. In other words, just as Avraham Avinu was laying positive spiritual foundations for his future descendants, likewise were the degenerate people of his generation laying bad spiritual foundations for their descendants.

We have to take the potential spiritual impact of our actions, words, and thoughts seriously. If we do not, why should Heaven? And, if we want Heaven to take our mitzvos seriously, then why shouldn't we? We are far down the road since it was first walked by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, but we are still on it; it is still the same road. We can make a difference, a much bigger one than we may think.

Text

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