

# KEY TO HEAVEN

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

***Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there . . . (Bereishis 22:2)***

**Agenda. The word itself** innocently refers to a list of things to be considered or done. When the word "secret" is added to it, as in "secret agenda," the word has a far more notorious connotation that usually means one thing: conspiracy.

Not all secret agendas are bad. Some mean well, and are actually secret for the benefit of others. Most, probably, are not meant to help others. Instead, they allow others to be duped and caught off guard while the one with the agenda gets what he wants with minimal or no cost.

When it comes to God and His agenda, it depends upon with whom He is dealing. If He is dealing with an evil person, then God's agenda will end up trapping the evil person in his own evil. When God deals with righteous people, such as Avraham, then His agenda, even if secret, can only be for the good of the person.

How much do you believe this? How much do you believe it with respect to yourself? How many times have things turned on you and you assumed that God did as well? How many times did your plans go awry and you assumed that God was against you, perhaps punishing you for a wrong doing that you may or may not have recalled?

Greater people have assumed exactly this in their time of distress:

And Yehudah said, "What shall we say to my master? What shall we speak, and how shall we exonerate ourselves? God has found your servants' iniquity, behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and the one in whose possession the goblet has been found." (Bereishis 44:16)

Yosef's brothers had come down during the famine to buy food, free Shimon, and be on their way back home peacefully as soon as possible. They had even hoped to find Yosef alive, and to save him too. Instead, they were framed, accused of stealing, and on the verge of losing Binyomin as well. It was their worst nightmare, and their only explanation was Divine revenge for the sale of Yosef.

They weren't completely wrong. God can do that. He can "pay" us back for bad things we did in the past while bringing about good results in the future. Yosef's brothers had to go through what they did to bring about the proper conclusion to the story. Their agony was not incidental.

The only thing is, they did not think that they had done anything wrong. They felt bad that their

father was inconsolable, but they maintained that ridding the family of Yosef had still been the best thing for the Jewish people. Why did they automatically assume that they were worthy of Divine punishment once things did not go their way? In fact, their unfortuitous circumstances even forced a public admission of guilt!

To begin with, nothing makes a person feel guilty than guilt. People sin and for the most part, they know it. If everything goes their way then they don't think twice about it. The moment life goes against them, however, it is a different story, as it should be:

Rava, and some say, Rav Chisda, says: "If a man suffers, he should examine his actions." (Brochos 5a)

What did Avraham do on his way to the Akeidah? God had blessed him with the son for which he had longed for almost 100 years. Yitzchak was a miraculous son through whom Avraham had planned to pass on his spiritual legacy. Yet, 37 years later he was on his way to sacrifice him, to give him back to God.

What had he done wrong? Had he not appreciated the gift of Yitzchak enough? Had he not worked hard enough to teach him the ways of God? Had he lost favor in the eyes of God and become unworthy of the fantastic ending to his life he thought he would have? Was the Akeidah a punishment?

These questions would not have been a sign of weakness. They would have been a sign of Avraham's humility, who never deemed himself worthy of anything God gave him. He knew enough about God to know that anything God gave him was always only a gift, a chesed. He knew that there is nothing we human beings can do to earn anything, though God gives us so much.

Iyov (who happened to be the reincarnation of Terach, Avraham's father) knew similarly, and said so:

"From my mother's womb I emerged naked, and I will return there naked. God gave and God took. May the Name of God be blessed." (Iyov 1:20-21)

In other words, God owes us nothing. The amazing thing is how many people live their lives as if God owes them just about everything. They don't necessarily thank God enough for the good, but they do make a point of complaining about the bad. It's as if the fact that God made us made us His debtors.

Such a mistaken point of view only emerges from believing more in this world than in the next one. A college student will put up with all kinds of abuse because he believes it will result in a degree than will result in the life of which he dreams. Employees will suffer a lot if they know that it could result in a future promotion.

What would happen to college students who learned that there will not be any jobs for them once they graduate? How will that affect their attitude towards the lifestyle to which they are subjected just to get their degree? How much abuse will an employee take before quitting if promotion seems

next to impossible?

It is a lot easier though to predict a future job or promotion than it is to imagine the World-to-Come. Although it is so talked about, not just in the Jewish religion but in all religions, there is nothing really known about it. It is the best-kept secret in all of history, because as the Talmud states, "only God's eye have seen it."

Even the Torah does not make a direct reference to Olam HaBa—the World-to-Come. That's like describing a demanding college course without mentioning what it will lead to. Few people have ever signed up for such a course just for the course itself. It's Marketing and Advertising 101: people want to know what is in it for them. They need to know how they will benefit from their sacrifices.

The trouble with a benefit, especially when it comes to serving God, is that it reduces the need to sacrifice oneself for a relationship with God. It becomes an ulterior motive to do the right thing, at least partially. Ironically, it even reduces one's ultimate reward in the World-to-Come, which is why we are told:

Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon HaTzaddik. He would say: "Do not be as servants who serve their master for the sake of reward. Rather, be as servants who serve their master not for the sake of reward, and the fear of Heaven should be upon you. (Pirkei Avos 1:3)

This was the Akeidah. It was a test of Avraham's faith in God, but in truth, he passed that last week, as the Torah testifies:

And he believed in God, and He accounted it to him as righteousness. (Bereishis 15:6)

Rather, the Akeidah was a test of Avraham's belief in Olam HaBa, in his understanding that this world is only a corridor to the next one. Last week Avraham graduated top of his class as far as believing in God of the world. This week Avraham is doing post-graduate work, showing how much he takes serious the idea that God is God of the World-to-Come as well, and that this world is just the way to meet Him there.

When God asked Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as the Akeidah, He was really asking him to sacrifice Olam HaZeh, this world. This was the hidden agenda of God through which Avraham, if he complied, would distinguish himself from the rest of the nations of the world in the most incredible way possible.

Successful, not only did Avraham earn the "key" to the World-to-Come for himself. He earned it on behalf of all his descendants who would ever live with the same belief. This is something that becomes evident from a person's "God owes me nothing" attitude, and his willingness to sacrifice this world to get to the next one.