

ABRAHAM'S WILL IS GOD'S WILL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

It will come as a surprise to no one that the Torah, and Judaism generally, apparently values human life above all else. Rare are the cases to be found in the Jewish story and in halacha where human life is not the primary value that trumps all other behavior and ideals. The story of the akeida - of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Almighty and at the last moment being prevented by Heaven from so doing - is illustrative of this idea of the sanctity of human life.

However as noble as this idea is, it many times wilts in the face of dire practical circumstances. The best and worst example of this problem is the conduct of war. There is no war without killing humans and the Torah in its narrative and value system certainly recognizes war as a reality and sometimes as a necessity.

The current debate in the Western world regarding the funding of stem cell research faces the moral dilemma of the permissibility of killing human fetuses in the process of possibly saving other humans from diseases, genetic and otherwise.

In the Torah itself, the kind, hospitable and righteous Abraham himself goes to war to rescue his kinsman Lot. It is obvious that the value of human life, dominant as it is in Judaism, is never quite absolute. And this therefore poses the moral questions that every generation, nation and even an individual eventually must face in life and society: When is taking a life justified?

Halacha provides some guidance on the subject, allowing for self defense, preemptive strikes and the execution of criminals who threaten society's existence. Jewish history also provides us with some insight on the matter, approving suicide, for instance, over forced conversions or a life of shame.

Because of this elasticity in what appears at first to be an absolute value, many questions are raised - and almost always in heartbreaking instances. The question of mercy killing and euthanasia remains on the agenda of the rabbinic responsa in our time though it is basically forbidden in Jewish society. Abortion is also opposed in Jewish law but individual respectable rabbinic advisors and decisors in some exceptional instances have allowed it.

The general rules and outlines are clear but in individual cases the matter becomes fuzzy. Maybe that is why Midrash sees Abraham himself as being conflicted over the issue of the akeida even after the angel of God instructs him not to sacrifice Isaac. The supreme test lies in the ability of humans to conform their behavior to God's will. That is the only truly absolute value in Judaism which allows for

no exceptions or deviations.

Abraham is rewarded for his willingness to sacrifice his son and he is rewarded for not actually going through with the sacrifice. The common denominator in Abraham's seemingly contradictory behavior is his constant willingness to accept God's will and behave accordingly. This attitude has become the basis for all halachic decisions and Jewish behavior over the ages - the continued attempt to understand and follow through upon God's will. That is Abraham's legacy to us.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com