

# ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

From Rav Binny

## **(Portion of Vayera)**

*Akeidat Yitzchak*; the binding of Isaac: One of the most challenging stories in Jewish history, when a parent, four thousand years ago, is asked to do the unthinkable; to sacrifice his only beloved son, in the name of...what?

Most people think this is an ancient legend, but it is a script that is all too familiar today, to so many families in Israel.

*As long as I live, I will never forget her screams: "Lamah? Lamah? Al Ta'azov Oti'!" "Why? Why? Don't leave me!"*

*It was supposed to have been such a happy day; I was finally getting out. After four and a half years in the Israeli army, I had finally received my honorable discharge, and had spent the previous day giving back my gear; this was supposed to have been my first day of real freedom. No one to tell me where to go, no orders to analyze and fulfill, no inspections, patrols, guard duty stints or maneuvers; just a long, lazy day in the August sunshine.*

*And it was all so grand, until I sat down to watch the news that night, and the nightmare unfolded on the screen.*

*My unit had finished a long period of maneuvers, and for the first time in a while had drawn what was thought to be a 'good' station: patrols on the Jordanian border, which was all quiet, especially relative to the areas in Lebanon we had been in last time around.*

*Normally, I would have gone with them, but as I was getting out the next day, there was no reason to 'learn the area' so I was done.*

*A Jordanian soldier, a Muslim fanatic, they said, had snuck across the border and ambushed one of the patrols, and Ronnen, a sergeant from our battalion with whom I had shared many a long night, was killed. News like that hits you right in the gut.*

*So the next day, instead of a long lazy day, I celebrated my freedom at Ronnen's funeral.*

*Ever been to a Sephardic (Middle Eastern) funeral? It's a lot different from the more western, Ashkenazi funerals. In the west, they tell you to keep a stiff upper lip, though one hears the occasional muffled sob, as the family tries to maintain a certain dignity, and keep it all together. But the Sephardim are different; they just let it all hang out: screaming and crying hysterically, and even a lot of yelling. I will never forget the sheer tragedy of Ronnen's mother, inconsolable in her grief. At one point, screaming and shouting, she literally threw herself on her son's coffin, refusing to let him go, and screaming: "Lamah? Lamah? Al Ta'azov Oti'!" Why? Why? Don't leave me!"*

So how do you answer such a question? Lamah? Why? Why does G-d let these things happen? Why do people get tested? What exactly is G-d trying to figure out?

This week's portion, *Vayera*, which contains the story of the binding of Isaac, is not some ancient story we are meant to remember. In every community in Israel there are modern day Abraham's and Sarah's who have been left to struggle with this question every day. So what are we to do with all this? Perhaps a closer look at the story of the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, is in order:

*"And it was, after these things, and G-d tested Abraham." (Bereishit 22:1)*

G-d now presents Abraham with what must be viewed as his greatest challenge: the binding of Isaac.

*"Take your son, your only son, the son whom you love so much, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up there as a whole offering, on one of the mountains that I will tell you of (show you)."*

This then, is the test: Abraham is now meant to offer up his only son, Yitzchak, as an offering to G-d, and somehow, this is supposed to demonstrate... what? What on earth could possibly be the motivation behind such a test? What are we meant to learn from it?

And most of all: why must this be such an integral part of life?

How can a world in which loving parents are meant to lower their sons, their only sons, (and indeed every son is an only son, because there never was and never will be another son just like him) whom they love so much, into the ground, be part of the same world that G-d describes as being "very good" (Genesis 1:31), at the conclusion of the six days of the creation of matter?

What is the purpose of all these tests we seem to encounter so often in life?

The Talmud, in struggling with the question of human suffering in this world, actually makes a very challenging statement:

*"Yesurin Ovrin Al Ha'Adam, Ye'pashpesh Be'Ma'Asav."*

*"If a person suffers travail, let him leaf through his actions (like a book)." (Berachot 5a)*

This damning statement seems to imply that if a person is suffering, he or she must have done something to deserve it! Could this be the approach we are meant to take?

Indeed, elsewhere in the Talmud, in *Moed Katan*, the Talmud suggests: *"Chayei, Bani, U'Me'zoni, Lo' Be'Zechuta Talya' Milta, Ela' be'Mazla."* "A person's life, children ('s health), and livelihood, are not dependent on merit, but rather on Mazel, luck." In other words, don't assume the challenges and suffering a person experiences, or for that matter even the joy and rewards they seem to receive, have anything to do with whether or not they are a good person. All of this is simply *mazel*, luck, or even fate.

So... which is it? Is our suffering our own fault, or simply bad 'luck'? And would it be a comfort to know that tragedy was just bad luck?

The end of this story, which seems to share the point of it all, is even more puzzling: Just as Abraham is ready to fulfill this most horrible of commands, an angel calls out in a heavenly voice "*Don't send out your hand to the lad... for now I know ("Atah Yadati") that you are truly in awe of G-d ("Yareh' Elokim")*". (22:12)

What does this mean? How can G-d (even speaking through the voice of an angel, whatever *that* means...) now know something? Doesn't G-d know everything, always? Could there be something G-d didn't know before? The premise is ridiculous!

So the **Ramban** (Nachmanides) suggests: "*Al Tikri' Ya'dati, Elah' Ho'dati*"; in a play on words, the Ramban says "*Don't read that G-d now knows, but rather, G-d has now made known.*"

In other words, somehow, Abraham achieves something here that only G-d knew he was capable of. Until this moment the Abraham that 'passes' the test of the binding of Isaac, existed only in potential. Now, through this episode, that potential was transformed into reality. In fact, many commentaries suggest that this is indeed the entire basis for the concept of trials and tribulations in this world: that through our struggles we live up to the potential of all that we can be.

But this idea, worthy of discussion though it may be, still leaves one feeling very challenged. What is all this for? Why does G-d have to do all this, in order to make us grow? Who really wants to discover their ability to live (and suffer) through such an ordeal, simply in order to discover who they are after the ordeal? What purpose can this possibly serve?

There is a fascinating comment that **Rashi** makes at the beginning of this story. Noting that the command of G-d is "*Ha' Alehu*", "*Offer him up*", Rashi says:

*"Lo' Ne'emar Shachtehu, Elah' Ve'Ha' Alehu"*

*"It does not say 'slaughter him; rather it says 'Offer him up'."* (22:2; Rashi ad. loc.)

What is Rashi suggesting here? What is the implied difference between slaughtering Yitzchak, and offering him up? After all, wasn't Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son, and slaughter him on the altar before G-d? Indeed, the end of this story clearly has Abraham; knife in hand, ready to do just that, when an angel arrives on the scene just in time to save the day?

What if Abraham actually was not sure what Hashem (G-d) really wanted of him? And what if this was precisely the point of the entire exercise! And what if Rashi is making exactly this point? You see, Abraham lived in a time when it was the norm to sacrifice one's sons to the Gods. Indeed, dying for G-d was exactly what the people of Abraham's day would have assumed this test to be. But, says Rashi, G-d doesn't ask Abraham to slaughter (meaning to destroy, or kill) his son; rather he asks him to offer him up. The challenge, Judaism suggests, in this world is not to die for G-d; the real question is *can you live* for G-d.

Indeed, there are indications in the text that may support this idea. As an example, at the beginning of this story, it is G-d Himself who speaks with Abraham, but at the end of the story, G-d's word comes to Abraham through the vestige of an angel, something that indicates a certain distancing from G-d. One might suggest that you cannot pick up a knife to slaughter your son, and not end up distanced from G-d, however much it may be a part of what G-d wants you to do (something I learned very clearly in the army...).

But one might equally suggest that Abraham is distanced from G-d because he misunderstood what G-d wanted, which was the point of the entire exercise.

Maybe the world, at a time when men were glorifying death in battle, and throwing their sons alive into religious fires, needed to learn, through one incredible individual, that the real challenge is how to live, and not just how to die.

Every day, in every moment, we make a choice, a choice of life over death. And it is in that choice that we discover not only who we are, but also all that we can be.

Shabbat shalom,

**Binny Freedman**