Did Abraham Fail The Divine Test?

Says "Shall not the JUDGE

Torah Portion VAYera

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Efrat, Israel — If one had to choose a Biblical moment which evokes awe, confusion, inspiration, fear and terror all at once, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the *Akeda*, stands out as unique. For thousands of years commentators have grappled with this unsettling, disturbing event, which with one stroke of the knife, threatens to dissolve Abraham's world as well as his world-order.

Abraham has been continuously promised that the nation which shall emerge from his own loins will, against all odds, survive and declare the name of the One God to the entire world. Behold Abraham's God is the true God, the world must have declared when aging Sarah gave birth to Isaac. And now Abraham is expected to destroy that very miracle.

Moreover, Abraham's message to the world was one of ethical monotheism, of a God who created the human being in His own image, who deplored immorality and bloodshed. Is Abraham now to preach child sacrifice? Hasn't his very ministry been the exact antithesis of Moloch's blood-thirsty path? And on a personal and existential level, how can God ask a human being, especially such a devoted servant, to sacrifice his future, his son, the most significant extension of himself?

What compounds Abraham's dilemma is that sacrificing his son Isaac is tantamount to sacrificing his entire dream, the dream of the One God, the One people, the One world.

Tragedy, however, is halted. The verdict of Biblical commentaries is that by subjugating his own will before God's will, Abraham proves to be the ever-faithful servant whose immense faith in the face of this tenth, and final, test, is rewarded. A ram trapped in a thick grove suddenly appears, and Isaac, as well as Abraham's dream, is saved.

Most commentators approach this difficult story of the *Akeda* from Abraham's point of view. Maimonides, for example, sees it as a fundamental continuation of the truth of prophecy. Upon hearing God's word, Abraham has no choice. He does what he does because he has heard the Divine command, and a true prophet cannot behave in any other way.

Theologians like Soren Kierkegaard, or closer to our own age, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, understand that Abraham is being taught the essential lesson in religious worship — suspending one's own judgment.

Shouldn't Abraham have expressed concern with a fellow human being's suffering, even if it weren't his own son?

In his classic work, *Fear And Trembling*, Kierkegaard is himself shaken by Abraham's 'fear and trembling,' but in the end he understands how Abraham's judgments must give way for God's.

Similarly, Leibowitz would argue that since the Torah's task is not to teach ethics, we are not supposed to extract an ethical message from Abraham's behavior. Abraham was being commanded to suspend his own will for the will of God, no matter how deeply it collides with his own conscience. In effect, the human being is not commanded by the Torah to be ethical; he is rather commanded to serve God.

But what if we look at the *Akeda* from a different perspective? Should Abraham's silence be seen as heroic? When God says, "Take your son, your only son, your beloved son, Isaac," [Gen. 22:2] why is there no word of protest, something . . . anything? When it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham eloquently of all the earth do justly?" [Gen. 18:25] And how he convinces God to reconsider His decree of destruction, bargaining down from 50 righteous people to only ten, is one of the most moving scenes in the Bible.

When it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham judges God from the perspective of what is ethically proper. ("Can the Lord agree to) even destroy the righteous together with the evil?" (Ibid). That would hardly be fair, argues Abraham before God.

It may be suggested that perhaps Abraham may very well have failed his tenth and final test. Perhaps God expected Abraham to have pleaded for Isaac, to have taken a firm stand against child sacrifice — to have resisted, pleaded and begged, on behalf of Isaac just as he resisted on behalf of Sodom. What if the command to sacrifice Isaac was not meant to test Abraham's powers of self denial but rather his ability to challenge God on behalf of the ethical and the right? Perhaps God was waiting for Abraham to refuse.

We find evidence for this reading in the text itself. After the *Akeda*, God never speaks to Abraham again. Indeed, it is an angel — and not God Himself, who prevents Abraham from this act. This is quite strange considering that we usually think of this as Abraham's greatest moment. But if it were, it stands to reason that God should not have cut off all communication with Abraham in the future.

Abraham, the perfect servant is indeed given a reward for his obedience, but he loses the greatest reward of all: fellowship with a God who speaks to him directly.

After all, in a later generation, the debacle of the Golden Calf and God's plan to destroy the entire nation and start anew with Moses alone, finds Moses absolutely rejecting the offer. Instead he argues against the Divine suggestion and debates with his creator, "O God, why unleash Your wrath against Your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a 'show of force?. . ." [Ex. 32:11-13] In the end God succumbs to Moses. And the greatest leader of all is born.

One of the great spiritual heroes of recent times is the Chasidic leader Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. He once rose in the midst of the Yom Kippur synagogue service and cried out to God "Enough! What have your people done that You continue to make them suffer? Have we not suffered enough? I refuse to leave this place until You forgive Israel."

If nothing else, shouldn't Abraham have expressed concern with a fellow human being's suffering, even if he weren't his own son?

In effect, after the Binding of Isaac, Abraham's career is over: we never see him directly encountering or being encountered by God again.

Can it be that God is teaching all future generations that we must categorically reject any unethical act — even if it is suggested in His own name?

This interpretation is not very different from that of Rashi who suggests that Abraham did not really understand God correctly in the first place. After all, God did not say: "slaughter your son," what he did say was "Lift up your son to the service of God."

In effect, therefore, although God knew that Abraham may understand him incorrectly, he was attempting to teach Abraham and all subsequent generations that it is absolutely forbidden to sacrifice one's child to God.

On a more personal level both literal sacrifice and figurative sacrifice are likewise forbidden. One dare not neglect one's children on the alter of divine service no matter how significant that service may be.

Our priest/teachers are commanded to marry and have children because our religion teaches that love of God ought not exclude but must rather increase one's commitment of family.

The story of Abraham and Isaac teaches all of us that sacrifice and dedication are two separate concepts and we dare not sacrifice our loved ones in dedication of God.

Shabbat Shalom.