

*Vayera: Questions and Comments on the Akedah*  
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 12, 2022 18 Heshvan 5783

How we interpret this story shapes the way we relate to the Bible, Judaism and God. For some, this story is so morally scandalous that they reject all of that. For others, this story is so spiritually sublime that they model their lives after it. It raises so many questions. I offer these answers:

**Did God really want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?** No, because God detests human sacrifice. **How do we know that?** Because the Torah has already declared its abhorrence for the shedding of innocent human blood: **Shofekh dam ha-adam/ ba-adam damo yishafekh. Whoever [now] sheds human blood, "by humans." shall his blood be shed, for in God's image he made humankind.** (Gen. 9:6).

In his argument with God earlier in this parasha, Abraham has already demonstrated his abhorrence of the shedding of innocent human blood. Since human sacrifice involves the shedding of innocent human blood, it is unjust and immoral. Even if God commands it. Thus, from the outset, Abraham apprehends the moral *thicket* he is in: God's command in conflict with God's moral nature. Abraham's virtue, (his willingness to follow God) in conflict with his own self-interest, his need for progeny.

**Does he know this is a test?** Absolutely. **Well, how do we know that?** Because from the time that God first spoke to him at age 75, to now,<sup>1</sup> everything in his life has been a test of one sort or another. The clue here is in the way God speaks to Abraham. The words **lekh lekha** here are identical to what God says to Abraham back at the beginning, when he tells him to move from Haran. **Lekh lekha** there and **lekh lekha** here. It was a test there and then, it is a test here and now. **Would Abraham have thought that God's request was unusual?** Yes. **Why?** Because (in

addition to the repugnance of a human sacrifice) an *olah*, a burnt offering, is something that a person does **on their own initiative**. Nowhere else (prior to this or after this) does God **ask** for a sacrifice. Cain and Abel sacrifice **on their own initiative**. Noah also. And, more importantly, Abraham builds several altars **at his own initiative**. When Isaac asks him, **But where is the lamb for the offering?** it is because he has witnessed his father do this several times. As we learn in Leviticus, a person makes a sacrifice on their own volition, not because God asks them.

**Why didn't Abraham protest here the way he did earlier in the episode of Sodom?** Let's examine the differences. In the story of Sodom, we are privy to God's thoughts,<sup>2</sup> in the Akedah, we are not. We never know what God is thinking here, other than the idea that this is a **test**. In the story of Sodom, on the other hand, God tells Abraham his intent to judge Sodom and possibly destroy it.<sup>3</sup> By sharing his thoughts with him, God was **inviting** Abraham's response. In the Akedah there was no such disclosure, and therefore, **no invitation** for argument. The two situations are fundamentally different. **God's disclosure at Sodom invites argument. God's command at the Akedah, shuts it down.** Thus, Abraham is left with two difficult choices: he can obey the first stage of the command - the **go to the land of Moria** part - and figure out how to extricate himself out of the **sacrifice him as an olah** part, or he could disobey the command right then and there, which would mean the annulment of the covenant and the dissolution of the promises, i.e. the end of the story. Either obey God and figure out how to extricate himself from this *thicket* for the sake of the future or disobey God out of his

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<sup>1</sup> The text does not tell us how old Abraham was at the Akedah. He was 100 when Isaac was born and 137 when Sarah died. If you agree that Sarah died subsequent to hearing of the Akedah, then he was 137. But in the text, Isaac is a *na'ar* נער lad, not a 37 year-old man! At the Akedah then, Abraham is somewhere in his early 100's which means that, having started out with God at 75, that he's been with God for between 25-40 years at this point. He has been through quite a lot. God has made several promises to him, a nation and a land, but has not delivered on them. The only tangible evidence of his future

is Isaac. Looking back at everything that he has experienced thus far, he must have understood that everything he has been through has been, as the rabbis perceive it, one series of tests.

<sup>2</sup> **shall I cover up from Avraham what I am about to do?** (18:17)

<sup>3</sup> **So God said: The outcry in Sodom and Amora—how great it is! And their sin—how exceedingly heavily it weighs! Now let me go down and see: if they have done according to its cry that has come to me—destruction! And if not— I wish to know.** (18:21)

intense pious, righteous, moral rectitude but bring the project to an abrupt end and annihilate the future (including us!) Abraham chooses to obey, without protest, **so that there would be a future!** He had to figure out a strategy of how to simultaneously obey God by going to Moriah, and defy God, by keeping his son alive.

**What is his strategy?** Delay. Delay. D.E.L.A.Y. As much as possible. In doing so, he increases the moral pressure on God to correct the injustice of His command and exercise His compassion, and gives God an opportunity to extricate Abraham from this *thicket*. In this reading, Abraham turns the tables on God. While God is testing Abraham to see if he will offer his son, Abraham is testing God to see if God will actually let him go through with it! God pushes Abraham to the limits of his obedience, and Abraham pushes God to the limits of His need for compliance.

**Why does Abraham bring the two lad-servants?** They are young enough not to ask too many questions, but old enough to witness what is happening. They also serve as reminders to God that whatever happens will become known beyond Abraham. Abraham's promise that he and Isaac **will return to them** ought to be understood as a way of increasing the moral pressure on God to extricate him from this demand. Ie. insurance.

**How do we know that Abraham is stalling?** Verse 9: **They came to the place that God had told him of** - That must have taken time. **There Avraham built the altar** - That takes a lot of time. **And arranged the wood.** More time.

**But how much wood would he have needed for a full offering?** Way more than could be carried by a young boy! Anybody who has ever made a campfire knows that you need a lot more than just a single bundle! He would have had to gather more at Moriah.

**What is the meaning of placing him on the altar atop the wood?** This is the ultimate clue that Abraham is stalling. In every single instance of biblical sacrifice, the slaughtering (and draining of blood and sectioning) takes place away from the altar. An animal is never killed on the altar but always at a spot close by so that the blood will be applied properly to it at the corners and at the base. (Besides, if you slaughter over the wood, the blood will dampen the wood or smolder the fire). It makes absolutely no sense for Abraham to slaughter Isaac on top of the unkindled wood,

unless he was trying to avoid doing it in the first place! The proper (and most practical) way of sacrificing him would have been to slaughter him close to an already kindled altar, and then place him on it. **That. Was. Not. Going. To. Happen!** **Was Abraham lying when he told Isaac, God will see-for-himself to the lamb for the burnt offering my son?** Absolutely not! He truly believed it! Indeed, that was the definitive expression of his unshakeable faith that God will extricate him from the *thicket* he was in. And by saying those words to Isaac, he was putting even more moral pressure on God to exercise compassion and telling Him how to do that! The whole story hinges on that detail, and the proof of that is that he names the place **'ADOSHEM-YIR'EH** in honor of the fact that God actually fulfilled what Abraham said God was going to do. **Then how do we understand Abraham 'binding' Isaac?** Abraham bound Isaac to subdue him to prevent him from running away. This is the most traumatic moment of the story. This is the moment where the relationship between father and son is irreparably broken. That is what Abraham ultimately sacrificed: his relationship with his son. Not his son. His relationship.

**But didn't he reach for, and the take the knife to slaughter his son?** Yes he did, but maybe not in the way that we might have imagined it, or various artists or commentators depicted it. It's one thing to hold the knife at his throat, and quite another to reach for it, hold it at a distance, and wait...and...wait...and...wait, for however long it would take...for God to intervene.

**Why would he wait for God to intervene?**

Because he, like us, could not follow a God who would demand human sacrifice to serve him. But, he, unlike most of us, was also willing to subject himself and his son to this terror, in order to prove his devotion. So, he was willing to wait for God to intervene. We don't know for how long.

**But in the end, it was the angel who intervened, not God!** Yes, because something broke also in God's relationship with Abraham at this moment.

**And why a ram in the thicket and not a lamb?** The ram is a substitute for Isaac, **but also a stand-in for Abraham.** God placed him in that horrible *thicket* and extricated him from it. Not without consequences: a ruptured relationship with his son, and a transformed relationship between he and God. They never speak again.