

The story of the Akeda: Its meaning in the Torah and in the modern world

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The story of the Akeda, or Binding of Isaac, is one of the most famous of all stories in the Torah. But what is it about? Does it teach the value of sacrifice, or the opposite? The love of God, or fear of God, or love of family – or something else entirely? And does it matter what we think the story is about, or is it, after all, just a story from a long time ago?

In this two-part class, we will explore two major ways of understanding the story of the Akeda, and show why it very much matters what the story is about. One very influential understanding teaches that it is all about submissiveness to the divine will. We will explore whether that does justice to the story, and whether it might actually be a very dangerous thought, leading (philosophically) to suicide bombers and beheadings in the desert. The other understanding is that Abraham – and we – learn a very important lesson in not sacrificing Isaac. In part 2, we will trace this reading through some of the commentators and draw out its implications for a life of ethics and morality in a complicated world.

1. Sacrificing Isaac

Kierkegaard

Historical and intellectual contexts

Leibowitz: A Jewish Kierkegaardian

2. Jewish parallels

Hatam Sofer

Malbim

3. Criticisms of Kierkegaard

Philosophical:

a. Buber

b. Zierler

Text:

a. Focuses on beginning, not the end

b. Context of Bereshit

4. *Not* sacrificing Isaac

Ha-Ketav ve-ha-kabbalah

Maimonides

Ibn Kaspi

Levinas

A (somewhat unfair) summary of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (Denmark, 1841)

In Kierkegaard's reading of the story, the central conflict is between universal ethics and an individual call of God. Abraham opted to depart the realm of the ethical, the realm of the universal in which life is governed by laws which can be articulated for the benefit of everyone, and enter the realm of the individual, in which man responds directly to the personal call of God. "By his act he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher *telos* outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former."

There are at least two specific universal injunctions being flouted in Abraham's act. First, paternal devotion: "In Abraham's life there is no higher expression for the ethical than this, that the father shall love his son. Of the ethical in the sense of morality there can be no question in this instance." Similarly, "Abraham's relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is quite simply expressed by saying that a father shall love his son more dearly than himself." Second, there is the prohibition against murder: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac." Most importantly, note that Abraham is said to have intended to murder Isaac. The act was (would have been) murder, for in the realm of the universal ethics, there is no justification for it – this is what divides Abraham from the other figures in literature and history who sacrifice themselves or their children. And this is what strikingly unites the presentations of Kierkegaard and Malbim: for Malbim, as well, the act was inherently evil, fundamentally at odds with God's will, and yet had to be carried out.

So despite the fact that it was murder, Abraham was prepared to act on it. "Why then did Abraham do it? For God's sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake." Why? Here the rational explanations must end, says Kierkegaard. "Abraham cannot be mediated, and the same thing can be expressed also by saying that he cannot talk." This is why Abraham is alone. He is alone in the story, and knows he must be alone: "The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others. ... The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher, and therein lies his deep humanity."

But he is also alone eternally. Abraham can be admired and revered, but not learned from. "Abraham keeps silent—but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and the anguish. For if I when I speak am unable to make myself intelligible, then I am not speaking. ... Now Abraham is able to say the most beautiful things any language can express about how he loves Isaac. But it is not this he has at heart to say, it is the profounder thought that he would sacrifice him because it is a trial. The latter thought no one can understand, and hence everyone can only misunderstand the former."

Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?

The ethical as such is the universal,¹ and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *réôos* [end, purpose] but is itself the *réôos* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual,² sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his *réôos* in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. As soon as the single individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal. Every time the single individual, after having entered the universal, feels an impulse to assert himself as the single individual, he is in a spiritual trial [*Anfægtelse*],³ from which he can work himself only by repentantly surrendering as the single individual in the universal. If this is the highest that can be said of man and his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal salvation, which is his *réôos* forevermore and at all times, since it would be a contradiction for this to be capable of being surrendered (that is, teleologically suspended), because as soon as this is suspended it is relinquished, whereas that which is suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its *réôos*.

If this is the case, then Hegel is right in "The Good and Conscience,"⁴ where he qualifies man only as the individual and considers this qualification as a "moral form of evil"⁵ (see especially *The Philosophy of Right*), which must be annulled [*ophævet*] in the teleology of the moral in such a way that the single individual who remains in that stage either sins or is immersed in spiritual trial. But Hegel is wrong in

speaking about faith; he is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer.

Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal—yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed.⁶ For if the ethical—that is, social morality⁷—is the highest and if there is in a person no residual incommensurability in some way such that this incommensurability is not evil (i. e., the single individual, who is to be expressed in the universal), then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought. Hegel should not have concealed this, for, after all, he had studied Greek philosophy.

People who are profoundly lacking in learning and are given to clichés are frequently heard to say that a light shines over the Christian world, whereas a darkness enshrouds paganism. This kind of talk has always struck me as strange, inasmuch as every more thorough thinker, every more earnest artist still regenerates himself in the eternal youth of the Greeks. The explanation for such a statement is that one does not know what one should say but only that one must say something. It is quite right to say that paganism did not have faith, but if something is supposed to have been said thereby, then one must have a clearer understanding of what faith is, for otherwise one falls into such clichés. It is easy to explain all existence, faith along with it, without having a conception of what faith is, and the one who counts on being admired for such an explanation is not such a bad calculator, for it is as Boileau⁸ says: *Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot, qui l'admire* [One fool always finds a bigger fool, who admires him].

Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified

Yeshaya Leibowitz, "Abraham and Job," in *Yahadut, 'Am Yehudi, u-Medinat Yisrael* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975), 391-394.

"עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה" — על העמידה בנפיון העקדה. ולא לפניו. ביתן לאברהם אישור על יראת-שמים שלו. חסידי "המונותאיזם האתי", במגמתם לרוקן את הדת מחכמה האמוני-דתי המיאוצנטרי-ולהעמידה על משמעות מוסרית-אנתרופוצנטרית. מרבים להחפעל ממעמדו של אברהם אבינו בוויכוח על סדום ועל צדיקיה — אולם לא בעקבות מעמד זה ולא בגללו נאמר לאברהם "עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה". ואכן, איך בפענוח "חלילה לך" ו"הטופט כל הארץ" שום הרכחה להתייחסות לאל מבהינת אלוההונו. אלא להתייחסות אליו מבהינת היותו טופט-צדק ודיק-אמת, או אף רחום ותנון לפני-משורת-הדין. ז. א. — מבהינת פונקציות המייחסות לו, שאינן שונות במדותן מן הפונקציות המייחסות לשופט ושליט בשר-ודם, או הגוררשות ממנה פונקציות שמעמדותן שירות לאדם המקבל עליו מרות השופט או השליט ההוא. מבהינת מסיימת יש בכך משהו כהגשמה. ולא זו בלבד אלא שהעובד את ה' מתוך גישה זו — את עצמו הוא עובד.

Malbim / Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weiser (1809-1879, across Europe)

You sit here with the donkey: thus it is told that this test differed from all else that Abraham did up to this point, since everything Abraham did until now to walk in the ways of God and keeping his injunctions and commandments, involved commandments which did not violate his intellect, so every command that he fulfilled, he did publicly for all to see, so that all the people of the land would know God and guard his path, to act justly and righteously. But this command was different. It violated his intellect: until now he had argued against idolaters, who offered human sacrifices, arguing that God did not want such abominations, and that there was no greater abomination in God's eyes than homicide.... And now that this command, which violated his intellect *and violated God's good ways* (ועתה כאשר הגיעתהו מצוה זו שהיא נגד השכל ונגד דרכי ה' הטובים), reached him, he did not want to fulfill it in front of his servants, for he was ashamed to do something in front of them which until now he had held to be an abomination, and he also did not want them to learn to do likewise. Therefore he hid it from them and said "we will bow down and we will return to you."

This was the core principle in this test, that he did God's command which went *against his intellect and against the right and the just and the good ways of God*, and still did not second-guess God. ... This act, which God in fact did not desire – and had [Abraham] slaughtered Isaac, it would have been an act of murder and an abomination to God (ובאמת לא רצה ה' בו, ואם היה שוחט את יצחק היה זה מעשה), which He despises – this act was opposed by his spiritual being, which sees the secrets of the higher wisdom, and he was therefore ashamed to do it in front of his servants, just as one is normally ashamed to commit an abominable act where others can see. And yet, the faith in God and his love and fear trumped all these considerations, and he did not refuse to fulfill God's will – which violated the intellect and decency, and which humiliated him in the eyes of men – still, the love of God was more powerful than all these, and he was tested and found to be perfect.