

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

Maimonides

Ibn Kaspi

Levinas

Rambam

1. *The purpose of the 'trial' (Guide 3.24)*

“The purpose and the meaning of every ‘trial’ that appears in the Torah is only that people should know what is proper to do, or what they are obligated to believe. The meaning of a ‘trial,’ therefore, is as if a specific action should be done but not for the purpose of having that specific instance of the action be done; rather, the purpose is that it should serve as an example that should be enshrined and others should follow.”

The Aqeda contains two major themes which are fundamental to the Torah. The first is “to make known to us the limits of the love for God and fear of Him, to what extent they reach.” The second:

“To inform us that the prophets accept as true whatever comes to them in revelation. One should not think that because it is a dream or a vision, as we have explained, and mediated through the Active Intellect, it may be that what appears to them or that they hear is taken to be uncertain, or that any wasteful imagination is mixed in. Therefore, He wanted to inform us that all that a prophet sees in a prophetic vision is *certain truth in the eyes of the prophet*. In no way should anyone raise doubts about any of this. It is, in his eyes, the same as physical things, apprehended with the senses and the intellect. The proof is that [Abraham] turned to slaughter his only son, whom he loved, just as he was commanded, even though this command was in a dream or a vision. If the prophets were at all doubtful regarding the veracity of prophetic dreams, or if they had any doubt about what they learned through prophetic visions, they would never do what nature forbids, and [Abraham]’s soul would not have responded to the multiply dangerous deed because of the uncertainty.”

2. *How does prophecy work (Guide 2.36)?*

“Know that the true reality and veracity of prophecy consist in it being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty.”

3. *The different levels of prophecy (Guide 2.45):*

“Let is not mislead you with regard to these levels if you find in the prophetic books a prophet who experiences a revelation on one of these levels, but it then turns out that this same prophet himself experienced a revelation in the form of a different level. For with regard to these levels I will note that a revelation may arrive to a particular prophet on a particular level at one point, and at another time a revelation may arrive to him at a lower level than the first revelation.”

The seventh level: that he sees in a prophetic dream as if He, may He be exalted, speaks to him, as it said with regard to Isaiah, “I saw the Lord...and he said, ‘Whom shall I send?’” (Isaiah 6:1-5), and as it says with regard to Micaiah b. Yimla: “I saw the Lord...” (1 Kings 22:19).

The eighth level: that a revelation arrives to him in a prophetic vision, and he sees symbols, like Abraham at the Covenant Between the Parts (Genesis 15:9-10), for these symbols were seen during the day, as was made clear.

The ninth level: that he hears speech in the midst of a vision, as it is written about Abraham, “And the word of God came to him saying, ‘this one will not be your heir’” (Genesis 15:4).

The tenth level: that he sees a person speaking to him in a prophetic vision, also like Abraham, in the terebinths of Mamre (Genesis 18:1), and like Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 5:13).

The eleventh level: that he sees an angel speaking to him, like Abraham at the time of the Aqeda. This is, in my view, the highest level of prophets that the books testify about their states....

4. *Two questions*:

- a. Is it possible that a *true* prophecy can be, in a sense, wrong?
- b. Is it true in *any* sense, even a partial one, that God wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Jeremiah 7:30-31

The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, says the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

כי-עשו בני-יהודה הרע בעיני נאם-
ה': שמו שקוציהם בבית אשר-
נקרא-שמי עליו לטמאו, ובנו במות
התפת אשר בגיא בן-הנם לשרף את-
בניהם ואת-בנותיהם באש – אשר
לא צויתי ולא עלתה על-לבי!

Similar is the evidence from **Micah 6:6-8**, a century earlier:

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down
before the exalted God?

במה אקדם ה', אכף לאלהי מרום?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a
year old?

האקדמנו בעולות בעגלים בני שנה?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten
thousand rivers of olive oil?

הירצה ה' באלפי אילים ברבבות נחלי-שמן?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of
my body for the sin of my soul?

האתן בכורי פשעי פרי בטני חטאת נפשי.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does
the Lord require of you?

הגיד לך אדם מה-טוב ומה-ה' דורש ממך:

To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with
your God.

כי אם-עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת
עם-אלהיך.

Possible sources: (Misreadings of) Shemot 13:1-2 and 22:28-29:

The Lord said to Moses, Consecrate to me every firstborn
male. The first offspring of every womb among the
Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.

וידבר ה' אל-משה לאמר, קדש-לי כל-בכור
פטר כל-רחם בבני ישראל באדם ובבהמה
לי הוא.

You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with
your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers
for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.

מלאתך ודמעך לא תאחר בכור בנך
תתן-לי. כן-תעשה לשרך לצאנך, שבעת
ימים יהיה עם-אמו; ביום השמיני תתנו-
לי.

Ibn Kaspi

“Starting with the distinction... that *'Elokim* refers to the world of the Heavenly Spheres, perceived as the uppermost part of the world of Separate Intelligences...the Torah will use either of these names in accordance with the perception of the person being discussed in that context.”

Gevia' Kesef, chapter 3 (Herring, *Joseph ibn Kaspi's Gevia' Kesef*, 8 [Hebrew])

‘When he [= the biblical narrator] began the stories of Abraham, he began, “And the Lord said to Abram, Go for yourself,” because Abraham was the first who developed the belief in the existence of the separate intellect. This opinion took him away from his land, and because of this he did all that he did. ... And therefore, in the stories of Abraham, he is always very careful to say “the Lord,” with the exception of some very few places.

In the Aqeda, he did very well in using “God” when he commanded him to bring his son as a burnt offering, because this is in fact not desired by the Lord. Therefore in the preventing the act, he said “the angel of the Lord,” and not “the angel of God,” because the desisting is necessary for us by virtue of our apprehension of the existence of the separate intellect, and our clinging to it. And he did superbly because then when he mentioned the willingness to act, he said, “for you are a fearer of God, and you did not withhold your only son,” because making his son into a burnt offering was a function of being a fearer of *God*, in other words, the heavenly spheres. This was also the result of his own imagination, because it was then the custom of all the nations to offer offerings and sacrifices. But when he got to the prevention, he said, “The Lord will see,” instead of the earlier, “God will see.”’

Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (tr. Michael B. Smith; London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 76-77.

“The ethical means the general, for Kierkegaard. The singularity of the *I* would be lost, in his view, under a rule valid for all. Generality can neither contain nor express the *I*'s secret. Now, it is not at all certain that ethics is where he sees it. Ethics as consciousness of a responsibility toward others..., far from losing you in generality, singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as *I*. Kierkegaard seems not to have experienced that, since he wants to transcend the ethical stage, which to him is the stage of generality. In his evocation of Abraham, he describes the encounter with God at the point where subjectivity rises to the level of the religious, that is to say, above ethics. But one could think the opposite: Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential.”

¹ Basil Herring, *Joseph ibn Kaspi's Gevia' Kesef: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Bible Commentary* (New York: Ktav, 1982), 91; see also the analysis of the problem of the names of God on pp. 77-97.