

The Akeidah. Did Abraham pass or fail the test?

By Aaron Finestone, Minyan Masorti, Rosh Hashannah Day 2, 2019

It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken her disgrace from her, was her pride and hope for all generations. So they rode all in silence and Abraham's eyes were fixed on the ground, until the fourth day when they looked up and saw afar the mountain in Moriah, but he turned his gaze once again to the ground. Silently he arranged the firewood, bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife. Then he saw the ram that God had appointed. He sacrificed that and returned home . . .

From that day on, Abraham got old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac thrived as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.

In his 1843 work, *Fear and Trembling*, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, proposed this account of the Akeidah. Kierkegaard viewed the Akeidah as challenge---how to navigate between divine command and one's sense of ethics.

Complicating this challenge is the precise wording of God's command. The text says, "KACH-NA ET BINCHA." Artscroll translates this phrase as "Please take your son." The Hertz Chumash says that "NA" means "I pray thee," suggesting that God was speaking to Abraham "as friend to friend."

Dr. Claude Mariottini, professor of Old Testament at Northern Baptist Seminary, explains, what God asked Abraham was not a command. It was a request. Abraham had a choice. Abraham was free to refuse God's request. However, what was at stake was Abraham's relationship with God.

Kierkegaard posed three questions:

First, is there a suspension of the ethical? Kierkegaard states, that Abraham is either a murderer or a man of faith. Why does Abraham do the Akeidah?

For God's sake, because God demands proof of his faith. For Abraham's sake in order to produce the proof. The relationship between God and Abraham is a trial, a temptation.

Kierkegaard's Second Question:

Is there an absolute duty to God? Kierkegaard argues that the ethical is the universal, and as such is divine. All duty is ultimately a duty to God.

Thirdly, Kierkegaard asks:

Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, from Eleazar and from Isaac?

Kierkegaard proposes, that for Abraham, the ethical had no higher expression than family life. Ethics demanded that silence. By remaining silent, Abraham could save another---He could spare his family from anguish about what was to happen.

Rabbi Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn was born around 1133. He was about 13 years old when the Second Crusade plowed through his part of Germany, turning Jewish lives into martyrs.

He wrote a poem about the Akeidah, in which Isaac willingly submits to sacrifice.

Rabbi Ephraim said of Isaac:

*Whispered the soft-spoken dove: Bind me as sacrifice
With cords to the horns of the altar.*

*Bind me for my hands and my feet
Lest I be found wanting and profane the sacrifice.
I am afraid of panic, I am concerned to honor you,
My will is to honor you greatly.*

In Rabbi Ephraim's poem, Isaac was in fact slaughtered by Abraham. Instantly, Isaac was drawn into Eden, then he is resurrected. As Abraham is about to sacrifice the

resurrected Isaac a second time, the ram, sent by God, appears and Abraham sacrifices the ram.

The poem concludes:

*This place he called Adonai-Yireh,
The place where light and the law are manifest.
He swore to bless it as the Temple site,
For there the Lord commanded the blessing.*

*Thus prayed the binder and the bound,
That when their descendants commit a wrong
This act be recalled to save them from disaster.
From all their transgressions and sins.*

*Righteous One, do us this grace!
You promised our fathers mercy to Abraham.
Let then their merit stand out as witness,
And pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Thine inheritance.*

*Recall to our credit the many Akeidahs,
The saints, men and women, slain for Thy sake.
Remember the righteous martyrs of Judah,
Those that were bound of Jacob.*

*Be Thou the shepherd of the surviving flock
Scattered and dispersed among the nations.
Break the yoke and snap the bands
Of the bound flock that yearns toward Thee*

O GOD! O KING . . .

Rabbi Andrea London, of Beth Emet synagogue in Evanston, Illinois, questions whether Abraham actually passed the test. She cites the Midrash which teaches that Sarah was so appalled by Abraham's willingness to sacrifice their son that she dies on the spot. Rabbi London says that Abraham leaves Mount Moriah to go bury her. Abraham and Isaac never speak to one another again.

As an alternative, Yehuda Amichai proposes that the hero of the Akeidah was the ram.

In his 1983 poem, *Ha-gibor ha 'amiti*, he wrote:

*The real hero of The Binding of Isaac was the ram,
who didn't know about the collusion between the others.
He was volunteered to die instead of Isaac.
I want to sing a memorial song about him—
about his curly wool and his human eyes,
about the horns that were so silent on his living head,
and how they made those horns into shofars when he was slaughtered to sound their
battle cries
or to blare out their obscene joy.*

*I want to remember the last frame
like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine:
the young man tanned and pampered in his jazzy suit
and beside him the angel, dressed for a formal reception
in a long silk gown,
both of them looking with empty eyes
at two empty places,*

*and behind them, like a colored backdrop, the ram,
caught in the thicket before the slaughter,
the thicket his last friend.*

*The angel went home.
Isaac went home.
Abraham and God had gone long before.
But the real hero of The Binding of Isaac is the ram.*

Did Abraham pass or fail his test?

Rabbi London says that we can argue that Abraham passed. At the conclusion of the story, we read that an angel of God says, “because you did this thing, and did not withhold your son, your only one, I will bless you greatly, and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore.”

If Abraham passed the test, he was rewarded with the loss of his wife and the loss of a relationship with his son. This is not the kind of life we pray for on Rosh Hashannah.

Rabbi London argues that we can learn from Abraham’s shortcomings to embrace our vulnerability, and to evoke God’s compassion, better than Abraham did. Instead of trying to determine whether or not Abraham passed or failed God’s test, we can see that Abraham responded to God in an adequate, but limited way.

To Rabbi London, the Akeidah raises this question: Can we meet our challenges with more courage, more connection and more compassion than Abraham? Abraham met his challenge with determination, resolve and compliance with authority. But he wasn't able to be open, to take emotional risks with those closest to him, to ask questions and to develop creative solutions to his life's challenges. He was not able to have a wholehearted relationship with God or with his family.

As we begin the New Year, what is our test in this moment? We, too, may be torn between duties and obligations. How can we learn to choose wisely from the either laudable or cautionary tale of Abraham?