

AKEIDA: THE UNASKED QUESTION

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The climactic reading of the High Holidays – the Binding of Isaac (the *Akeida*), which we read on the second day of Rosh Hashana – opens with the phrase “Some time later.” It’s an unusual way to introduce a story. The Bible generally doesn’t concern itself with contextualizing introductions. Even the openings of the books of the Torah, presumably the places requiring the most introduction, give us only that spare phrasing that is so characteristic of biblical narrative: “These are the names...” (Exodus); “And God called to Moses...” (Leviticus); “And God spoke to Moses...” (Numbers); “These are the words that Moses spoke...” (Deuteronomy). Even when the stories are linked in narrative sequence, the connection is usually signaled only by the sequence rather than with any language more elaborate than “And...” So, even though the phrase “some time later” might seem to separate the *Akeida* from other events in time, this phrase also links the story to the foregoing narrative in an uncommonly emphatic way.

That the *Akeida* story should connect to its surrounding narrative at all is itself a little startling. If ever there were a story that stood apart from its context, that unfolded in its own moral universe according to logic – or illogic – that we must strain to understand, it is this one.

But the text insists that the *Akeida* happened after some other set of events. The translation “some time later” does not even capture the pointed sense of the Hebrew, “*after these things*”. After *what* things?

A lot of things have been going on. The *Akeida* is the last of several pivotal stories that comprise parshat Vayera (Genesis 18-22), some of which form our readings for Rosh Hashana. The parsha opens with the three angels visiting Abraham to foretell the birth of Isaac, then God tells Abraham of His plan to destroy Sodom and Amora and Abraham bargains with Him to save the few innocents among the guilty; God destroys the cities; Lot’s daughters, believing themselves to be the world’s only survivors, lie with their father to repopulate the earth; Sarah gives birth to Isaac; Hagar and Ishmael are expelled from Abraham’s household and are saved by God in the wilderness.

What kinds of things are these? They are stories of a restless dynamic between the generation and the destruction of life. Each episode raises fateful questions of the continuity or discontinuity of humanity: Is it God’s practice to destroy cities? What is necessary in order to ensure the continuity of one’s lineage (in the case of Abraham) or of the human race (in the case of Lot’s daughters)? Can God maintain His covenant to make a great nation of Abraham if He commands him to cast off his first son and destroy his second?

It is as if the forces of continuity and destruction are in heated conversation, bargaining over the answers to these questions. This is the cosmic conversation that is manifest in Abraham's conversation with God at the outskirts of Sedom.

In the opening verse of the Akeida story, we are told that God had decided to put Abraham to the test. But surely any time that God speaks to us, it is a test of how we will respond. When God decides to destroy the cities, He makes a point of informing Abraham first. Rashi suggests that this is in the manner of a legal obligation, as the elimination of the cities from the land promised to Abraham would amend the terms of their covenant. But Rashi's observation on Genesis 3:9 seems even more apt: that when God calls out to a person, it is an invitation to enter into conversation. At Genesis 3:9, Adam passes this test, speaking truthfully of his guilt after having run away from responsibility. Abraham passes the test magnificently, taking responsibility for whole populations of others to whom he has no connection. His embrace of this responsibility is so forceful that he effectively turns the tables and puts God to the test – can God rise to Abraham's challenge and conform His plan of destruction to a standard of justice?

By bringing Abraham into such a morally loaded conversation, God is pushing Abraham to his moral limits, training him to be a championship moral athlete. But despite his powerful opening, Abraham is not yet conditioned to a challenge of this magnitude. He ultimately loses the debate – God does destroy the cities in the end.

We can see in his language how Abraham loses steam as the struggle proceeds. His first three exchanges with God are invested with action: “*Va-yigash Avraham va-yomar...Va-ya-an Avraham va-yomar...Va-yosef od l'daber eylav v-yomar*” – “Abraham came close and said...Abraham answered and said...He continued to speak and said...” (18:23, 27, 29). The second half of the conversation contains no such action; Abraham has lost the rhythm of *va-yigash, va-ya-an, va-yosef*. His confidence gives way to deference, and the freshness of his language gives way to repetition: “Pray let my Lord not be upset if I speak further...” (18:30); “Pray let my Lord not be upset if I speak further...” (18:32). At the beginning of the exchange, Abraham had repeated his language not with fatigue, but with moral sparks flying: “*Far be it from You* to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. *Far be it from you!*” (18:25). As the discussion moves through six iterations – from fifty to forty-five, to forty, thirty, twenty and ten – his fiery moral imperative cools off into a technical matter of accounting. He had opened with the rhetorical example of fifty innocent souls – a round number suggesting a handful of innocents amongst the guilty populace – but he loses his point as he allows the number to be discussed as a quantity rather than a principle.

It is no embarrassment to wear down after going six rounds with God. Standing up to God is obviously very much the exception rather than the rule. After his initial burst of audacity, Abraham catches himself and does everything he can to return to a more proper humble tone. That God tolerates Abraham's reproach at all is a measure of the unique stature that Abraham has with God. But even so, Abraham acknowledges his relative

place in the world, “I have presumed to speak to my Lord when I am but dust and ashes” (18:27). “Dust and ashes” make a particularly biting image at this moment before the two cities meet their fiery end. It evokes the fundamental terror of being one of God’s creations: God who creates can also destroy, and even the one man who enjoys special status to argue against the destruction is himself at risk of destruction. Abraham is coming into direct contact with the paradox of human existence: we are created in God’s image, but we are also created from dust and will soon enough return to it – to dust if we are fortunate, to ashes if not.

So, how could a mortal ever prevail in this debate with God? As the numbers decrease, the moral implications soar. To argue that ten good people justify saving the cities is a far taller claim than to argue for fifty. Either the ten would each have to be five times as good as each of the fifty, or the intrinsic value of each life would have to be that much more absolute.

Even for a towering soul such as Abraham, it is impossible to carry this argument to its logical conclusion – because the necessary final question is that of the *one* person. This is a question that no mortal dares to ask. To argue for the absolute value of a single life is necessarily to argue for the absolute value of one’s own self. Which of us, standing before God, can make such a confident claim?

Moses attempts such an argument and God will have none of it. When he pleads to enter the land after being punished for striking the rock, God responds in anger, “Do not continue to speak to me further on this matter!” (Deut. 3:26). This is the same phrasing that is used to describe Abraham’s argument – “He *continued to speak* and said...” In “continuing to speak” on behalf of others rather than for himself, Abraham is walking as close to the line as anyone can.

If God invited Abraham into conversation so that he would raise the question of the single life, He must have gone away disappointed. Abraham’s initial argument had suggested that it’s not the number but the principle that matters – “Will You really wipe out the innocent with the guilty? ...Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” But God presses the numbers, to the point where Abraham’s courage fails. But does God not understand Abraham’s limitation? Does He not perceive that he is arguing, by implication, for the value of one life? Can God not respond to the principle that Abraham is advancing? Or take one step closer and Himself make the final point in the discussion? Whether He cannot or will not, God does not.

Thus the conversation ends with failure on both sides. We don’t know which of them cuts it off. We are told simply that “the Lord went off when He finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.” (18:33). The Midrash provides explanations in either direction, noting that the judge departs when the advocate finishes arguing, and, alternatively, that the advocate departs when the judge has had enough of listening (Bereishit Rabbah, 49:14). Either way, the conversation remains unfinished, its six exchanges falling conspicuously short of seven, the classic number of completion.

And the seventh question, of the intrinsic value of the single life, hangs conspicuously open, unanswered and unasked.

It is after these things that God calls on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

The question that Abraham needed to ask but couldn't is now thrust upon him in horribly more frightening form. When Abraham bargained with God over the Sedom and Amora, it was an argument in the abstract. Abraham was not directly affected; he was arguing on behalf of other people. Now, at the end of parshat Vayera, after being challenged with responsibility for others over and over again – for the visiting angels, for the people of Sedom and Amora, for the house of Avimelech and for Sarah sojourning there, for Hagar and for Ishmael – Abraham is charged with the greatest possible responsibility for the most important person in his life.

Abraham responded to God's plan for Sedom and Amora with masterly speech and rhetoric; now he is dumbstruck. The language that had begun to fail him then as the moral stakes increased, now escapes him entirely. The entire Akeida story, including the three-day journey to Mount Moriah, passes in virtual silence.

The Talmud suggests that Abraham did have a response but held his tongue (J. Taanit 2:4). But whether he chooses to keep quiet or whether the ineffable seventh question precludes the possibility of speech, Abraham is not entirely disabled from responding to God's command. Even without the faculty of speech, he still has the choice to comply with the order or not.

He could spare his son easily enough by refusing to carry out the sacrifice. But God has put him in a powerful bind. If he refuses, then he will have both rebuked the creator of the universe, and also saved Him from consummating His hideous plan. To refuse the command would satisfy the dictates of his own conscience, but to carry on would force God to reveal whether He shares that conscience.

God has made this maximally difficult, of course. He forces Abraham to pursue the question not as a disinterested observer, as in the debate over Sedom and Amora, but from a position of extreme personal involvement. God is allowing Abraham to raise the question of the individual's ultimate value, but only if he experiences its fullest impact. To a disinterested observer, the value of the individual is not necessarily obvious. Even the Midrash accepts ten as a limit, noting that ten are required for a minyan (Bereishit Rabbah, 49:13). Certainly, it is easy to see the logic in casting the fate of the few with that of the many. God wants Abraham to appreciate that the value of the individual is a question that lies beyond logic.

Indeed, He does everything possible to underscore Abraham's existential investment in the question. God does not simply identify Isaac, but underscores Abraham's overwhelming closeness to him, referring to him as "your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac" (22:2). This is not the kind of closeness that Abraham enacts at

the beginning of the conversation over Sedom when “*he came close and said...*” This is the connection of Abraham’s flesh, blood and destiny to Isaac, which God emphasizes so forcefully as to virtually merge their two identities. Though He is describing Isaac, the rhythmic repetition of “you” and “your” conveys an almost hypnotic emphasis on Abraham’s involvement – God utters various forms of “you” to Abraham five times in the single command. Each phrase of identification raises the stakes further, much as each exchange of argument did over Sedom.

Abraham passes God’s test because he is willing to confront these massive personal consequences in order to pursue the ultimate questions. What remains now is for God to pass the test that Abraham has posed in taking up His challenge.

In His still-young world, God has tried two different approaches to establishing order among men: destruction, which purports to eliminate the wicked, and covenant, which aims to establish and encourage righteousness. The destruction of Sedom and Amora shows these two approaches beginning to clash. On the one hand, God saves Lot and his immediate family from the destruction, in deference His covenant with Abraham, Lot’s kinsman. On the other hand, their immediate first act upon escape from the city of sexual immorality is to engage in other sexual immorality. Moreover, the destruction of the cities is itself a violation of God’s very first covenant, the promise to all humanity never to destroy the earth again. God may be upholding the letter of the promise – not to destroy the entire world by water – but Abraham views the destruction of two cities by fire as a violation of its spirit (Bereishit Rabbah 49:9; Rashi on 18:25).

Abraham is the world’s witness to the incompatibility of destruction and covenant. He “*looks down*” at the smoldering remains of Sedom and Amora (18:27-28). In carrying out the command to sacrifice Isaac, he “*looks up*” – at the mountain where the sacrifice is to be done (22:4) and again to see the ram that will replace Isaac as the offering (22:13). He is looking up at God, in silent entreaty that God reverse the course He took at Sedom and Amora. Abraham never lifts the knife in this narrative – he “*stretches out*” his hand and “*takes*” the knife (22:10) – but he “*lifts up*” his eyes. He is replacing the act of the hand with the act of the eye, substituting the act of witness for the act of destruction – and calling on God to do the same. As in his previous encounter with God, Abraham follows through six iterations leading up to the ultimate decision – six distinct verbs describe his preparation for the act: “...Abraham *built* the altar... and *laid* the wood... and *bound* Isaac... and *laid* him on the altar... *stretched forth* his hand, and *took* the knife” (22:9-10). And as before, the progression is cut off before the consummating seventh step – this time in preservation, rather than in destruction. The displacement of the last step here resolves the disturbance that the previous displacement created; Abraham has brought the conversation over Sedom and Amora to closure.

In recognition of this, he names the mountaintop as *Adonai-yireh*, “God sees”. What is it that God sees?

He sees Isaac's innocence, with no surrounding population of sinners to confound the question of whether this single life is worth saving. He sees that to allow Isaac to be killed would scuttle His covenant with Abraham. Though He could easily produce a new heir for Abraham – Isaac was conceived miraculously to replace Ishmael, another miracle child could be made to replace Isaac – He has made a promise that Isaac specifically would carry on Abraham's line (18:19-20). Isaac has specific, individual value. But it is not only *this* person who has value in the context of *this* covenant. The terms of the covenant themselves have value, which God realizes He must honor. If He is to engage in covenants, He must keep His end of the promise and preserve the members of His covenants through their lifetimes so that they may fulfill their end of the bargain. Man owes loyalty to God *and* God owes loyalty to Man.

God has elevated the act of seeing. In upholding His covenants, He must turn away from His primary role as the Creator who has the power to destroy us, and take up the mantle of the Judge who has the obligation to bear witness – to *see* us. Seeing is not a new activity for God – He had recently announced that He would “go down and see” whether the two cities' sins were as great as they seemed (18:20). But a new emphasis on seeing suggests an examination of the individual and not just the population, a watchfulness for *tshuva* and not only for sin.

It also suggests a recognition of our limits. In the conversation over Sedom and Amora, God required Abraham to speak and make arguments. But on matters of ultimate significance, Man cannot speak. Abraham does not even try to speak in the Akeida episode – he knows speech would only result in frustration as it did before. He does not allow God to hear him, only to see him. God must watch his actions and read them. He must focus on all that we do, not only on the little that we are able to put into words. Isaac seems to understand this implicitly. He makes no argument to save himself, he only asks where is the lamb for the offering (22:7). He knows that we express ourselves through our ritual gestures and our daily motions more than we can through our words. And he knows that God sees what we are doing.

Abraham insists on living in covenant – which means living in relationship, with awareness and influence flowing in both directions. He has struggled with God to demonstrate how absolutely he values Him. And God responds by demonstrating how absolutely He values Man. Abraham has built this relationship, we are able to follow his model – if we *come close*, and *answer*, and *continue to speak* to God, He will come close, and answer, and continue to speak, to us.