

GOD'S MERCY – TO SEE AND TO BE SEEN

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One of the puzzlements of the ever-puzzling story of the Akeida (the binding of Isaac) is what a small role Isaac seems to play in it. The episode is narrated as an experience in the life of Abraham, with Isaac serving primarily as an instrument in the test that God has set out for his father. After the climactic reversal through which Isaac is saved, the story continues without him – he conspicuously does not descend the mountain with Abraham, and the next time he appears in the narrative is nearly two chapters later, after lengthy accounts of Abraham's further dealings.

When Isaac reappears, we are told that he is coming from the area near Beer Lachai Roi (Genesis 24:62), a place different from where he had presumably dwelt with Abraham. Immediately before the Akeida, Abraham and his family were living at Beer Sheva, a place that Abraham himself had named (21:31). Now, Isaac comes from a place that was named by, of all people, Hagar, his mother's servant and his father's concubine, who had been expelled from the household precisely to allow him pride of place as Abraham's heir. It is understandable, perhaps, that Isaac would not return to the dwelling-place of his father who nearly killed him. But why would Isaac gravitate toward the place that is associated specifically and solely with Hagar?

Behind the apparent opposition between the competing interests of Isaac and Hagar lies a deeper personal commonality. Isaac's role as a pawn in Abraham's story strongly parallels Hagar's role as a pawn in Isaac's own story – the story of his conception, and of Abraham and Sarah's desire to protect him as their heir. Like Isaac, Hagar does not act, but rather is acted upon. Each is an instrument in the events that shape other people's lives.

Hagar's suffering has a special quality. Unlike many others in the Bible who express distress by crying out (e.g., Gen. 18:20, Exodus 3:7), Hagar seems unable to call out. She never speaks in her own defense when she is tormented by Sarah, never seeks recourse by entreaty to Abraham or through prayer to God. She runs away speechlessly.

And yet God responds to her. He *sees* her distress and sends an angel to comfort her (Gen. 16). Hagar is naturally astonished to be visited by an angel of God, and, further, to have survived such a close encounter with divinity. But it is equally stunning that her suffering draws a response from above without her ever expressing it outwardly.

Hagar seems not to have the luxury of speech or even of prayer. She is a servant, living constantly in a subordinate position, in which she is subject to the demands of her masters – even so profound a demand as to bear Abraham's child on Sarah's behalf – and also, though she does not initially know it, subject to God's hidden and somewhat convoluted plans. She lives in apparent isolation from family or peers – who, in such circumstances, could she talk to? And being an Egyptian, she is presumably unacquainted with the possibility of calling on God. From her perspective, it is her fate, indeed, it is her identity, to be powerless. She is accustomed to her own needs and feelings being irrelevant to those around her, and to her own wishes having scant influence on the actual events of her life.

Her natural powerlessness stands out all the more strongly against the natural vigor of her son. It is in Ishmael's nature to be heard – his very name means “God will hear”. Indeed, in the second episode of Hagar's flight from Abraham and Sarah's household (21: 9-21), God is said to hear his cry even though the only utterance reported in the story is Hagar's cry as she fears for his death. Ishmael is a destined to be a hunter and a fighter; every description of him is that of a man of action (16:12, 21:20). It is his nature to put himself unreservedly into the world.

Isaac, like Hagar, does not have this advantage of personality. His name means laughter, and the first thing that his mother does when his birth is foretold is to laugh, in apparent disbelief. The laughter signified by his name surely suggests the expression of joy in the miraculous occurrence of his birth. But it is hard not to detect as well a sense in which his birth is something of a joke or a trick – a bravura performance by God – or at least, as we might say, that something “funny” is going on in Isaac's existence, something unstable and not quite straightforward.

The word from which Isaac's name is derived – *tz-ch-k* – in its different forms follows Isaac throughout his life, each time with somewhat complicated implications. After his marriage, he is reported to be “sporting” with his wife – *metzachek* – playing, in the sense of lovemaking (26:8). This is a touching moment, as it is a most unusual report in the Torah of cheerful conjugal love. But it also is dangerous, as it occurs while Isaac and Rebecca are sojourning in the house of Abimelech under guise as brother and sister, to escape a famine. The playfulness suggested by *metzachek* underscores the depth of Isaac's bond with his wife, but it also ruptures his bond with his host, who reproaches him for his deception with fear and indignation.

Much earlier, when Isaac and Ishmael are children, Ishmael is said to have laughed or played with Isaac – again, *metzachek* – which infuriates Sarah and impels her immediately to expel Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness. It is not clear what sort of playing Ishmael was engaged in – it is natural enough for brothers to play together, and the commentators go to great lengths to cast this playing in the scandalous light of mocking or even sexual misconduct – but whatever it was, it caused a fundamental break in the household and placed mother and son directly into mortal danger. This word by which Isaac is named has the power to build vital relationships – the lineage of God’s covenant and the love between husband and wife – but also the power to create enmity and hostility.

So while Ishmael, by his nature and by his very name, can make himself heard with ease, Isaac, by his nature and his very name, has a much more complicated interface with the world around him. In all the years from his birth, through his marriage, through the birth and growth of his sons, Isaac is not shown to utter more than seven words. His sons easily overtake him in the quantity of their speech in the narrative. Moreover, Isaac’s first utterance – during the Akeida episode – invites a deceptive response from Abraham, and his next utterance – to Abimelech – is itself a deception. Speech is not Isaac’s medium.

Like Hagar, he has no one to speak to. Though he is not socially isolated as she is, he seems to tend toward solitude. The scene in which Rebecca is brought to him to marry seems to underscore his loneliness, presenting him walking alone in a field at sunset with no apparent purpose, in stark contrast to the richly social and purposeful circumstances of Rebecca’s engagement that are recounted immediately before. His relations with his brother are strained from birth over the question of inheritance, as his sons’ relationship will be as well, and his relationship with Abraham is irreparably damaged by the Akeida experience.

He bears all these tensions quietly within himself. Like Hagar, he lives as an instrument of others’ plans and suffers with a profound privacy that he is powerless to express. Both of them suffer in such unique circumstances – the harassed surrogate mother, the son bound for sacrifice – that their grief could scarcely be understood even if they were able to speak. The literary scholar Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain* describes how physical pain is so internal and particular to the individual in pain that it cannot be related to others, and is actually incompatible with the inherently external faculty of speech. The lonely suffering of Isaac and Hagar approaches this level of inexpressibility.

But God does not need to hear them. He responds by seeing them. It is one thing for God to respond when you call, it is another thing for God to see you when you suffer in silence. For God to see the silent sufferer, He must go much further, keep a much more watchful eye. From the name she gives to the place, it seems that Hagar recognizes this: we are told that she is sitting by a spring, but in naming it Beer Lachai Roi – “Well of the Living One Who Sees Me” – she calls it a well. A spring is a source that gushes forth from the earth; a well is something hidden, something that must be sought out. As if Hagar herself were a well, God has sought her out, plumbed her depths and drawn her out.

And what he has drawn out of her in particular is a new power of sight. Later, after having been seen, Hagar is again in the wilderness with Ishmael, fearful of death from thirst, when God “opens her eyes” (21:19) to see a well from which she can draw water and be saved. The boon of being seen by God is to gain new sight. “In your light,” as the Psalmist wrote, “we see light” (36:10).

These episodes are separated in time – it is in Hagar’s first flight from Sarah’s cruelty (Gen. 16) that she is seen and in her later expulsion from the household (Gen. 21) that she is granted this sight, at the moment when she most needs it. Isaac’s new sight comes after a long delay as well. His suffering reaches its highest pitch, we assume, during the Akeida. But God does not respond to Isaac then and there. Rather, Isaac carries his anguish with him into the future.

To suffer is to be in some sense obliterated, to become invisible – and indeed, Isaac after the Akeida becomes invisible to the reader, disappearing from a long stretch of the ensuing narrative. When he appears again, the first thing we are told is that he has been in the area of Beer Lachai Roi. He is gravitating toward Hagar’s place, as if driven by a desperate, if unconscious, desire to be seen by God, as she was. And it seems to work – it is immediately reported that Isaac “raised his eyes” and saw the caravan bringing Rebecca to him as his wife (24:63). Isaac’s gift of new sight, like Hagar’s, brings a reversal of fortune, from weakness to strength, from oblivion to security and promise. The exchange of sight continues as Rebecca “raises up her eyes” to see Isaac, bringing an end to his invisibility with the onset of love and the beginning of comfort for his losses (25:67).

The arrival – literally, the appearance – of Rebecca brings Isaac out of the shadows and into the full life of a blessed patriarch. The narrative proceeds directly from his invisibility prior to Rebecca’s arrival to his siring of sons and his successful activity in the world after his marriage. It is notable, though, in this drama of seeing and being seen, that Isaac’s later limitations as a father come from his inability to see his sons, Jacob and Esau, when they present themselves to him to receive his blessing.

Isaac's vulnerability – a trait decidedly not shared by the other patriarchs – might simply be a part of his character. Despite the redemptive vision that God granted him after his return from Beer Lachai Roi, Isaac never takes original or assertive action, but tends instead to replay the actions of his father – presenting his wife as his sister when abroad (26:7; cf. 12:11 et seq., 20:2 et seq.), and re-digging his father's wells (26:15-23) rather than establishing his own. Isaac's particular vulnerability of blindness, though, seems a direct result of his early suffering. Having been unseen by his father at his moment of greatest peril, Isaac is unable to see his sons at the moment when they most need him.

Isaac is not a character who can extend himself creatively beyond the patterns that his father demonstrated to him. And the vital regard of a father seeing the pain and the humanity of his son is not something that Isaac received from his father. For that, he had to rely on God. Nor did he ever receive a blessing from his father; for that, too, he has relied only on God. Moreover, God's blessing arrives, conspicuously, only after Abraham has died. As if to underscore the substitution of God's fatherly regard for Abraham's, the text tells us in a single verse that "it was after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son Isaac" and that "Isaac settled near Beer Lachai Roi" – the place where God has seen him as Abraham never did (25:10).

Abraham was hardly apathetic toward Isaac, of course. He was called to the service of God, which, in the case of the Akeida, was incompatible with the love he had for Isaac. The incompatibility between service to God and service to family is the very crux of the test that God puts to Abraham, and is stated almost explicitly when God calls Abraham to the grim task by identifying Isaac as "your son, your only one, whom you love" (22:2). It is exactly because Abraham was willing to rise to this challenge that he is deemed to have passed God's test.

But in the course of passing God's test, Abraham becomes a silent sufferer along with Isaac. Early in the story, there is a sense that Isaac's identity is subsumed into Abraham's identity – God calls Abraham to do something to Isaac, but repeatedly uses the word "you" in describing Isaac ("your son", "your only one", etc.) so that Abraham's act upon Isaac becomes almost equally an act upon himself. At the climax of the story, though, it seems that Abraham's identity is subsumed into Isaac's. It is at this point that Abraham – the smooth talker in business dealings before and after the Akeida, the great orator and advocate of Sedom and Amora, who dares to challenge God in His plan to destroy the cities – loses the ability to speak. His silence certainly does not reflect an indifference to the act of killing his son – the text shows us that rather than performing the task in the rote sequence that must have been familiar from other sacrifices (as in the two-word account of his sacrifice of the ram in place of Isaac, 22:10), he performs it haltingly, in its many discrete steps – Abraham built the altar, set out the firewood, bound Isaac, laid him on the altar, reached out his hand, took the knife. The story proceeds in slow motion, as if to underscore Abraham's extreme reluctance. But for all his conflict in performing the sacrifice, Abraham is unable to speak or call out. His anguish is there only to be seen by God.

And indeed, at the climax of the Akeida that Abraham comes into the pattern of the silent sufferer: God calls out to Abraham, who has *not* called out to God. He rescues Abraham from the anguish that He has placed him in – and, as with Hagar and Isaac, He does this by enabling Abraham to see something new: the ram that he will then sacrifice in Isaac's place. Just as Isaac "raised up his eyes" to see Rebecca, whose arrival reversed his fate (24:63), Abraham "raised up his eyes" to see the ram, which allows the tension of the Akeida to be unwound. And Abraham is as deeply awed by this divine intervention a Hagar had been – like her, he names the place in recognition of the saving power of God's sight – *Adonai Yireh* – God Sees (22:14).

What the Akeida shows us, then, is the exact borderline between God's judgment and God's mercy. God starts by challenging Abraham to a test, and ends by seeing the pain that Abraham endures in carrying out that challenge. Sitting in judgment, God *watches* to see whether Abraham will pass the test. But all the while, God is also *watching over* Abraham, protecting him in His mercy. God's judgment is very demanding, calling on Abraham to do the unthinkable – which will in fact tear his family apart, even disabling Isaac in his relationships with his own sons later on. But God's aspect of mercy cannot allow the aspect of judgment to carry on to its final conclusion. Once Abraham has passed the test – convincingly, if not conclusively – then, in that very moment, between the lifting of the knife and the thrust of the knife, God's act of judgment is ended and his continuous quality of mercy shines through in full force.

God's challenges are onerous, even overwhelming. But they can be passed, and we can earn a favorable judgment. The test is in what we do when we are most frightfully challenged. When Abraham is pushed to his spiritual limit, he becomes speechless like Isaac and Hagar, and it is in this condition that God answers him with a saving vision. Jonah does not push himself to his spiritual limits – he continually shrinks and flees from God's challenges and from God's sight. God calls on him to use his faculty of speech to warn the people of Nineveh of God's judgment, but it is only when he needs to be rescued from the belly of the fish, that Jonah begins to use his power of speech. He wants God to exercise mercy on him – to save him from the sea and provide him with a plant to shelter him from the sun – but he does not earn God's mercy by taking the action that can secure God's judgment. The people of Nineveh, on the other hand, do take action, and by atoning for their sins, they convince God to reverse His judgment and to bestow His mercy on them instead.

It is not perfection that God requires of us, it is the vigorous exercise of the powers that we possess. God fills our lives with challenges, and it is only through strenuous effort that we may pass His many tests. But He has also filled us with abilities – each of us with a different set – that we can, and must, employ, to earn a positive verdict. As Hagar, Isaac and Abraham discover, it is only when we feel we have reached the end that God opens our eyes to the new beginning. And it is only when we have passed through to the limits of God’s judgment that we encounter the beginning of God’s limitless mercy.