

JUDAISM ON THE CUTTING EDGE

On Mount Moriah God gave a test on religious motivation—and provided a story worth repeating at every New Year. By Jeffrey H. Tigay

On Rosh Hashana we read one of the most perplexing stories in the Bible. *Akedat Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac, describes how God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, only to cancel the command once he saw that Abraham would obey. In our age, people who believe God orders them to kill are considered mentally ill. Most of us would rebel rather than kill our children, and many could not believe in a God who demands such a thing. Our resistance is not only the result of modern secularism but is rooted in the Bible itself, which explicitly requires that firstborn sons be redeemed rather than sacrificed and singles out child sacrifice as the most extreme of the Canaanites' abominations.

How, then, could the Torah tell such a story in praise of Abraham? One theory is that the *Akeda* teaches the very lesson that God rejects human sacrifice—but there is not a word to this effect in the story itself. The test over, God tells Abraham not to harm Isaac, that now He knows that Abraham truly reveres God. He

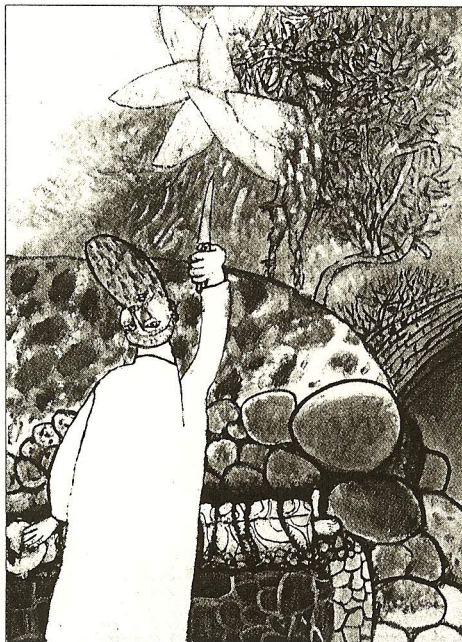
adds that because Abraham has not withheld his son, He will proceed to fulfill His promises. Not a word is said about the wrongness of child sacrifice in general. That would come later in the Bible.

To understand the *Akeda* we have to keep in mind that Judaism did not emerge all at once. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived before the giving of the Torah, and did things that God had not yet forbidden. Abraham married his half-sister, and Jacob was married to two sisters at the same time. The Torah later called such marriages abominable. Jacob worshiped God at a stone pillar, which Deuteronomy later forbade as idolatrous. So it was with child sacrifice, which was still practiced in Abraham's time. Prior to Sinai, children were not seen as independent individuals and fathers held life-and-death authority over them. However much it grieved him, Abraham had no reason to believe God opposed child sacrifice. He may even have seen a certain logic in it: The sacrifice would show extreme devotion to the Deity to whom he owed all things, including the child.

That being the case, if we want to understand the *Akeda*, we must suspend our own post-Sinai revulsion and try to understand what God's command would have meant to a person living in Abraham's time.

Perhaps the clue to God's purpose is in the wording of His command: "Take your son, your only one, whom you love,

Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." As Professor Nahum Sarna notes, the style of God's command—the words "go forth," the listing of what is being given up, the vagueness of the destination—recalls His words to Abraham years earlier: "Go forth from your land and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."



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It is in this stylistic similarity that we find the meaning of the *Akeda*. When God first called Abraham to follow him, Abraham and Sarah were, respectively, 75 and 65 years old and childless. Yet God promised Abraham a nation full of descendants. Abraham followed and God gave him Ishmael and Isaac. After Ishmael was sent away, it was only through Isaac that God's promise could be fulfilled. In the *Akeda*, by subtly reminding Abraham of His original promise while asking him to forgo that promise by sacrificing the son through whom it would be

realized, God tested whether Abraham's devotion was based on expected reward or was unconditional.

God's testing of Abraham's motives is one of the fundamental issues in religion. As Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches, "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of their allowance, but like servants who serve with no thought of an allowance." Religion should not be utilitarian; it demands sacrifice, at times even martyrdom. Though the Bible often promises tangible rewards for obedience to God, and our prayers regularly give voice to such hopes, the *Akeda* reminds us that ultimately there are no guarantees of reward.

As difficult as it may be for us to accept the terms of the test, the *Akeda* shows, in the way that was most meaningful in Abraham's times, that his devotion to God was selfless. Even today his story reminds us that we should not expect religion to provide us with tangible rewards. Rather, we should expect the inner rewards that come from the beauty of the commandments, community, identity, religious study, and from striving to know and obey our Creator. **H**

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