



Avraham's and Our Sacrifice

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5779

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Most of us are horrified by this morning's Torah reading, in which God commands Avraham:

קח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אֹהֲבָתְךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד
הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

“Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriyyah, and offer him up there as an offering-up upon one of the mountains that I will tell you of.”

And, even more shocking to us, Avraham nearly goes through with it, perhaps because child sacrifice may have been a common and accepted feature of other ancient near eastern religions. But God intercedes at the last possible moment, when Avraham's poised, knife in hand, over his son. God's messenger calls out:

אֲבִרְהָם אֲבִרְהָם... אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנֶּעַר וְאֶל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה.

“Avraham! Avraham! ...Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, do not do anything to him!”

We heave a collective sigh of relief that God doesn't actually desire human sacrifice.

A midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 56:8, cited by Rashi) takes this further: God never expected Avraham to sacrifice Isaac. God merely wanted Avraham וְהַעֲלֵהוּ – to bring Isaac up to the mountain, but never said to slaughter him. God wasn't changing God's mind or tricking Avraham, Avraham just plain misunderstood the Divine directive.

Of course, this midrash runs directly counter to the peshat – the plain sense meaning of the Torah text – which seems to convey that Avraham was correct in thinking he should sacrifice his son.

So then what does God want? What is the message of the akeidah – the binding of Isaac – for Avraham and for us?

The continuation of the heavenly messenger's intervention specifies:

כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חִשַּׁבְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

“For now I know that you are in awe of God—you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me.”

Avraham passes God's tenth and final test of him because he is *willing* to sacrifice what is nearest and dearest to him, that which seemed the most impossible and took him the longest in life to achieve: his son with Sarah.

While this is an extreme and morally troubling example – even though halted before the potential became actual – the idea of sacrifice is important in Judaism and in life.

Note that it's not sacrifice for its own sake that the angel commends in Avraham. Judaism doesn't promote outright asceticism or volitional martyrdom. Rather, sacrifice – giving up something substantial – is valuable when it has a greater purpose. In Avraham's case, it's an expression of his awe of God.

While the English word *sacrifice* connotes making an object sacred or holy, the word generally used by the Torah to refer to sacrifice is *korban*. *Korban* comes from the same Hebrew root as *kareiv*, to draw near. A sacrifice, a *korban*, is an action that brings the object – and more importantly, the person offering it – nearer to God.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jews haven't practiced animal or plant sacrifice. So how do we draw near to God?

We usually understand prayer as our substitute for sacrifice, which the Talmud affirms תפלות כנגד תמידין תקנום – “The prayer services were established corresponding to the daily sacrifices” (Berakhot 26b). But we also have a theologically audacious Talmudic teaching that goes much farther:

אמר רבי חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא: מיום שחרב בית המקדש, אין לו להקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד.

“Said Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami in the name of Ulla: From the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy Blessed One has nothing in the world except the four cubits of *halakhah* alone” (Berakhot 8a).

What does it mean that God is confined to the prescribed dimensions of *halakhah*?

Halakhah – usually translated as Jewish law, but literally, the path – the Jewish way we walk through life, becomes the locus for encountering God.

Halakhah becomes the replacement for, or perhaps the new form of, sacrifice.

How is *halakhah*, Jewish living, a sacrifice? And how does it help us connect with God?

Roughly speaking, *halakhah* places things and actions into the categories of permitted and forbidden and asks us to choose to forego the latter.

When we voluntarily impose limits on ourselves, on what we eat, how we speak to and about others, when we work, who we touch, or how we spend our resources, we subtly remind ourselves that fundamentally, the world is not ours for the taking.

As Maimonides writes in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:13):

“It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else.”

Or as we'll sing when returning the Torah to the ark:

לִי-הַנָּהוּ הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָהּ, תִּבְלַל וַיֵּשְׁבֵי בָּהּ:

“The Lord’s is the earth and its fullness, the world and the dwellers within it” (Psalms 24:1).

Jewish observance is our people’s ancient spiritual path that, through regular practice, ideally instils in us a heightened consciousness of our impacts on each other, on other creatures, and on the world. This greater sensitivity should lead us to self-restraint, the ability to withhold our hand from always taking. If we make a regular practice of this, it can effect shifts in our behaviour, even outside the realm of traditional halakhah.

A personal example: After I started keeping kosher in high school, I started thinking about my food more, not just in terms of what’s kosher and what’s not, but about what it is and where it comes from. And keeping kosher also helped me realize that I have the power to choose not to eat some foods, even though I know they taste good. So I started thinking more about the animals I was eating, and then decided not to eat them any longer. This has become an identity-shaping moral and spiritual commitment for me.

I don’t share this out of pretensions of piety, but only to illustrate that even ostensibly purely ritual practice can have profound effects on us and our world.

Similarly, the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes of wrapping himself in a tallit as reminding him to remember those who don’t have proper clothing and to prompt him to give more generously.

Today, Shabbat can teach us, among so many things, that we can and should place limits on our screen absorption. And if I can unplug from devices in order to prioritize connecting with real people over Shabbat, I have the ability to do so during the week as well.

Of course, Judaism is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Each mitzvah we do stands on its own as something positive, whether we do it again or not, whether we do other mitzvot or not. But making a habit of doing something – or refraining from something – means that the mitzvah can have a real effect on us, can help change us.

The act of choosing to give up something, to sacrifice, is just as important now as it was in ancient times, and it still draws us closer to God. And Jewish tradition gives us 613 possible avenues to pursue making sacrifices for the sake of imbuing our lives with greater meaning.

So when we read the akeidah – the binding of Isaac – let’s think not only about what God requested of Avraham, but what we’re prepared to try to sacrifice, and why.