

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

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The *Akedah* is haunting. All three Abrahamic religious traditions take the story as foundational; it establishes Abraham as the father of these faiths, even the father of faith. It is not, though, a story one would read to a child before bedtime. A sensitive child might shiver at what genuinely appears to be not heroism but moral horror. Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua argues that Abraham's blind obedience cannot have positive religious significance. Indeed it is sometimes suggested that Abraham failed God's test; commanded to murder, he was all too willing, no questions asked. Yet there is something enormously powerful, even inspirational, about the story and about Abraham.

In the earlier biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorah, Abraham boldly confronts God:

²³Abraham came close and said

Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

²⁴Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city,
Will you really sweep it away?
Will you not bear with the place because of the fifty innocent that are in
its midst?

²⁵Heaven forbid¹ for you to do a thing like this,
to deal death to the innocent along with the guilty,
that it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty.
Heaven forbid for you!
The judge of all the earth—will He not do what is just?²

Commanded to sacrifice Isaac, where stunned incredulity seems much more in order, Abraham is strangely silent, even passive; he arises early³ and sets off toward Mt. Moriah with Isaac.

It is told that a student commented to Joseph Campbell, a giant in the study of mythology, that he was tired of the old stories and longed for new ones. Campbell replied that that was fine; “if you have a couple of thousand years to work at it.” The *Akedah* is among the great gifts of the Hebrew Bible. Proposals about its meaning and significance abound: allusions throughout biblical literature, Rabbinic *midrash*, Christian reflection on the story and on its reflection

¹ Many translations find here something more tame, as in “Far be it from you.” Fox’s translation comes much closer to the Hebrew. If anything, the Hebrew is less tame than Fox suggests. See Fox’s footnote to the phrase “heaven forbid”: “Lit. “May you have a curse.” That seems to me too strong in the context. But the key hebrew root is “kll,” to profane.

² Genesis 18 *The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox translation (1983)

³ The Hebrew for “arises early,” *va’yashkem*, suggests (to my ear) eagerness, a spiritual opportunity.

in Christian thinking about God's sacrifice of his own son, medieval and modern commentaries, including that of Kierkegaard and the literature responsive to him. The text, powerful as it is, is extremely spare. We are thus invited to provide *midrash*, to fill in gaps, to make sense of it and its power. Needless to say, there are many ways.

I propose that we resist starting with the hardest questions. There will be time later for wonder about God's motives, for example. Abraham's thinking—we are not privy to it—is difficult enough. What was he thinking? Did he suffer with a choice? Was it no choice at all? What did he tell himself about Isaac, about his commitment to his beloved son, about Isaac as the promised progeny of future nations?

Before making my proposal, I want to attend to unmistakably significant aspects of the story. Here's one: Abraham's tenderness towards Isaac, as well as their bond, seem unaffected by this cruelest of marches. The text seems to encourage us to feel their closeness. It repeatedly reminds us that "the two walked together"; the Hebrew *yachdav*, "together," is very strong; almost (but not quite), "as one." Indeed even after Isaac asks his father about the missing lamb for the slaughter and Abraham answers that God will provide the lamb—at which point Rashi⁴ suggests that Isaac knows what must be planned—the two walk together, *yachdav*.

⁴ The dean, one might say, of Rabbinic biblical commentators, 1040-1105.

Additionally Abraham refers to Issac warmly as “my son.” Think about how strange and unlikely this is for a father who—as many would have us believe—has already make his decision to kill his son; all is fixed but the horror of the actual sacrifice. For real people, even more for those emotionally and spiritually sensitive, such a commitment would prompt a certain distancing of the father from the son.

One of the overarching themes of the *Akedah* is that of trust, Abraham’s trust in God and Isaac’s trust in his father (and perhaps also in God). But how are we to understand trust? It is often seen as an expectation that God will see to it that things turn out right, for the best. Many have read the *Akedah* that way, and there are suggestions in Kierkegaard that such is Abraham’s outlook. Although such an outlook would certainly be trusting, I think I see something deeper in the *Akedah*. I return to this below.

Turning to Isaac, I see him—in the manner of some teenage boys—as totally trusting of his father, his hero.⁵ Seen this way, the *Akedah* is among other things a kind of buddy story, more accurately a father-son saga. Until the end approaches—the actual binding of Isaac—and my imagination goes quiet. The Bible never again tells of any interaction between father and son; Abraham seems

⁵ The text does not reveal Isaac’s age, licensing speculation, as if one sees the play with different age actors and reflects on which comes closest to the truth, “truth” as it were. See Jon Levenson’s *the Birth and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p.133, for a discussion of various possibilities, from thirty seven to twenty six to fifteen. My Isaac is perhaps fifteen.

to return without Isaac who perhaps sets out on his own. The human costs of God's test of Abraham are inestimable.

The dark moment of God's initial command is nightmarish. Could the whole thing be a bad dream, a vision of Abraham? It is certainly not presented as such. There are, however, other biblical passages that appear to report actual happenings, only to have some commentators, most famously Maimonides,⁶ take the passages to record visions.

Maimonides maintains that if an angel, a *malach* of God, shows up in a narrative, the narrative should be seen as the vision of a prophet rather than as a record of actual events. Maimonides, having announced this as a principle, does not apply this explicitly to the Akedah; perhaps that was too stark given the role this story plays in the tradition. But others take this to be Maimonides's view.⁷ In favor of the nightmare interpretation is this: Abraham has left behind a culture in which child sacrifice was practiced. He has entered a new life, a new world. His God is a God of justice, the judge of all the earth, as Abraham calls him. One night he dreams that somehow things are not at all the way they have appeared; God wants Isaac. This is a nightmare I can imagine having. And the way the story is told, its spare quality...it has a kind of dreamy quality.⁸

⁶ Guide for the Perplexed, Book II, Sec. 42.

⁷ See Marc B. Shapiro's discussion in *Changing the Immutable* (2015), pp. 67-71.

⁸ A variation on the nightmare interpretation: We are told that only in the case of Moses does God speak face to face with a prophet. God confronts the other prophets, Abraham included, in visions, dreams. Perhaps the gap between visions and visions—simply human as

Whether or not Maimonides sees the passage as describing a nightmare, this reading is certainly provocative, provocative in both senses. Of course, if the *Akedah* is a mere vision we need not worry about why God would issue such the chilling command. And we could happily bypass the horror of considering Isaac's reaction (not to speak of Sara's reaction) to God's test of his father. But some questions remain: what would (or should) someone do in such a circumstance? If one went along with the command would that pious or impious? Where does one's faith leave one vis-à-vis such a command?

Still, the proposal is quite radical and I want to explore what to make of the *Akedah* as usually understood, as a narrative of actual happenings, one that is (somehow) fundamental to the faith. I begin by exploring Abraham's puzzling silence.

A. J. Heschel, in his classic work on prophecy,⁹ denies that the prophets have what we might call propositional knowledge of God. The contrast is with Maimonides's contention that the prophet is a philosopher, that the patriarchs, for example, had philosophic knowledge of God. Heschel points us in another direction, away from theoretical knowledge and towards a kind of personal familiarity with God. The prophet "gets" God in a way not available to the rest of

opposed to revelatory—is wide, clear. Perhaps there are times that it is not clear. Abraham's revolutionary moral/religious outlook notwithstanding, the world he emerges from may have left its imprint. Might it not be that at a certain point, for reasons unknown. Abraham hears, sees, imagines God to want Isaac by way of an offering. Perhaps it takes three days of focused wandering to resolve the issue or to have it resolved.

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962)

us. He knows God in the way that we get the nuances of human interaction. Indeed the prophet is in the unique and in many ways uncomfortable position of being acutely sensitive to God and at the same time, to Israel, to the people. The prophet is tuned in, understands and empathizes with their pains and pleasures, their wants and needs, those of God, those of the people.¹⁰

Instead of reading Abraham as inconsistent—his boldness concerning Sodom and Amora as opposed to his silence in the face of God’s command to kill Isaac—we might note the contrast and take it as an indication that Abraham—who gets God—sees something that we do not. And surely divine-human communication—whatever it amounts to—is nuanced no less than are our communicative interactions with one another. Something about the interaction with God—the details of which are in any case not available to us—says to him that this is not the time to challenge.¹¹

¹⁰ On knowledge of interpersonal nuance: Oliver Sachs, in *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1996), understands autism – perhaps it’s only one variety – as an inability to learn “by hanging around.” When one reflects on how we learn so much of what we need for successful negotiation of experience, we learn not by articulation of rules or principles or propositions, but simply by...and here it gets hard to say. How is it that a baby learns to speak? Not by mastering rules or instructions, that’s certain. The baby, when things go well, has the equipment that in the course of normal interactions with others allows her to enter our linguistic practice.

Or think about how one masters the countless nuances of social life, from the appropriate distance one stands from interlocutors, to gestures that signify respect or disdain. One suffering from autism lacks the equipment to learn in this way; what is nowadays called “the autism spectrum” represents various degrees of such deficiency.

¹¹ Eleonore Stump, in a major work, *Wandering in Darkness* (2010), addresses the *Akedah* in the context of Abraham’s life and his spiritual career. In a wonderful turn of phrase she refers to Abraham’s eloquent silence. Her suggestion is that his refraining from objecting to God bespeaks Abraham’s understanding of the nature of and reasons for the test that God imposes. However the idea that God has good reasons for this extreme cruelty is, for me, on a par with the idea that Job’s catastrophes are the product of some sound reasons, something far from the

Abraham's silence, then, does not indicate that he shies away from confronting God. Still, he sets out early the next morning with Isaac. Does this mean that he has in effect said "Yes" to God, that he sets out committed to doing what God has commanded? If it does indicate such a commitment, I am lost. My sense of Abraham as a giant of faith is at stake. That's not the Abraham of my religious imagination. Of course, if that's what the text says, that's what it says. Does it say that?

God's call to Abraham must have induced vertigo, the world turned upside down, inside out; a moment at which one loses one's bearings. How strange that Abraham arises at dawn¹² and proceeds, walking, one might say, in God's tempo.¹³ Abraham's action exhibits an almost peaceful simplicity, but how can that be?

Earlier I spoke about trust in God and the way it is often understood, as the belief that things will turn out alright, that God will so see to it. I suggested that there may be a deeper kind of trust at work here. At the heart of trust—Abraham's as well as ours--indeed at the heart of faith, is a sense of being

suggestion of the beginning of the Book of Job or anything else in Job. I agree, though, and appreciate the suggestion that Abraham's silence is eloquent. On the subject of God's reasons, another approach to God's command is needed.

¹² I continue to thank my undergraduate teacher, Rabbi Moshe Besdin, z"tzl, for the sense that the Hebrew, *va'yashkeim*, "and he arose early in the morning," suggests an *eager* response to God.

¹³ Martin Buber, in *Two Types of Faith* (1951), speaks of acting in God's tempo as an aspect of faith.

grounded in God. Abraham and God are intimates;¹⁴ that intimacy centers Abraham, he lives in it. To further indulge my religious imagination, Abraham has achieved that level of intimacy that the Bible, in Deuteronomy (10:20, 11:22, 30:20), refers to as “cleaving to God.” Nachmanides¹⁵ suggests that one who has attained to that level is never without God. It is as if one is in love, where the other’s presence almost hovers, affecting the person, her interactions, her doings, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

This, of course, is a very different matter than believing that God will make it right. It’s not a *trusting that* (something is the case); rather *trusting in* (someone).¹⁶ One so grounded, so centered may in fact harbor the thought that God will make it right, that God always makes it right. But not necessarily. Perhaps Abraham, like many of us, has seen enough of life to disabuse him of such optimism. Perhaps his trust, his faith, is more a matter of an unbreakable bond, borne of intimacy; he and God together, come what may.

Abraham’s commitment to God, whole and entire, stands alongside his wholehearted love for Isaac. It is difficult to imagine the two coming apart; they seem like interlocking aspects of a deeply religious, deeply human outlook. But

¹⁴ The verb, “to know,” *la'daat*,” conveys intimacy, even sexual intimacy, as when the Bible speaks of Adam knowing his wife. God speaks of Abraham, at the beginning of their debate, as it were, about Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:19), as someone God has known.

¹⁵ In his commentary on Deuteronomy 11:22.

¹⁶ So Jeff Helmreich suggested as the best way to put the distinction I’m making.

God's command tears them apart. We are not told that it threatens to do the same to Abraham. But to know a parent who has lost a child is to know something of what was at stake. The thought of losing a child by one's own hand is simply unthinkable, bizarre. Whence Abraham's simplicity?

Abraham's is a simplicity generated by a faith that sustains in the midst of darkness. However tortured the night hours after God's command, whatever his thinking about his beloved son, and perhaps about Sarah, there is still the morning, the birth of the day, the stunning creation renewed. Abraham sets off, not knowing where the path will lead, but ready to follow it until the end. He marches, both non-negotiable loves clenched between his teeth, his head down, straight ahead, a moment of transcendent faith. Abraham's spiritual genius—the rules have been left behind—is in part a matter of not confronting the decision prematurely. That would be paralyzing, offering only obsessive anguish.

In philosophy we tend to overemphasize the role of decision in voluntary or intentional action. Of course, people sometimes need to stop and think about what's to be done, to decide which way to go. But most of the things we do are, as it were, smooth, virtually automatic.¹⁷ We typically function more like well-oiled machines than like creatures whose actions bespeak the discontinuity of choices made. Abraham's future, seen from Day 1 of his march, is grim. Neither of Abraham's loves, God and Isaac, can be sacrificed for the other. Better to cling

¹⁷ As Larry Wright emphasizes.

to both loves and to see where the path leads.

Abraham offers us a faith-based model¹⁸ for facing impossible choices. It may be that what is required, in the end, will be relatively automatic. “I will know what to do when the time comes. I hope.” One renders one’s action—as much as possible—the output of a well-oiled machine. This is hardly cowardice or avoidance; it is a pinnacle of practical wisdom in the face of excruciating choices.

Ironically, with Isaac’s hand in his, Abraham unknowingly reverses the challenge; will God be silent, will He remain silent? God responds by calling off Abraham. Perhaps He has seen enough. If tests are tools by which God and the universe allow us to grow in ways otherwise unavailable, there has been enough growth....¹⁹

I’ll close with a reflection on a postponed question, perhaps the most difficult one: How is the test imposed on Abraham remotely consistent with the character of the God of Israel?

First, an approach that I mention primarily to put aside. In the Exodus passages about the redemption of the first-born, God sometimes sounds as if He

¹⁸ Forgive the moment of (political) lightness.

¹⁹ Unlike Kierkegaard and others, I do not see the central challenge to be moral. Were I asked to kill a child of mine, probably only (much) later would I think about morality. Abraham must think: how can I kill my boy. I can’t imagine that he is thinking, “How can I violate morality?” To be primarily stunned by the violation of morality would be the proverbial one thought too many. What’s at stake is more in the domain of love. Thanks to Harry Frankfurt for the insight that the primary challenge is not moral.

wants the first-born; other times the text speaks of the redemption of the first born, as if by right they belong to God but that the remedy is a symbolic redemption. And in a strange, one of a kind passage in Ezekiel, God, through Ezekiel, speaks of the first-born and of the fact that God's anger with the Israelites prompted him to give them "bad laws." The topic is vexed; the thought that the God of Israel was sympathetic to child sacrifice is inconsistent with lots of remarks in the prophetic literature. If one were to take this seriously, one might understand the *Akedah* as depicting God working it out, both wanting child-sacrifice and in the end rejecting the idea. The view is worthy of mention, but there is neither external, say archeological, evidence, nor clear textual evidence, nor a preponderance of scholarly opinion.²⁰ I return to the question of what motivates God to ask for Isaac.

The command that Abraham offer Isaac as a burnt offering seems nightmarishly cruel. Not only a father's taking his child's life by his own hand; also the sacrifice. Here's how a burnt offering was to be made: the flesh burned, the skin retained. Later in the Bible we are told of burnt offerings' sweet smell to God. All of this lends credence to the nightmare interpretation, attributed to Maimonides.

The sheer cruelty of God's command is breathtaking. Job, whose children are slaughtered by others, and the martyrs of the second temple had it easier.

²⁰ But see Jon Levenson's *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. Levenson is sympathetic to the idea.

The latter died *b'taharah*, in purity, with clarity of purpose and of conscience.

Here the world has turned upside down. The Creator who appointed Abraham to bring light and justice to world the reminds Abraham of his fatherly love as he asks for Isaac's offering.

I don't believe that the question of God's reason is subject to reply. There is no good answer forthcoming. Answers in the spirit of theodicy are available, but they lack the scent of truth. There is a tendency among theorists of almost every variety to shore up theory, "pushing it," defending the view by way of theses that lack naturalness. Merely brilliant answers to the most difficult questions become difficult to resist. But this is the road to answers that pale in comparison with the questions that prompted them. As with conduct so with thought: straightforwardness, straight-ahead-ness is near the head of the table of virtues.

In that spirit (or so one hopes) I want to transpose the question into a different key. Let's ask instead why the Bible, as opposed to later apologists, is so little interested in protecting God from apparently just criticism, how its extreme openness contrasts strikingly with the defensive posture of later theorists. It's striking how awful are some of the reported doings of the Judge of all the earth, our Father, our King, the Author of all things. It is one thing, bad enough, to hear of how God treats His (and Israel's) enemies, as in the book of Joshua. But with the *Akedah* as with Job we are speaking of his beloved. And the Bible displays these things apparently without hesitation, with no attempt to explain.

The Bible doesn't seem to know about God's perfections, an idea that comes into prominence only later, during medieval times. God's ways lack perfection and not only in the ethical domain. God changes his mind, becomes angry, almost petty, is jealous in a very human way, is subject to flattery, and the like. I'm reminded here of a theme that has struck me from time to time, a conception of worship at odds with later theory and with the sensibility especially of the other Abrahamic religious traditions. The latter tend to see worship as the adoration of perfection. In the imagination of the Hebrew Bible, the gap between here and there, between us and God, is maintained but there is also something of the flavor of domestic life, as if we were life partners, sharing good times and bad, triumphs and disasters, subject to anger with one another, sometimes severe, and falling in love with one another time after time.

At the beginning of the Book of Hosea, God tells the prophet to marry a whore; presumably to convey the sense of what it's like to be married to Israel. The Song of Songs is poetry of love, emphasizing longing for the other, including sexual longing, and the joys and aches of love. It was understood by the tradition to be a parable about God and Israel. Rabbinic *Midrash* has God going into exile with the Jews after the destruction of the Temple. God prays, in the Talmudic imagination, that His desire for strict justice will be overcome by his loving, nurturing side. God struggles as do His creatures.

From the perspective of the Most Perfect Being picture, such anthropomorphisms will seem to rob God of what makes him godly. On the

outlook I'm eliciting from the Bible, the Perfect Being conception posits an unreal sort of love towards an unrealistically idealized deity. The flavor of the biblical conception is illustrated by the following comment on the Mourner's *Kaddish*. One recites this prayer three times a day for 11 months following a parent's death. Strangely, the prayer never mentions death, or the loss, or the deceased. Instead it is a glorification of God prayer. The comment I came across when I was a mourner, one that transformed the recitation, was that *Kaddish* is the mourner's attempt to comfort God for His loss. There is something very comforting about comforting another. One shares a life with God.

A very different side of Jewish religious sensibility: Elie Wiesel writes²¹ about a trial held by inmates of a German concentration camp. God is charged with crimes against humanity and against his chosen people, and pronounced guilty. Right after the verdict the group adjourns for afternoon prayer.

Seeing God in anthropomorphic terms, as with the interpretation of *Kaddish* mentioned, can be uplifting. And then one gets to Job or the Akedah, or the Holocaust. To the extent that one allows oneself to let the story in, to feel it, one is horrified. That we are often less than horrified, that we try to explain God, these are tributes to those who insist that if God does it, there must be a reason; it

²¹ See his play, *The Trial of God* (Knopf, 1979), inspired by this event .

must be an example of ethical perfection. But the texts, the stories both imagined and real, are plain. They don't so much as hint at theodicy.²²

Perhaps the Bible's unembarrassed directness about God's ways is testing us, but not in a way anticipated by theodicy. As Abraham was incredulous at the thought that God might destroy a city in which righteous people lived, perhaps we should allow ourselves to taste the moral horror, to be stunned by these questions that can have no answers. Perhaps this is training in faith, in straight-aheadness. Perhaps such training and such faith is the point.²³

AFTERWORD

On September 11, 2001, the day of the catastrophe, my wife and I were flying home from London. Hours into the flight I sensed that the plane turned completely around. After a while an announcement was made: the air space over California had been closed and we were heading back to London. There was a buzz among the passengers but since the air phones were not functional—what was that about?—no one had any idea what had happened. Later we were told

²² In Job, there is more than a hint that God knows what he is doing. Which is not to say that He works with a higher morality, or even that everything happens for a reason. He may react to the creation as "very good" without having such reasons, as with a great artist.

²³ Thanks to several people who commented on an earlier draft on Academia.com. Thanks especially to Jeff Helmreich and Joseph Almog for discussion and comments. This paper is based on a number of talks given over several years, most recently at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. I thank the many participants in those discussions.

that the air space over the US had been closed. More suspense, but still no explanation. We landed, sat on the ground for perhaps a half hour; an airline representative appeared and told us about the New York and Washington, DC terrorist attacks. Our daughter recently had moved to New York City and our son was in DC. Could we have lost one or both of our treasures?

The Talmud, characterizing the state of mind of Moses at a moment of extreme distress, says that "his soul departed." We were beside ourselves. With trepidation, we proceeded through a long corridor into the main terminal. Dominating my thoughts during the endless-seeming walk was Abraham's march, with faith, with his head down, holding on to both loves, not thinking about what lay ahead. In the end we learned that our kids were fine. It was more than gratifying to reflect on what I had learned from Abraham.