

# THE SUBMISSION OF ABRAHAM

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## NOAH AND ABRAHAM

Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, lives a life characterized by engaging man and God. The richness of the relationships that Abraham forms is especially striking against the backdrop of Noah's unengaged life. Noah does not attempt to contest the depravity of his contemporaries. Although earning the title of *tzaddik tamim* – *wholly righteous* for his strict obedience to God, *Noah walked with God* (Gen. 6:9) but does not talk to God. Abraham, on the other hand, walks before God (Gen. 17:1), and talks with God. He is commended by God for his passion to communicate to others the belief in a moral God whom humans are to emulate: *For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do kindness and justice* (Gen. 18:19).

Although a man of strong faith, Abraham's interactions with God are at times confrontational. The most striking exemplar of that behavior is his defense of Sodom in the shadow of God's plan for its annihilation. Abraham's service of God, for most of his life, is not characterized by submission. Nevertheless, before he is to achieve *tmimut* (wholeness) in his service, submission becomes part and parcel of Abraham's repertoire. This article will trace the process.

Throughout the entire narrative of Noah, God is referred to as *Elohim*. This title can also mean "judge", and refers to the distant, authoritarian aspect of the Godhead who sits in judgment as opposed to YHVH which reflects the aspect of God that is embracing, egalitarian, and forgiving toward man (Rashi, Gen. 1:1; *Bereshit Rabbah* 12:15). Noah's relationship with God is one of a servant carrying out the edict of his master. The only instance in which the appellation YHVH appears with respect to Noah is in the context of Noah's sacrificial offering (Gen. 8:20-21). YHVH in this instance reflects God's embrace of Noah's initiative as a basis for the establishment of a partnership.

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In contradistinction, the texts that relate to Abraham refer to God as YHVH, with three critical exceptions. God is referred to as *Elohim* in the context of the *milah* (circumcision), the banishment of Ishmael, and the *akedah* (the binding of Isaac). In the first and last case, however, God is also referred to as YHVH. Yet they are mirror images of each other; while the text addressing the *milah* begins with the appellation of YHVH and ends with that of *Elohim*, with respect to the *akedah* the order is reversed. This point has significance and will be elaborated upon as the discourse unfolds.

In these three cases, as will become apparent, God reveals himself as a master who requires submission. They are exceptions, but very formative exceptions, to Abraham's acting as a partner, so to speak, with God and being accepted by Him as such. In addition, it is worthy of note that while Noah is thrice reported, via the root *tz-v-e*, as doing exactly as he was commanded (Gen. 6:22; 7:5, 9), *tz-v-e* is only used once with respect to Abraham, after he circumcises Isaac (Gen. 21:4). This is so despite the fact that God makes many more requests of Abraham than of Noah: he is to leave his family and birthplace; "cut" a covenant with God (*brit ben habetarim*), circumcise himself and the males in his household (*milah*), banish Ishmael, and finally, bind Isaac on a sacrificial altar (*akedah*).

#### A PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

The first time God appears to Abraham in the biblical text he is told to part ways with his past, geographically, culturally, and socially, in order to enable him to receive a most elaborate blessing. In addition to progeny, wealth and fame, Abraham is promised to become the source of blessing in the world: *and you shall be a blessing* (Gen. 12:2). *Bereshit Rabbah* 29:11 explains that Abraham was empowered to bestow blessings upon others, an ability that until then was reserved for God himself; now Abraham will be His partner in this regard.

As Abraham journeys through the land of Canaan, he pitched his tent at strategic points through which people are likely to pass. Twice along the way Abraham builds an altar, and a third time he revisits one of them, but not once does he offer a sacrifice (Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:4). Instead, Abraham utilizes the altar as a rallying point where people would gather and Abraham would *call in the name of God* (Gen. 12:8; 13:4). Later on in his journey, Abraham

again *calls in the name of God* (Gen. 21:33) at the rest station he establishes in Beersheba. While it is not clear exactly what “calling in the name of God” entails, it is clearly a way of proactively publicizing the existence of God.

The partnership between God and Abraham and his descendants is already sealed in *brit ben habetarim*. God (consistently referred to YHVH), embodied in a torch of fire, passes between the two halves of the animals cut up by Abraham as a symbol of the union (Gen. 15:17).

Regarding Abraham’s relationship with God, perhaps the epitome of this partnership finds expression in Abraham’s defense of Sodom. God declares that He cannot finalize the verdict on Sodom without first consulting Abraham: *For I know that he will surely pass on to his children the belief in God’s justice and charity, as well as the man’s mission to emulate these attributes* (Gen. 18:19; free translation by the author). Armed with an invitation to debate, Abraham challenges God’s justice by making an argument never before presented by man to God: Sodom should be saved in the merit of the righteous individuals who dwell in her midst. This argument reflects Abraham’s belief in the sense of responsibility the righteous have for their fellows and the hope that they may inspire others to repent. God embraces Abraham’s position and accepts his defense. Had there in fact been a quorum of righteous individuals in Sodom, the city would indeed have been saved. Abraham rests his defense and only then – honoring the defender – does God withdraw his presence (*Tanhuma Bereshit 9:8*). Although we would have thought it appropriate for the text to refer to the divine as *Elohim* – after all, justice is being meted out – only YHVH appears. The predominant significance of this text is Abraham’s defense of Sodom, not the inevitable decision to destroy it.

#### REACHING *TMIMUT* THROUGH SUBMISSION

Despite Abraham’s proactive nature and the acts he initiates, he does not reach *tmimut* – wholeness – until he passes the tests of resignation and ultimately, full submission. It is important to point out that the promises God makes to Abraham, both in terms of multiplying his descendants and giving them the land of Israel as an inheritance, are made long before Abraham is put to these tests, and are not made conditional upon Abraham’s passing them. Abraham’s submission must be unconditional.

Submission unfolds in three stage hierarchy, the first of which is the *milah*. It is a symbolically sacrificial act which entails cutting into the flesh. It is also a submissive act as it entails “minimizing” oneself before God. Prior to the request for circumcision, God, still referred to as YHVH, says to Abraham: *Walk in front of me and be whole* (Gen. 17:1). God essentially affirms Abraham’s way of serving God – continue to walk before me – trailblaze, initiate, and be the protagonist of justice, but at the same time be *whole*, add the dimension of submission. From this point on, only the appellation *Elohim* appears with respect to the *milah*. It, in fact, appears nine times in this portion of text, in contrast to making not even one appearance in the saga of Abraham up until this point. In addition the appellation *Shadai* is used here, which Ibn Ezra (commentary to Gen. 17:1) explains as depicting a ruler, literally one who has captured (*shadad*) the world. God here requests of Abraham a physical expression of submission and respect for God’s omniscience. A hint of the impending submission is Abraham’s prostration mentioned in the verse immediately prior to the first time *Elohim* is used with respect to Abraham (Gen. 17:4). It is noteworthy in this regard that later when the text relates the *milah* of Isaac (Gen. 21:5), the appellation of *Elohim* is again used. Immediately following the request for circumcision, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, father of many nations (Gen. 17:5). Circumcision will not minimize his ability to continue his mission, but rather enhance it due to the extra respect he will command. Abraham’s main avenue for serving God was to remain intact.

The second stage of submission is the banishment of Ishmael; this act is not symbolic of but rather an actual sacrifice. Elements of this submission are previewed, ironically, with tidings of Sarah’s birth of a son, which is significantly found sandwiched between the commandment of the *milah* and its execution (Gen. 17:16). Upon hearing the good news, Abraham says to *Elohim*: *If only Ishmael would live before you* (Gen. 17:18), noted by Rashi as an allusion to God’s statement to Abraham in Gen. 17:1, *walk before me*. Abraham hopes that Ishmael will be part of his moral legacy. To this *Elohim* responds: *But your wife Sarah will bear a son for you and I will establish my covenant with him* (Gen 17:19). To Abraham’s great disappointment, these words clearly exclude Ishmael who was originally included in the *milah*. There is some divine consolation, however, although not in the way which

Abraham had hoped for. *Elohim* tells Abraham that he has heard his prayer and will make Ishmael into a great nation (Gen. 17:20).

Indeed, not long after the weaning of Isaac, Abraham was instructed by *Elohim* to submit to Sarah's request and banish Ishmael from his household (Gen. 21:12). This was a quasi-sacrifice of the son with which Abraham had great difficulty (Gen. 21:11). Abraham submits, waking up early in the morning (as he does with respect to the *akedah*) to do as he was told (Gen. 21:14).

The ultimate internalization of the import of submission and sacrifice, however, comes only with the final stage – the *akedah*. It is noteworthy that Abraham never offered actual sacrifices to God of his own volition; the altars he built, as will be recalled, were not used for sacrificial purposes. *Bereshit Rabbah* 55:4 alludes to Abraham's own awareness of his flaw. After the lavish celebration he painstakingly prepares in honor of Isaac's birth, Abraham ponders: "I invited a multitude of individuals, including great dignitaries, to partake of the feast and expressed gratitude to God, but did not bring even one sacrifice." The sacrifice will now come in the form of Isaac.

The text itself, in its introduction, is very clear about the purpose of the *akedah*: *After these things, God tested Abraham* (Gen. 22:1). There are no words of consolation from God as there were with Ishmael, just the command for complete submission. There is no mention of Abraham's pain regarding the commandment as there was with that of banishing Ishmael. The command was beyond pain.

As opposed to *milah*, in which the narrative starts off with the appellation of YHVH and continues with *Elohim* as the request for submission manifests itself, the reverse occurs in the *akedah*. Up until Abraham binds Isaac, only the name *Elohim* is used (five times), reflecting the authoritarian aspect of God. However, immediately after Abraham submits to God by binding Isaac on the altar, the appellation reverts back to YHVH. The latter also appears five times, so as to balance the authoritarian God with the God of mercy and partnership. Abraham subsequently sacrifices the ram of his own accord in order to display that he has, in fact, internalized the importance of submission. God acknowledges his act and declares that now that Abraham has undergone the necessary metamorphosis and earned the title of a *God-fearing* man (Gen. 22:12). He will now be able to continue successfully in his previ-

ous work of being an inspiration to other nations whose respect for him will only grow (Gen. 22:18).

#### BEYOND SUBMISSION

Immediately after the *akedah*, Abraham returns to the “lads” he left at the bottom of the mount and together with them, goes back to Beersheba (Gen. 22:19). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh (commentary to Gen. 22:19) points out the nobility of the post-*akedah* Abraham. Having gone through the ultimate test, he unassumingly joins those who could never fathom his sacrificial experience back to the world of the mundane.

The end of the chapter immediately preceding the recounting of the *akedah* describes Abraham’s activities in Beersheba (Gen. 21:33). Immediately after the *akedah* we are told of his return to Beersheba (Gen. 22:19). The *akedah* is sandwiched in between the details of the pact Abraham makes with Abimelech and the *eshel* (shade tree) – and his subsequent return to the same place. It would seem that the text mentions the latter not only to inform the reader of a return to a geographic location but also, maybe especially, to inform the reader of the return to the pre-*akedah* way of life Abraham lived in Beersheba, engaging the population and calling in the name of God. Abraham returns to the activities that were the essence of his being and the legacy he leaves for the future. The important thing is that the *akedah* has taken place and the readiness to sacrifice the ultimate has been established; it is not meant to be a blueprint for day-to-day life.

Abraham has left a rich multi-faceted legacy for emulation by future generations, inspiring them to aspire to seize all opportunities for exemplifying a moral life. He inspires them not to be afraid to question God’s actions, all the while continuing to have full faith in His justice. Finally, although all hope and pray that sacrifices will be few and far between, if called upon to make sacrifices, large or small, they will draw strength from Abraham who stood up steadfastly to the ultimate test of the *akedah*, against his nature and against the nature of any father to his son.