

THE AKEDAH DRAMA

JOEL B. WOLOWELSKY

This essay presents a fresh and novel reading of the Akedah – the “Binding of Isaac” episode described in Genesis 22. The Akedah is not seen as a tale of submission to divine cruelty, but as a staged drama of faith redefined – one that sanctifies restraint over zeal and elevates conscience over conformity.

A first reading of the chapter leaves a torrent of troubling questions. Why would God test Abraham, especially after his long spiritual journey of loyalty and obedience? And why such a horrifying test – the command to kill one’s own son? Why does Abraham remain silent, failing to protest on behalf of innocent Isaac, as he once did for the sinful citizens of Sodom? Isaac, too, seems unnervingly compliant. Was he also being tested? And finally, why is Abraham given, after the ordeal, the same blessings of land and descendants that he had already received? These questions take on a different dimension when considered against the backdrop of Abraham’s cultural setting. Rather than a cruel test of obedience, the Akedah, read in its historical and textual context, becomes a radical repudiation of pagan sacrificial norms and a moral banner of faith’s ethical boundaries.

In such a milieu, God’s command may not have sounded grotesque. If Abraham believed that God required the same devotion as pagan gods, the request would have aligned with prevailing norms. For example, in II Kings 3:27, King Mesha of Moab offers his firstborn son as a burnt offering in battle. In that case, how could it function as a meaningful test of Abraham?

Here, the medieval commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel offers a pivotal insight. He challenges the conventional translation of the Hebrew word *nissah* (Genesis 22:1) – typically understood as “tested” – and instead links it to *nes*, meaning “banner” or “sign,” as found in a discussion of this verse in *Bereishit Rabbah* 55:1, “like an ensign [*nes*] on a ship.” Building on this reading of *nissah*, we suggest that God was not testing Abraham, but elevating him, making of him a moral banner for a new kind of faith. In this light, the Akedah becomes a divine drama staged to renounce pagan models of religious extremism. God is not testing Abraham but is rather recruiting him to model

true faith – not to submit to the shocking logic of child sacrifice, but to help repudiate it.

Although reading the narrative with the understanding that both Abraham and Isaac were aware all along of the fact that they were demonstrating God's opposition to child sacrifice does go counter to most traditional approaches, *Bereishit Rabbah* 56:8 notes that the text itself hints to this in the wording of God's command to Abraham, "when I said to you: 'Take you your son,' I did not say: 'Slaughter him,' but rather, 'take him up.'" We are suggesting that Abraham and Isaac were aware of the implications of the wording that God used, and acted accordingly.

This interpretive turn reshapes the entire narrative and obviates the above challenging questions. Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain together already holding a firm understanding of true religious faith. Abraham tells his servants that both he and Isaac will return, hinting at the intended moral message of the episode. The story that will be told on their return will be part of the Torah's anti-pagan polemic. Isaac, who could have resisted, especially given his strength and awareness, calmly lies on the altar. And then the melodramatic moment arrives: Abraham raises his knife as if he were going to slay Isaac. But God intervenes – not through direct speech, but via an angel, a dramatic literary *deus ex machina*.

The angel cries, *Do not stretch your hand against the boy. Do not do anything (me'umah) to him* (Gen. 22:12). Rashi, in alternate manuscripts, suggests a different meaning to the word *me'umah*. He reads the word as *mum* – a blemish or even a minor injury that would disqualify an intended sacrifice. Abraham might have considered to symbolically indicate that Isaac was an inappropriate candidate for sacrifice by lightly wounding him and rendering him a *ba'al mum*. But even that would be too much. Rashi's reading reinforces the point: God rejects not only child sacrifice, but even the symbolic gesture of bloodletting, reinforcing the message that God's ethics transcend ancient norms.

The angel declares, *Indeed (ki), I already know that you fear God, and you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me* (Gen. 22:12). Abraham had already passed this test earlier – with Ishmael! (In verse 1, Rashi notes that *your son, your only one* (Gen. 22:2) could refer to either Ishmael or Isaac.) In Genesis 21, Sarah demands that Abraham expel Ishmael. Abraham

is deeply distressed, but he obeys God's instruction to obey Sarah. Abraham's willingness to let go of his firstborn was already an act of profound surrender to God's will. The Akedah did not establish surrender as the essence of faith, but revealed that divine demands have moral limits. There is no place for the pagan tradition of child sacrifice.

The rewards mentioned by the angel – progeny through Sarah and land – are not new rewards earned here, but confirmations of blessings already unfolding. Isaac has been born. Abraham has established a foothold in Be'er Sheva. Avimelekh has recognized Abraham as a source of blessing. These divine blessings were never contingent on agreeing to Isaac's sacrifice. Abraham had already demonstrated surrender with Ishmael; the Akedah reveals what true faith does *not* require: the blood of the innocent.

Just after the high drama of the would-be near-sacrifice, the Torah offers what seems like an anticlimax: a genealogy. Abraham is told that his brother Nahor has fathered many children, including Bethuel, father of Rebekah (Genesis 22:20–24). Why conclude with this mundane update? Why keep it as part of the Torah reading when the *Akeda* is read on Rosh HaShana?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers a profound insight. After the Akedah, Abraham might have asked: 'Why me? Why must I suffer years of longing, undergo excruciating tests while my brother Nahor – an idolater – effortlessly builds a family?' Nahor's daughter, Rebekah, will join Abraham's lineage and help carry forward the covenant. Nahor will also be the progenitor of the Jewish People! This irony might well have deepened Abraham's internal conflict. To continue believing under such circumstances – to affirm the worth of a life marked by struggle, faith, and sacrifice – that is the real test.

In the end, Abraham sees the ram caught in the thicket and offers it instead of his son. The Jewish tradition emerges at that moment – not in the blood of a child, but in the sacrifice of desire, of certainty, of control. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: "Judaism has a tremendous tradition; it is not simple or easy to live a life of Torah and mitzvot. One must be willing to sacrifice on its behalf many things, large and small" (*Yemei Zikkaron*). The Akedah's enduring legacy is the sanctification of moral struggle. True faith may demand sacrifice – but never the blood of the innocent. It requires a heart strong enough to surrender, yet discerning enough to know what God never asks. This story

doesn't glorify blind obedience; it affirms that moral norms lie at the very heart of covenantal faith.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style

can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

