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## Thoughts on the Akedah

Byline:  
Alex Harris

Above all the Torah is a story. It is our story. It is replete with heroes, villains, drama, and ethical dilemmas. The Torah devotes a good deal of time talking about these characters and their trials, but more often than not, when reading these stories we learn less about the characters and more about ourselves. That's because we weigh ourselves against the actions of our forefathers and foremothers. We ask ourselves: "Would I have done the same thing had I been in his or her position?" "Did he or she do the right thing?"

No story in the Torah exemplifies this better than *Akedat Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, this story appears to be one of a conflict between obeying a divine commandment from God—"Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzhak, and go to the land of Moriah and raise him up there as a sacrifice" ([Genesis 22:2](#))—and a moral prohibition against murder and child sacrifice. In other words, Avraham is forced to decide between moral and divine considerations.

For 2,000 years, this story has plagued and intrigued Jews and non-Jews alike by drawing forth questions inside of us regarding Avraham's actions: "Did Avraham do the right thing?" "Why was he rewarded?" "Would I have done the same?"

One common traditional interpretation is that Avraham "passed the test" by putting blind faith in God and by being willing to sacrifice his son to serve God. Avraham is held up as the paramount *oved hashem*, servant of God.

Another interpretation is that the *Akedah* was a punishment or reaction for Avraham's actions. This interpretation is supported by Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra in [Sanhedrin 89b](#):

[To what does "after" refer?] Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: "After the words of Satan." For it says ([Gen 21:8](#)), "And the child grew up and was weaned." Satan said to the Almighty: "Sovereign of the universe! To this old man You graciously granted the fruit of the womb at the age of a hundred, yet of all that banquet which he prepared, he did not have one turtle-dove or pigeon to sacrifice before you!" God replied, "Yet were I to say to him, 'Sacrifice your son before me,' he would do so without hesitation." Straightway, "God did test Abraham... And he said, 'Take, I pray, your son' [[Gen 22:1](#)]."

In [Sanhedrin 89b](#), the *Akedah* is a reaction to Avraham's failure to provide a sacrifice

for God following the birth of Yitzhak. Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra imagines Satan questioning the depths of Avraham's loyalty to God. Therefore, God seeks to prove Satan wrong by commanding Avraham to give the ultimate sacrifice: his own son, Yitzhak.

A second interpretation that views the *Akedah* as a punishment comes from Rashbam, who views the *Akedah* as a response to Avraham's problematic treaty with Gerar in [Genesis 21:22-32](#).

Both of these interpretations rely on the curious line, "And it was after these things" ([Genesis 22:1](#)). Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra and Rashbam read their *peirushim* into these four words.

Other interpretations also hinge on these four words. The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan imagines a conversation between Yishmael and Yitzhak:

Ishmael answered and said: "I am more righteous than you, because I was circumcised when thirteen years old; and if it had been my wish to refuse, I would not have handed myself over to be circumcised." Isaac answered and said: "Am I not now thirty-seven years old? If the Holy One, blessed be He, demanded all my members I would not hesitate." Immediately, these words were heard before the Lord of the universe, and immediately, the word of the Lord tested Abraham, and said unto him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Rambam (and other Rishonim) viewed the *Akedah* as the prooftext for the reliability of prophecy on the same level as a logical deduction. It teaches us that prophecy should be heeded just as any empirical experience of the world.

Now, turning to the contemporary world, we have several interpretations from Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Rav Kook, Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar), and Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburger.

For Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the *Akedah* is primarily about obedience to a divine command that stands contradictory to ethics.<sup>3</sup>

Rav Kook and Rav Shagar have similar interpretations of the *Akedah* that are based on a Midrash of the *Akedah*. The Midrash goes,

As [Abraham and Isaac] were walking, Satan appeared to Abraham and said to him, "Old man, are you out of your mind? You're going to slaughter the son God gave you at the age of one hundred?! It was I who deceived you and said to you, 'Take now

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[your son]....”<sup>4</sup>

In this scenario, Satan approaches Avraham and attempts to convince him that it was not God who asked Avraham to sacrifice his son, but rather Satan himself. This is Satan’s attempt to dissuade Avraham from sacrificing Yitzhak. Rav Kook explains that Satan here is actually Avraham’s conscience.<sup>5</sup>

Rav Shagar goes a bit further. He concedes that it is possible that Satan represents Avraham’s conscience. Rav Shagar then states that this argument, this doubt is the central message of the *Akedah*. He argues that Avraham was unsure of whether he truly was commanded by God to sacrifice his son, but that he persevered through doubt to serve God. Rav Shagar concludes,

The lesson is clear: A conceited, all-knowing religious stance renders the trial, and with it the entire religious endeavor, a sham. The trial, along with a religious lifestyle and a connection to God, can exist only in the context of a humble personality that is content in not knowing. A conceited stance stems from pride, and it is the voice of Satan. The trial will forever be associated with a subject who by nature is in the dark.<sup>6</sup>

Action despite doubt is the essence of faith and the true victory of Avraham.

As well, Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburger argues that human morality is limited and that the act of the *Akedah* was not immoral. He critiques the Kantian categorical imperative that Kant describes as, “objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must always follow despite any natural desires or inclinations we may have to the contrary.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, ethics are governed by rationally constructed, mutually recognized norms. Rabbi Wurzburger sees this view on ethics as limiting. He argues that humans have a “covenantal imperative” that is ethically correct even if we can’t rationalize it. Human morality is limited. Divine morality is not.<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Wurzburger argues with Ramban’s interpretation of [Devarim 6:18](#), “Do what is right and good in the sight of Hashem,” as a divine commandment to act morally, but qualifies this commandment by saying that there are times when human understanding of morality is insufficient to fulfill the “covenantal imperative.”

Finally, there are several contemporary non-rabbinic interpretations of the *Akedah* that are worth addressing.

The first comes from Jon D. Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at

the Harvard Divinity School. Levenson argues that child sacrifice was not morally problematic during the time of Avraham. Levenson believes that the purpose of the *Akedah* was to show us that child sacrifice was not acceptable.<sup>9</sup>

Aaron Koller in his work *Unbinding Isaac* understands the *Akedah* to be a moment in which God not only demands but desires the sacrifice of Isaac as a testament to Avraham's ultimate faith in God's promise of progeny. However, God values the individual human life more than he desires Avraham's sacrificial act. Koller relates, "Consider a health-conscious person looking at a piece of cake. He may want the cake, although in the end, he won't eat it. The rejection of the cake is a statement not of its despicability or fundamental abhorrence, but of a desire for health that is even more powerful than the desire for the confection."<sup>10</sup>

This motif is recorded in rabbinic literature, as Koller cites,

R. El'azar b. 'Azariah says: How do I know that a person should not say, "I don't want to wear *sha'atnez* [the forbidden mixture of wool and linen]," or "I don't want to eat pork," or "I don't want to have that illicit sexual relationship," but rather, "I do want to! But what can I do? My Father in heaven decreed against it." This is what is taught, "I separated you from the nations, to be Mine." Thus one distances oneself from a sin and therefore accepts the yoke of heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, we have the interpretation of the Danish Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>12</sup> In his seminal work, "Fear and Trembling" (1843), Kierkegaard offers his explanation. In his mind, Avraham's actions were morally wrong, yet they were meritorious because of Avraham's absolute subservience to God, what Kierkegaard terms "the teleological suspension of the ethical." Avraham pushes ethical considerations to the side for the purpose of serving God.

All of the aforementioned *peirushim* are interesting and offer much insight into the troubling story of the *Akedah*. But none of them resonates with me. I take issue with both their incongruity with Avraham's character as well as my own moral sensibilities. I will discuss each of these critiques in turn.

I find it hard to believe that Avraham would not know that child sacrifice is wrong. Avraham has a highly developed moral conscience. The entire *Parashat Vayera* is designed to show this fact. Avraham's generous welcoming of the three messengers and his intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah serve as key examples to Avraham's keen moral sense.<sup>13</sup> Avraham's compassion and generosity are highlighted in numerous

Midrashim.<sup>14</sup> To think that he would suddenly accept child sacrifice as morally acceptable is simply not likely.

Instead, I argue that not only did God not intend Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak but that Avraham intuited this and went along with it as a testament to his devotion to God. At no point during the story of the *Akedah* did Avraham truly believe that he was going to sacrifice his son. There is some indication of this interpretation in the text.

Firstly, it is not clear in the text that God asked Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak. Rather, it is possible that God commanded Avraham to raise Yitzhak as an offering but never intended to kill him. We can derive a proof of this interpretation from the text itself.

The original command was to “raise him up *as* a sacrifice,” but was never explicitly *to sacrifice Yitzhak*.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, when asked by Yitzhak where the animal was that they would sacrifice, Avraham responded, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son” ([Genesis 22:8](#)). Avraham indicated that he was not worried about the eventual sacrifice, since God would attend to it. In my opinion, this is Avraham tacitly revealing his belief that God would not make him sacrifice his son and that Avraham believes that there will be some force that will intercede and prevent the final action.

Also, Avraham never even began the downward stroke of the blade that would kill his son. He only raises the knife, “And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.” ([Genesis 22:10](#)).

But he never brought it down. He never began the act that he knew he would not have to do. Yes, an angel interceded, but this was Avraham’s belief all along.

Avraham’s reward at the end of the *Akedah* was not for his blind faith in God and sacrifice of moral considerations, but rather Avraham’s commitment to both his faith in God and his own moral judgment. In Avraham’s eyes, God was morally perfect and would never command Avraham to commit a morally abhorrent act. His faith in God was the faith that God was morally perfect. This, I believe, is the message of the *Akedah*.

The idea that God never intended Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak is not my original thought. The suggestion that God never intended Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak is found in a Midrash in [Taanit 4a](#): “And never entered my mind” - this refers to Isaac the son of Abraham.”

Another source for this interpretation comes from Rabbi Acha’s reading of [Genesis Rabbah 56:8](#):

“When I said to you ‘take your son’ I never said to slaughter him. I merely said

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to 'raise him up.' I said this to you to demonstrate your belovedness, and you did my bidding. Now take him down."

And finally, from Tanchuma 17:2,

"Abraham's ram was created at twilight," meaning from the beginning of creation God never intended Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak for the ram that took Yitzhak's place had already been created.

A final, striking insight comes from Israeli philosopher Yoram Hazony, who argues that the name that Avraham gives to the site of his ordeal is indicative of his understanding. Hazony comments,

As it turns out, Abraham does not leave the terrible scene at Moria without comment. He gives the place a name, and in so doing, tells us precisely what he believes is significant about what happened there. The name he gives the place is "The Lord Will See [*adonai yireh*]," this being a reference to his own words, reported a few lines earlier, when he tells Isaac that "God will see [*elohim yireh*] to the sheep for an offering himself." The meaning here is unmistakable. For Abraham, there is one and only one thing that is worthy of remembering here and passing to future generations: That is the fact that he had held fast to the conviction that God would provide the ram so that there would be no human sacrifice — and that God had indeed come through for him, providing a ram in place of his son, as Abraham had believed he would.<sup>16</sup>

My *hiddush*, reinterpretation, is that Avraham, due to his acute knowledge of God and highly developed moral conscience, intuited that this was God's plan. His "willingness" to sacrifice Yitzhak was not an expression of his willingness to blindly follow God's commandments especially when they transgress Avraham's moral code. Instead, it is an expression of Avraham's willingness to follow God's commandments knowing that they are in line with moral correctness.<sup>17</sup>

Two final points: The first is that human morality resembles divine morality. We can asymptotically approach divine morality by honing our own moral sensibilities much as Avraham did. In this way, we can better live our lives in accordance with divine morality and save ourselves from the error of human subjectivity. Avraham's morality very closely approximated God's morality because Avraham had worked hard on developing his moral

conscience (See [Sotah 14a](#)).

Lastly, this is my interpretation. It speaks to me as I believe that human understanding of morality is central to Jewish, ethical life. Any interpretation of the *Akedah* that asks me to believe that Avraham desires or attempts to commit a morally abhorrent act is one that I cannot accept. Others may disagree with me and that is both expected and welcomed. The legacy and marvel of Judaism is its openness to multiple opinions. This, too, is a message of the *Akedah*.

As Rav Soloveitchik said, “The drama of the *Akedah* is multi-semantic, lending itself to many interpretations. God demands that man bring the supreme sacrifice, but the fashion in which the challenge is met is for man to determine.”<sup>18</sup>

I hope that all can find an interpretation of the *Akedah* that speaks to them, and I hope that in the process of listening to the words of Torah, we can hear ourselves and our souls whisper who we truly are.

## Notes

1 One should not overlook the irony that the story is known as *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, when Isaac is almost a completely passive character. See Aaron Koller *Unbinding Isaac* “The Erasure of Isaac” and Stolle, “Levinas and the Akedah,” 137-139 cited in Koller.

2 Targum Pseudo Jonathan on [Genesis 22:1-19](#).

3 “[Leibowitz’s] glorification of the Akedah—the binding of Isaac—which is the heart of the existential moment of true worship of God for its own sake, comes into focus as an alternative theology of redemption. The Akedah is understood as the ultimate redemptive act. The rational and the ethical, therefore, are suspended and, finally, transcended when one fully accepts the yoke of Torah and Mitzvot.” See also Rechnitzer, Haim O. “Redemptive Theology in the Thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz.” *Israel Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2008, p.138-139. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/30245835](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245835). Accessed 6 Sept. 2020. Note that this is also part of the Malbim’s understanding. See Malbim on [Breishit 22:5](#).

4 Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Aggada* (Vienna 1894), *Vayera* 22. Cited in “Faith Shattered and Restored” Magid Books. Translated by Elie Leshem.

5 Riskin, Shlomo. “Parashat Veyera: Listening to the right voice.” *Jerusalem Post*. 17 Oct 2013. <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/columnists/parashat-veyera-listening-to-the-right-voice-328994>

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Accessed 6 Sep 2020.

6 Rosenberg, Shimon Gerson. "Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda" *Faith Shattered and Restored*. Maggid 15 July 2017.

7 "Kant's Moral Philosophy" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 7 July 2016. Accessed 21 May 2020 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

8 See Wurzburger, Walter S. *Covenantal Imperatives*. Edited by Eliezer L. Jacobs and Shalom Carmy. Urim Publications 1 Sep 2008.

9 Levenson, Jon D. *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton University Press. 2012 p. 59.

10 Koller, Aaron. *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought*. Jewish Publication Society: 2020 p. 139.

11 *Ibid.*

12 For a more comprehensive explanation of Kierkegaard's view and modern Jewish thinkers who were deeply affected by his writings on the Akedah see *Unbinding Isaac* by Aaron Koller.

13 David Hartman puts Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah as a balance to the story of the Akedah. The former puts forth the prophetic mode of protest, rebuke, and subjective moral sense. The latter emphasizes submission, acquiescence, and the objective, even inscrutable, divine will. David Hartman *A Heart of Many Rooms* p. 14.

14 [Bereishit Rabbah 38, 48](#).

15 See Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag) "Interpretation of the Words," on [Bereishit 22:1](#).

16 Hazony, Yoram. *Philosophy of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Cambridge University Press: 2012. p. 164.

17 An alternative reading of the Akedah that I am partial to is that Abraham deeply struggled with the conflict between his own moral intuition and the seemingly amoral divine command to sacrifice his son. Though he hoped that God would provide a *deus ex machina* to solve his moral quandary, Abraham was ultimately unsure of both the impending outcome and God's desire. In this view, it is argued that God did not want Abraham to actually sacrifice his son, but rather wanted to test Abraham's devotion to Him. In the climactic moment of the Akedah, Abraham, not seeing a way out from his internal struggle, submits himself to divine will and attempts to sacrifice his son. Whereupon realizing that Abraham chose submission rather than protest, God ends the test, seeing that Abraham has made his decision. In this reading, it appears that Abraham failed the test by submitting to the will of God instead of protesting against the immoral decree. This is evident in the text

as God never speaks to Abraham again.

18 Student, Gil. "Rav Soloveitchik on the Akedah" *Torah Musings*. 31 Jan 2008. Accessed 21 May 2020. <https://www.torahmusings.com/2008/01/rav-soloveitchik-on-akedah/>

See also:

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/mitigating-the-akedah>

[https://www.korenpub.com/media/productattachments/files/s/h/shagar\\_excerpt.pdf](https://www.korenpub.com/media/productattachments/files/s/h/shagar_excerpt.pdf)

<https://washingtonjewishweek.com/17256/the-puzzling-akedah-story/uncategorized/>

<https://www.torahmusings.com/2008/01/rav-soloveitchik-on-akedah/>

<https://hds.harvard.edu/people/jon-d-levenson>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

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Byline:

Alex Harris lives in Washington, DC, and is in the Master's program for Israel Education at George Washington University and a researcher at the Washington Institute. He is currently writing a book on contemporary Jewish thought. This article appears in issue 39 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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