Shedding Light on the Akedah Story: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, is one of the most powerful and enigmatic passages in the Torah. Why did God need to test Abraham's faith in such a dramatic fashion? Why did Abraham heed God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac without offering any resistance? Why did the angel of the Lord wait until the very last moment—when Abraham had a knife at Isaac's throat—to intervene? Over the centuries, many commentators have offered interpretations of the Akedah story. What follows is my commentary on the Akedah.

God commands Abraham: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you."

How would Abraham have reacted to these words? Here is what he may have been thinking:

"Your son, your only son"—I have two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac is not my "only" son. Yes, I've sent Ishmael away at Sarah's request but he is still my son.

"Whom you love"—I love Ishmael! I sent him away with great reluctance, but he is my first son; he is stronger than Isaac. I prayed that God would accept Ishmael as my heir (Bereishith 17:18).

"Isaac"—Isaac is a shy, weak boy. How can he possibly be my successor? He doesn't have the strength of character to build a new faith and a new nation.

God was not testing Abraham's faith in Him. Rather, He was testing to see if Abraham could open his eyes and realize the virtues of Isaac! Abraham offered no resistance to God's command because Abraham did not value Isaac highly. Perhaps this was a way to be rid of Isaac and reclaim Ishmael as his rightful heir.

Abraham and Isaac traveled together for three days before coming to the mountain where the sacrifice was to take place. God apparently wanted Abraham to spend this considerable time with his son to get to know him better, to try to understand his unique nature and spiritual qualities. Yet, Abraham did not get the message; he bound Isaac on the altar, ready to slaughter him.

An angel called out from heaven: “Abraham, Abraham…. Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything unto him; for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

In the traditional Torah musical notes, there is a “pasek” between the two mentions of Abraham’s name. This implies a sharp break between the two. Abraham before the Akedah was radically different from Abraham after the Akedah.

Originally, he had not fully understood or appreciated the greatness and value of Isaac. But as he brought a knife to Isaac’s throat and was about to lose him forever, suddenly it dawned upon him how terribly he had misjudged Isaac. He now appreciated the precious qualities of Isaac; he now loved Isaac totally.

After this transformation had occurred within Abraham, the angel told Abraham to spare Isaac’s life. The angel affirms that God knows now that Abraham fears the Lord because Abraham did not “withhold” his son, his only son, from God. The Hebrew word for “withhold” is “hasakhta.” The root of this word is also the root of the word for darkness, “hoshekh.” I believe the verse could be understood as follows: “…for now I know that you are a God-fearing man [and have come to understand My choice of Isaac as your successor], seeing that [your eyes] are no longer darkened from [realizing the value of] your son, your only [single legitimate heir] son [whom you have received] from me.”

Thus, the Akedah story tells how God challenged Abraham to open his eyes and to see clearly the virtues of Isaac. The trial served to remove the darkness from Abraham’s perception of Isaac, and to enlighten him as to the true greatness of his unique son whom God has chosen as his successor. Once Abraham saw the light—which he only did upon contemplating the imminent death of Isaac—then God knew that Abraham had learned his lesson properly.

The story concludes with Abraham’s noticing “a ram caught in a thicket by its horns.” Abraham takes this ram and sacrifices it to the Lord in place of sacrificing Isaac.

It can be surmised that the ram had been caught in the thicket throughout this episode, not that it just suddenly turned up in time for Abraham to sacrifice it. The ram had been there all along—but Abraham did not see it! He was oblivious to what was right in front of his eyes, to an obvious substitute for Isaac on the altar. Only after the Akedah, when the darkness was removed from Abraham's perceptions, did Abraham become enlightened about the value of Isaac; only then was he able to see the ram—to contemplate more clearly the reality around him.

Thus, the Akedah story teaches that we sometimes don't adequately appreciate and value others until we are about to lose them—or until we have indeed lost them forever. If only we had opened our eyes earlier! If only we had taken the time to understand! After such a cathartic experience, our eyes become enlightened, we see more clearly and with better perspective. Hopefully, as in the case of the Akedah, the lesson is learned before the loss of the loved one; often in life, though, it is learned too late when nothing can be done except to mourn.

God's challenge to Abraham was a challenge we each face: to think and perceive more lucidly; to value others more sympathetically; not to let our eyes be darkened by egotism or erroneous judgment.

We often don't appreciate what we have until we've had to contemplate losing it forever. Then we open our eyes and try to salvage the situation. Or we come to regret our short-sightedness for the rest of our lives.

Angel for Shabbat