The Binding of Isaac: Extremely Religious without Religious Extremism, by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel's article appears in issues 27 and 44 of Conversations.

The Akedah, or binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19), [1] is a formative passage in Jewish tradition. It plays a central role on Rosh haShanah, and many communities include this passage in their early morning daily liturgy. Beyond its liturgical role, the Akedah is a religiously and morally challenging story. What should we learn from this jarring narrative with regard to faith and religious life?

It appears that the Akedah, perhaps more than any other narrative in the Torah, teaches how one can and should be extremely religious, but also teaches how to avoid religious extremism. In this essay, we will consider the ideas of several modern thinkers who explore the religious and moral implications of this narrative. Why Did Abraham Not Protest? Although the very idea of child sacrifice is abhorrent to us, it made more sense in Abraham's historical context. Many of Israel's neighbors practiced child sacrifice. It stands to reason that when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham concluded that perhaps God required this of him. Of course, God stopped Abraham and went on to outlaw such practices as a capital offense in the Torah (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2–5). We find child sacrifice abhorrent precisely because the Torah and the prophets broke rank with the pagan world and transformed human values for the better. [2] In its original context, then, the Akedah highlights Abraham's exemplary faithfulness. He followed God's command even when the very basis of the divine promise for progeny through Isaac was threatened.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was deeply troubled by the morality of the Akedah. He maintained that nobody is certain that he or she is

receiving prophecy, whereas everyone knows with certainty that murder is immoral and against God's will. Therefore, Abraham failed God's test by acquiescing to sacrifice Isaac. He should have refused, or at least protested. [3] However, the biblical narrative runs flatly against Kant's reading. After the angel stops Abraham from slaughtering Isaac, the angel proclaims to Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Genesis 22:12). God thereby praises Abraham's exceptional faith and commitment. [4]

Adopting a reading consistent with the thrust of the biblical narrative, Rambam (Spain, Egypt 1138–1204) draws the opposite conclusion from that of Kant. The fact that Abraham obeyed God demonstrates his absolute certainty that he had received true prophecy. Otherwise, he never would have proceeded: [Abraham] hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved…. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and [Abraham's] soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it (Guide of the Perplexed III:24). [5] Although Rambam correctly assesses the biblical narrative, there still is room for a different moral question. After God informs Abraham about the impending destruction of Sodom, Abraham pleads courageously on behalf of the wicked city, appealing to God's need to act justly (Genesis 18:23–33).[6] How could Abraham stand idly by and not challenge God when God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son?

By considering the Abraham narratives as a whole, we may resolve this dilemma. Abraham's actions in Genesis chapters 12–25 may be divided into three general categories: (1) responses to direct commands from God; (2) responses to promises or other information from God; and (3) responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly with Abraham. Whenever God commands an action, Abraham obeys without as much as a word of protest or questioning. When Abraham receives promises or other information from God, Abraham praises God when gratitude is in order, and he questions or challenges God when he deems it appropriate. Therefore, Abraham's silence when following God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac is to be expected. And so are Abraham's concerns about God's promises of progeny or information about the destruction of Sodom. The Torah thereby teaches that it is appropriate to question God, while simultaneously demanding faithfulness to God's commandments as an essential aspect of the mutual covenant between God and Israel. [7]

The Pinnacle of Religious Faith

Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994) suggests that Abraham and Job confronted the same religious test. Do they serve God because God provides all of their needs, or do they serve God under all conditions? Both were God-fearing individuals before their respective trials, but they demonstrated their unwavering commitment to God through their trials. [8]

Professor Moshe Halbertal (Hebrew University) derives a different lesson of commitment from the Akedah. God wishes to be loved by us, but this is almost impossible since we are utterly dependent on God for all of our needs. We generally express love through absolute giving. When sacrificing to God, however, we always can hold out hope that God will give us more. Cain and Abel could offer produce or sheep to God, but they likely were at least partially motivated to appeal to God for better crops and flocks next year. What can we possibly offer God that demonstrates our true love? The Akedah is God's giving Abraham the opportunity to offer a gift outside of the realm of exchange. Nothing can replace Isaac, since his value to Abraham is absolute. As soon as Abraham demonstrates willingness to offer his own son to God, he has proven his total love and commitment. As the angel tells Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Genesis 22:12). Halbertal explains that Abraham's offering a ram in place of Isaac becomes the paradigm for later Israelite sacrifice. Inherent in all sacrifice in the Torah is the idea is that we love God to the point where we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves or our children to God. The animal serves as a substitute. The Akedah thereby represents the supreme act of giving to God. [9] The ideas explored by Professors Leibowitz and Halbertal lie at the heart of being extremely religious. Abraham is a model of pure, dedicated service and love of God. Such religious commitment is ideal, but it also comes with the lurking danger of religious extremism. We turn now to this critical issue.

Extremely Religious without Religious Extremism

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) composed a classic work on the Akedah, entitled Fear and Trembling. He argued that if one believes in religion because it appears reasonable, that is a secular distortion. True religion, maintains Kierkegaard, means being able to suspend reason and moral conscience when God demands it. Kierkegaard calls Abraham a knight of faith for his willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son. Although Kierkegaard's philosophy did not lead others to violence in the name of religion, it certainly is vulnerable to that horrific outcome. In his philosophy, serving God must trump all

moral or rational concerns.

A fatal problem arises when the representatives of any religion claim that God demands violence or other forms of immorality. In a powerful article written in the wake of the terror attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, Professor David Shatz (Yeshiva University) addresses this urgent question.[10] He observes that in general, the answer for any form of extremism is to create a system with competing ideals for balance. For example, one may place law against liberty, self-respect against respect for others, and discipline against love. In religion, however, there is a fundamental problem: placing any value against religion—especially if that competing value can trump religion—defeats religious commitment. Professor Shatz suggests a solution. There is a way to have passion for God tempered by morality and rationality without requiring any religious compromise. One must embrace morality and rationality as part of the religion. The religion itself must balance and integrate competing values and see them all as part of the religion. This debate harks back to Rabbi Saadyah Gaon (Babylonia, 882–942), who insisted that God chooses moral things to command. In contrast, the medieval Islamic philosophical school of Ash'ariyya maintained that whatever God commands is by definition good. [11] Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah fails Professor Shatz's solution to religious extremism and is therefore vulnerable to the dangers of immorality in the name of God. In truth, Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah fails the narrative itself: God repudiates child sacrifice at the end of the story. Whereas Kierkegaard focuses on Abraham's willingness to suspend morality to serve God, the narrative teaches that God rejects immorality as part of the Torah's religion.

The expression of religious commitment in the Torah is the fear of God, which by definition includes the highest form of morality. [12] There must never be any disconnect between religious commitment and moral behavior, and Israel's prophets constantly remind the people of this critical message. [13] Thus, the Torah incorporates morality and rationality as essential components of its religious system. It also is important to stress that people who act violently in the name of religion generally are not crazy. Rather, they are following their religious system as they understand it and as their clerics teach it. Such manifestations of religion themselves are evil and immoral.

Post-modernism thinks it can relativize all religion and thereby protect against the violence generated by religious extremism. In reality, however, post-modernism achieves the opposite effect, as its adherents no longer have the resolve to refer to evil as evil and to battle against it. Instead, they try to rationalize evil away.

This position very meaningfully empowers the religious extremists. [14] Professor Shatz acknowledges that lamentably, there are negative extremist elements among some Jews who identify themselves as religious, as well. However, their attempts to justify their immorality with Torah sources in fact do violence to our sacred texts.[15] Such Jews are not extremely religious, as they pervert the Torah and desecrate God's Name. Similarly, every religion must build morality and rationality into their systems so that they can pursue a relationship with God while avoiding the catastrophic consequences of religious extremism. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has observed, "the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion." [16]

Conclusion

The Akedah teaches several vital religious lessons. Ideal religion is all about serving God, and is not self-serving. Because we expect God to be moral, the Torah's protest tradition also emerges with Abraham's holding God accountable. We may and should ask questions. Simultaneously, we must obey God's laws in our mutual covenantal relationship. We aspire to be extremely religious, and Abraham serves as a paragon of the ideal connection to God, an active relationship, and faithfulness. The Akedah also teaches the key to avoid what is rightly condemned as religious extremism, using religion as a vehicle for murder, persecution, discrimination, racism, and other expressions of immorality. Morality and rationality must be built into every religious system, or else its adherents risk lapsing into immorality in the name of their religion.

One of the best means of promoting our vision is to understand and teach the underlying messages of the Akedah. We pray that all faith communities will join in affirming morality and rationality as being within their respective faiths. It is imperative for us to serve as emissaries of a different vision to what the world too often experiences in the name of religion, to model the ideal fear of Heaven that the Torah demands, and ultimately to sanctify God's Name.

Notes [

1] The Hebrew root for Akedah appears in Genesis 22:9, and refers to binding one's hands to one's feet. This is the only time that this root appears in the entire Bible. [2] Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800–1865) suggests that this legislation was in part an anti-pagan polemic, demonstrating that the Torah's idea of love of God does not involve the immoral sacrifice of one's child. [3] Kant was not the first person troubled by the moral implications of the Akedah. In the second century BCE, the author of the non-canonical Book of Jubilees (17:16) ascribed the command to sacrifice Isaac to a "satanic" angel named Mastemah,

rather than God Himself as presented in the Torah. Evidently, the author of Jubilees was uncomfortable attributing such a command directly to God. Adopting a different tactic, a fourteenth-century rabbi named Eleazar Ashkenazi ben Nathan Habavli maintained that the Akedah must have occurred in a prophetic vision. Had the Akedah occurred in waking state, he argued, Abraham surely would have protested as he did regarding Sodom (in Marc Shapiro, Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History [Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, p. 70]). [4] See sources and discussion in Yonatan Grossman, Avraham: Sipuro shel Massa (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), pp. 300–301. [5] Translation from The Guide of the Perplexed, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 501–502. [6] See especially R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?” in Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 62–88. [7] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, “Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Abraham Narratives and Commentary,” in Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education, ed. Jeffrey Saks & Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp. 192–212; reprinted in Angel, Through an Opaque Lens (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127–154; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 99–122. [8] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 48–49, 259. Cf. Michael V. Fox, “Job the Pious,” Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 117 (2005), pp. 351–366. [9] Moshe Halbertal, On Sacrifice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 22–25. [10] David Shatz, “‘From the Depths I Have Called to You’: Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism,” in Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th, ed. Michael J. Broyde (New York: Beth Din of America and K’Hal Publishing, 2011), pp. 197–233. See also Marvin Fox, “Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism,” in Collected Essays on Philosophy and on Judaism, vol. 2, ed. Jacob Neusner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 29–43. [11] See Howard Kreisel, Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 38. [12] See, for example, Genesis 20:11; 42:18; Exodus 1:17, 21; Deuteronomy 25:18. [13] See, for example, Isaiah 1:10–17; Jeremiah 7:9–11; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21–25; Micah 6:4–8. [14] For a chilling study of the virtual elimination of the very concept of sin and evil from much of Western literature, see Andrew Delbanco, The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995). [15] See especially R. Yitzchak Blau, “Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and

Moral Constraints," Tradition 34:4 (Winter 2000), pp. 39–60. [16] R. Jonathan Sacks, The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 11.