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Reclaiming the *Akeidah* from Kierkegaard

David Fried

A *havruta* of mine once complained to me that there is nothing anyone says about the *akeidah* (binding of Isaac) that does not boil down to either Kierkegaard or Kant[1]. Kierkegaard and Kant view the *akeidah* as confronting the same moral problem: how to navigate a contradiction between divine command and one's sense of ethics. This reading seems quite natural: what could violate our ethical sensibilities more than the murder of one's son? The two titans dispute the lesson we ought to draw regarding the proper resolution of this conflict.

For Kierkegaard, as his view is classically presented, the message is the "teleological suspension of the ethical."[2] Religious life is fundamentally paradoxical. Normally, God asks us to set aside our temptations in order to behave ethically. However, our faith and devotion to God must be so absolute that we must set aside all other sensibilities, including the ethical, as mere temptations, or passions, when they conflict with an explicit divine command.

This explanation makes the *akeidah* one of the most challenging sections to deal with in the entire Torah. This is not because we are all committed to Kant's categorical imperative and believe that the moral law admits no exceptions. Perhaps we could accept that occasionally some greater cause could justify killing an innocent person. The challenge is that every religious zealot believes that his or her cause is the one that warrants the teleological suspension of the ethical. Absent knowledge of the future, we don't have a clear mechanism to determine who is right and who is wrong[3]. We could theoretically contend that Abraham, an established prophet who could be reasonably confident in his understanding of the divine will, differs from the terrorist. However, such an approach would leave the story with an insufficiently enduring lesson, namely to simply revere Abraham for his degree of divine understanding, a level to which none of us can aspire. Additionally, as we shall see, there are other good reasons for rejecting Kierkegaard.

Although I reject Kierkegaard's interpretation, I must challenge those who claim that Kierkegaard's line of interpretation is too anachronistic to have been the original meaning

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[1] For additional discussion of this topic, see Herzl Hefter, "Surrender or Struggle: The Akeidah Reconsidered," Tzvi Sinensky, "There's No Need to Sacrifice Sacrifice," and Alex Ozar, "Love (and Trust) Conquer All."

[2] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 64-77.

[3] In defense of Kierkegaard, he was keenly aware of this problem and proposed a way to distinguish a legitimate teleological suspension of the ethical from an illegitimate one. For it to be legitimate, the person must be fully aware of the paradox, and not believe he is in any way ethically justified. Furthermore, there must be no personal desire other than coming closer to God. Had Abraham felt any hatred or anger toward Isaac at the moment he was prepared to slaughter him, or had he been part of a sect that would have given him approbation rather than scorn for the act, it would have been an act of murder and not an act of faith.

because child sacrifice was widely practiced at that time[4]. The ethical problems of child sacrifice are well-known throughout the Torah (See Deuteronomy 12:30-31). Although child sacrifice was commonplace in the Ancient Near East, it seems reasonable to assume that Abraham's critique of the predominant pagan religion would have already included rejection of child sacrifice[5]. If Abraham had somehow not figured out the moral repugnancy of human sacrifice on his own, we would have expected God to have taught him this lesson early on in his career, not at its apex. Furthermore, rabbinic commentaries have long confronted the challenge of divine commands that seem to violate our ethical sensibilities[6]. It would not have been anachronistic for centuries of Jewish commentators prior to the 19th century to raise the ethical challenge of God commanding Abraham to do something He so clearly forbids elsewhere in the Torah. Yet generations of Jewish commentators looked at the *akeidah* and, with very few exceptions, did not see his test as having to go against his ethical sensibilities[7]. As devotees of the Jewish tradition, then, we must reject Kierkegaard because his interpretation runs counter to the classical view

On the other hand, the classic alternative to Kierkegaard is Kant. For Kant, Abraham essentially failed the test. God, the Supreme Ethical Being, could not possibly ask of us to do the unethical. For Kant, as noted, the moral law must be universal and allow no exceptions. If killing one's son is wrong, it is wrong under all circumstances. Abraham therefore should have recognized that since the command to sacrifice his son was unethical, it could not possibly represent the will of God[8]. This interpretation is still viewing the *akeidah* as being about navigating contradiction between divine command and one's sense of ethics, against the classical Jewish view. Yet another problem with this explanation is that there is nothing in the text indicating that Abraham failed the test. On the contrary, the text effuses with praise for Abraham's conduct (Genesis 22:12-18).

Of course, one could take the middle position that Abraham had to be prepared to do the unethical, but by ultimately sending the angel to tell him not to sacrifice Isaac, God teaches Abraham that He would never ask for this kind of service[9]. This, too, is difficult: if the lesson is truly just that God does not want human sacrifice, His methodology seems a bit over the top. Did Abraham really need to experience such immense suffering thinking he was going to have to kill his son? Couldn't he have proven his devotion to God in some other way?

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[4] See Robert Gordis, "The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Judaism* 25 (1976): 414-419; and Ethan Tucker, "Redeeming the *Akeidah*, Halakhah, and Ourselves," (2016) 19-21, available at: https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLVakeidahhh.pdf.

[5] It is not my intent here to claim that God had revealed to Abraham the verses in Deuteronomy prohibiting child sacrifice. Rather, as the founder of ethical monotheism, Abraham was presumably a critic of the ethical system of those around him and could not be assumed to believe something was ethical merely because they did. As child sacrifice was their most morally repugnant practice, it makes sense that if Abraham was going to criticize any part of their ethical system, this would have been it.

[6] See *Vayikra Rabbah* 32:8. See also Rashi on *Sanhedrin* 101b s.v. Nitmakhmekh be-vinyan.

[7] See *Bereishit Rabbah* 56:4.

[8] Immanuel Kant, *On the Conflict between the Faculties* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 115

[9] See Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman's introduction to the *akeidah*, especially his quotation from Abraham Geiger in footnote 2. See also Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Iggerot ha-Rayah* 2:43.

How the *Akeidah* Was Traditionally Understood

Perhaps owing to these questions, unlike Kierkegaard and Kant and contrary to what has become conventional wisdom, most traditional Jewish commentaries did not understand Abraham's test at the *akeidah* as centering on the tension between human moral sensibilities and divine command. Rather, Abraham was being tested in his ability to set aside the natural mercy he felt for his son[10]. Put differently, Abraham was not being asked to do the unethical but to do the ethical despite his powerful inclination to the contrary.

Ralbag makes this implication explicit, adding his own twist by arguing that Abraham must have assumed that Isaac had done something to deserve the deed Abraham was being asked to carry out (Genesis 22:8 s.v. Elokim). While one might critique Ralbag by saying that the text's usage of sacrificial language does not make it sound like Abraham is being asked to carry out a punishment, this approach does fit very nicely with Ramban's understanding of sacrifices. Ramban (Leviticus 1:9 s.v. Olah) explains that when we offer an animal as a sacrifice (including an *olah*, the model used for the *akeidah*), we are meant to see ourselves as deserving of death; the animals take our places only by the grace of God.

It would thus be reasonable for Abraham to assume that if God wants him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice, it is because Isaac deserves to die. And why shouldn't Abraham make this assumption? He has already been assured of God's justice in the story of Sodom. He has every reason to believe that when God commands him something, it is because the dictates of strict justice require it. Kierkegaard specifically said not to compare Abraham to Brutus of the old Roman Republic, who had to carry out the strict justice of the law on his own sons[11]. Yet, in Ralbag's read, that is exactly what Abraham is being asked to do. When Abraham passes the test, it may be said, similar to what Kierkegaard said about Brutus, that while many have loved justice, none have demonstrated it so gloriously as Abraham[12]. While Ralbag may have been the only commentator to explicitly adopt this particular interpretation, we shall see that his view that Abraham believed his son deserving of death not only aligns with the classic reading of the *akeidah* as being about the tension between mercy and justice, but also fits thematically into a careful read of the wider narrative arc of Abraham's career. To appreciate this point, we turn to Abraham and Sodom.

Abraham and Sodom

God reveals to Abraham his intentions regarding Sodom, "For I have known him, that he will instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right (*tzedakah u-mishpat*). (Genesis 18:19)." Upon hearing God's plan, the man who was destined to teach his children about justice demands justice from God: Would you save the entire city if there were fifty righteous people? Forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten (Genesis 18:23-32)? To each of these God responds in the affirmative.

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[10] See *Bereishit Rabbah* (Vilna) 56:10, *Pesikta Zutartah* 22:14, et al. See also the numerous liturgical compositions about the *akeidah*. For an unconventional approach that sees the entire incident as a punishment for Abraham, see Rashbam to Genesis 22:1 (s.v. va-Yehi, ve-haElokim).

[11] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 2:5

[12] Cf. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68-69.

There are many strange aspects of this dialogue. It is presented as a demand for justice. "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? (Genesis 18:25)" In contrast with this rhetoric, though, Abraham seems to be asking God to save even the people who are not righteous[13]. Furthermore, why does Abraham stop asking at ten? Why not see if God would spare the city for even a single righteous person? Perhaps the biggest elephant in the room, though, is Lot. Abraham and God have a full conversation about Sodom, yet neither one mentions Lot. Radak (Genesis 18:32 s.v. Akh) offers two possibilities as to why Abraham does not mention Lot in the course of his advocacy. The first is that he knows Lot is not righteous; it is therefore not in Abraham's interests to bring up his name. The second is that he is not sure if Lot is righteous or not. I believe this second approach to be more compelling. Lot's character, after all, is somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, at great personal risk, he shows hospitality to the visitors, even defending his actions against the people of Sodom (Genesis 19:3-6). And unlike his wife, he is able to refrain from turning back while leaving Sodom (Genesis 19:26). At the same time, he encourages the Sodomite mob to violate his daughters (Genesis 19:7-8).

Yet we can take a step beyond Radak. It is not just that Abraham is unsure as to Lot's righteousness. *He is afraid to know.* Abraham stops at ten and does not go down to one because he fears the answer. Lot has a family of eight (him, his wife, four daughters, and two sons-in-law)[14]. If God were to tell Abraham that there is not a single righteous person in Sodom, that would be telling him that Lot too is not righteous, which Abraham cannot bear[15]. While Rashi and Ramban (to Genesis 19:29) point out ways in which Lot was more righteous than the other people of Sodom, the verse makes clear that he was only saved because "God remembered Abraham" (19:29). As Radak says explicitly (ad loc.), even though he may have been more meritorious than the other Sodomite residents, were it not for Abraham, that merit would have been insufficient to save him from being killed. In this regard, then, Lot is ultimately a failure[16]. For all the years that Abraham was childless, Lot was the closest thing he had to a son. Lot's failure to live up to Abraham's mission was, to some degree, also his own failure.

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[13] This point is made by Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman in his introduction to the section.

[14] See Genesis 19:8, 19:14, and Rashi ad loc.

[15] Rashi (to Genesis 18:32) suggests that Abraham stops arguing at ten based on Noah's family. If God did not save the world for them, Abraham could reasonably assume He would not save the city of Sodom for a group of that size either. Noah's family, like Lot's family, consisted of eight people: Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives. In his comments, Rashi provides an explanation as to why Abraham did not go down to nine, which would apply to my suggestion as well. See also Saadia Gaon, ad loc. (long version, available at: http://mg.alhatorah.org), where he raises several possibilities as to why Abraham stopped arguing at ten, one of which is based on his limited knowledge about Lot's family. He suggests that Abraham is not actually aware as to how many of Lot's daughters are married, and, had all his children been married, the family might have been as large as ten. Contrast this with Radak (ad loc.), who assumes that Abraham does not mention Lot because he knows Lot has been influenced by the people of Sodom and is no longer righteous.

[16] Rashi's language suggests that he may disagree with Radak's reading, and holds that Lot was saved based on his own merit. On this view, the Torah's reference to God remembering Abraham indicates not that Lot was unworthy, but that Lot only acquired his own merit on account of his association with Abraham.

This leads us to a tantalizing conclusion. The verse states that "Abraham arose in the morning and hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord. Looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln" (Genesis 19:27-28). In that rising smoke, Abraham sees the answer to the question he was afraid to ask. While Radak (Genesis 19:29 s.v. Va-Yehi) assumes that God told Abraham at that point that Lot was saved, according to a simple read of the text, Abraham fully believes Lot is dead, and never finds out otherwise. In this vein, we may newly appreciate the nature of the prayer that the Talmud ascribes to Abraham upon his arisal in the morning (*Berakhot* 26b)[17]. Of course, we can never know the exact words he spoke to God, but we can imagine him expressing a sense of personal remorse for Lot having gone astray from his mission, and a promise to do better with Ishmael and Isaac.

Abraham and Ishmael

Abraham is given another chance, but again he fails to appreciate the shortcomings of those he loves. Though commentaries disagree widely about the precise nature of Ishmael's misdeed, he too fails to live up to Abraham's mission (Genesis 21:9; see Rashi, Ramban, and Radak ad loc.)[18]. Again, Abraham has difficulty confronting his relative's failure . Only Sarah notices at first (Genesis 21:9).When she tells him that Ishmael needs to be banished (Genesis 21:10), "the matter was very bad in the eyes of Abraham (Genesis 21:11)." *Bereishit Rabbah* (53:12 in Vilna; 56:11 in Theodor-Albeck) associates the verse, "He who shuts his eyes from seeing evil (Isaiah 33:15)," with Abraham's failure to acknowledge Ishmael's demerits. Radak and Ramban (to Genesis 21:11) explain that he disliked the idea because of his great sympathy toward Ishmael; his love for his son obscured his capacity to clearly perceive his faults[19]. God therefore issues a direct command that Abraham listen to Sarah and banish Ishmael (Genesis 21:12). For a second time, "Abraham arose in the morning (Genesis 21:14)" to face the reality of a son who has not lived up to his values. This time, he passes this test. When given a direct command from God, he trusts God and does not disobey. In a sense, though, he got off easy with Ishmael. All he had to do was banish him, and he had assurances from God that Ishmael would live even after the banishment (Genesis 21:13).

The *Akeidah* in the Context of Lot and Ishmael

But what if Abraham's son deserved more than banishment? What if he had done something so horrific that he deserved the death penalty? Would Abraham be able to carry out such a charge, or would his fatherly love interfere? To answer this outstanding question, God devises a test. He tells Abraham that his "son, the only one [remaining in his household], whom [he] loves (Genesis 22:2)" must be killed. In light of his prior experience, Abraham has no logical choice but to believe that Isaac is deserving of this punishment. He knows that his

[17] The English word 'prayer' derives from the Latin 'precaria' meaning to beg or entreat, and thus generally connotes a specifically petitionary communication with God. The Hebrew *tefillah*, for which prayer is an inexact translation, does not have this connotation and can refer to any communication with God. See, for example, Jonah's *tefillah* (Jonah 2:2-10), which contains no textual indication of a petitionary element.

[18] A minority of commentators view Ishmael's behavior as basically innocuous and see the banishment episode as being primarily about inheritance. See Abravanel for this approach.

[19] See also the commentary of Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam on Genesis 21:11, who similarly highlights that Abraham had been unaware of Ishmael's failings. It is interesting to compare this with the midrashic approach that associates Isaac's blindness later in life (Genesis 27:1) with his inability to see Esau's wickedness (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:5). Perhaps he inherited this trait from his father.

blind spot is his inability to see the failings of his loved ones. He knows he couldn't see Lot's failings or Ishmael's failings until it was too late to prevent their death (in Lot's case) or banishment (in Ishmael's case). Now he has every reason to believe that Isaac has failed him as well. Moreover, Isaac must have failed even more spectacularly than Lot or Ishmael: in neither of those cases did God demand that Abraham carry out the death penalty himself.

For a third and final time, then, "Abraham arose in the morning (Genesis 22:3)." He sets out on the three day journey to Mount Moriah. He knows that if he kills Isaac, he is killing not just his son, but his last hope at a legacy. And that is precisely the test. The one whose legacy is to teach his descendants about *tzedakah u-mishpat* must come face to face with the reality that his descendants will sometimes fail to live up to that commitment. He must put his commitment to *tzedakah u-mishpat* ahead of even his commitment to his family. As he raises the knife, God sends the angel to stop him (Genesis 22:11-12). From here Abraham learns that Isaac was in fact not liable for death. But he will have descendants who are guilty, and Abraham needed to model that when strict justice requires it, we must be willing to carry out harsh punishments even against our own. According to Ralbag's interpretation of the classical commentators, then, the *akeidah*'s enduring lesson is not about the need to suspend our commitment to the ethical. The *akeidah* ultimately takes no stance on that question since the conflict between divine command and our personal sense of ethics is not its subject. Rather, the *akeidah*'s enduring lesson is about the importance of our commitment to the ethical, even at great personal cost.

Abraham Versus Moses

Did Abraham pass the test of the *akeidah*? On the one hand, assuredly, yes. "For now I know that you fear God[20], since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me (Genesis 22:12)." It is hard to read this verse as offering anything but praise for Abraham. On the other hand, Abraham's understanding of God did not reach the highest possible level available to humankind. God says to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *E-l Sha-ddai*, but by my name Y-H-W-H I was not known to them (Exodus 6:3)." Rashi (ad loc.) explains that they did not appreciate the full measure of God's true attributes for they did not see the promises fulfilled[21].We can understand Rashi's comment in light of what I have said. The God Abraham knew was a God of strict justice, Who at times demands the sacrifice of a son. This answers the question I posed above about why, when Abraham argues with God about Sodom, he presents it as a demand for justice when in reality he was asking for mercy for the guilty: *he couches his argument in terms of justice because that is the only God he knows.* Abraham never knew the God who rescued an undeserving Lot on his behalf (Genesis 19:29). He never knew the God who listened to the supplication of the undeserving Ishmael *ba-asher hu sham* (where he is) (Genesis 21:17). Abraham, who learned to forego his legacy

[20] The Hebrew for "fear God" is *yerei Elokim*. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1980), 252-253, notes that whenever the phrase *yerei Elokim* is used in the Torah, it refers to the ethical treatment of the weak and the stranger. Accordingly, that God identified Abraham as *yerei Elokim* as a result of the *akeidah* underscores the point that the test was to see if he would act ethically , not if he would suspend his commitment to the ethical.

[21] Though my focus here is on Abraham, it should be noted that the verse mentions Isaac and Jacob as well. See supra., note 19, for a discussion of this trait as it relates to Isaac. Regarding Jacob, see Genesis 32:11, which Rashi takes to indicate that he, too, believed in a God of strict justice who would not fulfill promises to the undeserving.

and God's promises for the sake of justice, could not possibly relate to a God who would fulfill those promises even to undeserving descendants.

Like Abraham, Moses too "arose in the morning (Exodus 34:4)." But when Moses arises, God conveys to him the attributes of mercy (Exodus 34:6-7). God does not need to test if Moses is capable of confronting the failure of his loved ones. Moses has already demonstrated he can do this. "Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!' And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin (Exodus 32:26-27).'" God reveals His attributes of mercy only to the one who, when justice calls for it, is willing to "say of his father and mother, 'I consider them not,' to disregard his brothers and ignore his own children (Deuteronomy 33:9)." What if Abraham had reacted differently at Sodom? What if he had inquired all the way down to one? What if he had been able, from the beginning, to fully come to terms with Lot's failings? Perhaps, then, God could have revealed His attributes of mercy to Abraham. Perhaps He could have told Abraham that Lot would be saved on Abraham's behalf. Perhaps Abraham could have asked for the cities to be saved as a pure kindness the way Lot himself did with Tzo'ar (Genesis 19:18-22). Perhaps the entire *akeidah* would not have been necessary.

David Fried teaches Judaics at the Hebrew High School of New England (HHNE). He has semikhah from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and has learned at Yeshivat Har Etzion. He lives in West Hartford, CT, with his wife Molly and their son Elchanan.

Avraham's Test of Loyalty

Mark Glass

I.

Akeidat Yitzchak is often read through a moral lens, drawing the focus onto Avraham's willingness to murder his son and God's demand that Avraham do so. But there are other ways to read the *akeidah*, treating not theoretical, philosophical questions but matters relating to Avraham's trajectory in the context of the rest of his life as told in Genesis. From this perspective, the *akeidah* serves a purpose often overlooked, as Avraham is offered an opportunity to finally prove his loyalty to God.

Such an idea may seem, at first, an overreach. Where lies Avraham's disloyalty? This is, after all, the Avraham who follows God into the unknown (Gen. 12:1, 4); who looks only to God as his source of wealth (14:22–23); and circumcises himself at God's behest (17:24). But there are hints of another Avraham: An Avraham whose faith in God's promise is lackluster (cf. Ramban to 12:10); whose faith in God's protection is weak (12:11–16); and who questions God's ability to bring him a son (15:2). Avraham's most questionable act is his interpretation of a divine command that leads him to send his son and concubine off to die in the desert (21:1–21). This final situation casts a sharp light on Avraham's loyalty and leads God to test him with the *akeidah*.

II.

The story of sending away Hagar, merely twenty-one verses long, is easy to misread as an example of Avraham's loyalty to God. Following Yitzchak's birth, Sarah grows enraged by Yishmael's presence and demands that Avraham cast out Yishmael and Hagar, his son and concubine, insisting that Yishmael not share in Yitzchak's inheritance:

> She [Sarah] said to Avraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Yitzchak." (21:10, trans. NJPS)

Disturbed by this demand and the thought of losing a son – "the matter greatly distressed Avraham" (v. 11) – Avraham nonetheless agrees following God's intervention: "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says…" (v. 12). Thus, the next morning Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael off with some supplies. It seems clear from the verses themselves that, though Avraham is hesitant to follow Sarah's demand that he send Hagar and Yishmael away, God's instruction to do so sways him. In other words, Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael away, not motivated by Sarah, but by God's command.

The details, however, paint a more complex and questionable image. One thing that is clear from the Avraham story is his vast wealth, implied at many points in the narrative and explicitly noted in 13:2. It is also clear that he possesses the resources to send someone comfortably on a long journey to another country, as seen when he sends his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak in chapter 24. And so, as Avraham sends off Hagar and Yishmael, it is worth considering the route not taken. Why would Avraham only give Hagar such meager provisions, "some bread and a skin of water" (21:14), when he could so easily give more? As

noted by Jon D. Levenson, it is highly unlikely "that one skin of water will suffice a young woman and her child lost in the desert" (p. 75). Avraham isn't sending Hagar and Yishmael away, he is sending them off to die! This intention is reinforced by God's miraculous saving of Hagar and Yishmael when Yishmael is on the cusp of death in the very next verses (vv. 15–19). Though this is not the first time Avraham has shown cruel indifference towards Hagar, (cf. 16:6), his active participation in their death is striking. That Avraham never sees neither Hagar nor Yishmael again underscores that the reader should assume that Avraham thinks them dead. [Indeed, the *midrash* (*Gen. Rabbah* 61) that claims that Keturah, Avraham's wife following Sarah, is Hagar blunts the horror of chapter 21, because it ensures Avraham was reunited with a woman he had thought dead at his own hands.]

All this is to say that, though a simple reading of this story shows an Avraham who is only following God's command – "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says" (21:12) – a closer look reveals his follow-through to be not only cold-hearted but also based on a particular interpretation of God's instruction. God does not demand that Avraham treat Hagar and Yishmael with such cruelty. Why doesn't Avraham send them with, at minimum, enough provisions to make it *somewhere?* Why, instead, does Avraham send them off to die? This is what motivates God's test. Avraham has a hand in Hagar and Yishmael's near-death, a death not commanded by God. God now must clarify if Avraham's motivations were pure.

III.

There is another Biblical story that, when viewed through a particular lens, illuminates God's purpose with the *akeidah:* Shaul's slaughter of all but one of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15). Despite being commanded by God to slaughter all of Amalekites in response to their attacking of the Jewish people as they left Egypt (Exodus 17:8–14), Shaul spares Agag, king of Amalek, and takes of the booty, flouting God's command (I Sam. 15:9). The issue, claims R. Aharon Lichtenstein, is not in God's order to commit genocide per se – however hard that may be to stomach – but in Shaul's selective observance of the command (*By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, p. 126):

> The only justification [to killing the Amalekites] lies in it being a response to an unequivocal divine command. Therefore, if Shaul had been motivated in his actions purely by fear of God, by obedience to the *tzav*, then he should have followed the command to the letter. … Now, if he didn't kill Agag but killed everyone else, what does that indicate? It indicates that what motivated him in killing the others was not the *tzav* of God, but rather some baser impulse, some instinctive violence. And the proof is that he killed everyone, but spared his peer, his royal comrade. … He killed [the Amalekites] not purely due to a divine command (which is the only thing that can overcome the moral consideration), but rather out of military, diplomatic or political considerations.

A clear, unequivocal, divine command when followed faithfully can trump morality's governance – so claims R. Lichtenstein. But, Shaul's selective observance of that command indicated a different motivation: not the victory of divine command over morality but the using of a divine command to excuse morality and justify horror, the genocide of Amalek. Once Shaul is ignoring God, each Amalekite death is unjustified, a murderous, morally objectionable act done for mere diplomatic reasons. Shaul's sin lies in his disloyalty; his deviation from God's instruction renders these horrific actions his own.

Such a concern lies at the heart of Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael. By giving Hagar neither enough provisions nor any resources for her and Yishmael to survive their exile, one question demands an answer: where do Avraham's loyalties lie? Were his actions purely due to a divine command – as a simple reading of the story indicates – or motivated out of other considerations, such as sharing Sarah's cruelty? This question not only haunts the reader but also God, as it were. Does Avraham's mercilessness in sending Hagar and Yishmael off reveal an Avraham using God's command to justify horror? How can God know that Avraham was following Him?

The very ambiguity of Sarah's demand amplifies the question. She uses the word *garesh* to demand Hagar and Yishmael's exile (21:10). But the word has ambiguous connotations. Though translated as "drive out," several other occurrences of the word imply a darker meaning. When God says that He will "drive out" the other nations from the Land of Israel (Ex. 34:11), for example, it is hard to imagine this statement implying anything other than destruction and death. Is this what Sarah means, using polite language to mask an ugly request? Her history with Hagar makes it likely. But it cannot be that this is what God endorses, given that God saves Yishmael's life (Gen. 21:17–21).

And so, when Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael off to die in the desert, whose command is he following, Sarah's or God's? Does he use God's instruction to justify his (attempted) murder of his concubine and son, revealing a selective loyalty to God? Or does he truly believe God wants him to kill Hagar and Yishmael? This is not outside the realm of possibility – Avraham has already considered the possibility that God would desire Yishmael's death (17:18), fearing "God will kill Avraham's older son to make room for the younger one who is to be the true ancestor of the covenanted people" (Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, 51). Though God then assures Avraham that Yishmael will still live (v. 20), Avraham might think that God's agreement with Sarah is a change of mind – after all, Avraham believes God can change His mind, as he makes clear in the story of Sodom (18:23–33).

Thus the question of Avraham's loyalty. There is no clear way to process what motivates Avraham from his actions thus far. But there is a way to discover where his loyalty truly lies: a test. A replication of the same situation with similar conditions where the only command is divine and there can be no ulterior motive to Avraham's actions. Avraham must be willing to do to Yitzchak what he did to Yishmael. If he fails, his (almost) murder of Yishmael was an act of cruelty in which he used God's command as justification for a baser violence. But, if Avraham is willing to sacrifice Yitzchak, it shows his loyalty lies only with God.

IV.

There is no need to keep up any suspense. Every reader of chapter 22 sees clearly that Avraham passes this test and thus his motivations for sending Hagar and Yishmael off to die emerge only out of God's command and no other. What often goes unnoticed is how strongly the chapter reinforces the link between the *akeidah* and Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael, showing it to be a clear replication of the previous chapter. But it also invokes Avraham's loyalty by calling back to his first act of obedience: God's initial call of *lekh lekha* and his response, in a mirror formulation that is remarkably similar. Not only does the phrase occur only twice – in this chapter (v. 2) and in 12:1 – but both verses contain three

terms of increasing specificity and the demand that he travel to an unknown location to be revealed at a later point (Canaan and Mount Moriah). Avraham's first act of loyalty has God tell him to leave *me-artzekha, umi-moladtekha, umi-beit avikha* – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house (12:1) – while his test of loyalty has him sacrifice *et binkha, et yehidekha asher ahavta, et Yitzchak* – your son, the favored one you love, Yitzchak (22:2). Chapter 22's opening verses can thus be read either as the beginning of the test – until this point, Avraham has followed God's instruction, beginning with *lekh lekha;* now, he must prove that he still does by following a new *lekh lekha* – or as a reminder to the reader of his unquestionable loyalty that will be reaffirmed by the end of the chapter. Either way, that the Torah introduces this new call with the words "some time afterward" implies a direct connection to the preceding narrative and thus the prompt of the test, the sending off of Hagar and Yishmael.[22]

From this point on the Torah continually recalls to Avraham's sending off of Hagar and Yishmael both in its language and imagery.[23] Following both divine commands Avraham rises early in the morning (21:14, 22:3). In both situations Avraham takes (*va-yikkah*) the object that will cause the death – the minimal water that will bring Yishmael's dehydration and the wood upon which Yitzchak will be burned – and places it (*sam al/va-yasem al*) upon the victim (21:14, 22:6). Avraham is thus repeating every stage of his sending off of Hagar and Yishmael with Yitzchak. Just as he could have changed his plans for Hagar and Yishmael at various junctures but did not, so too does he have an opportunity to change his mind about sacrificing Yitzchak. The choices he must continue to make during *Akeidat Yitzchak* are the same choices he made when sending Hagar and Yishmael off to die.

The stories are resolved in similar ways, too. Both victims are spared by angelic intervention at the behest of God (21:17, 22:11) with the angel referring to both children not by name but as *na'ar,* a "youth" (21:18, 22:12). Both deaths are averted by the sudden noticing of a solution. Hagar is shown a well, while Avraham sees the ram to replace Yitzchak (21:19, 22:13). That God should save Yitzchak from Avraham in a manner similar to how He saved Yishmael from Avraham's actions emphasizes that *Akeidat Yitzchak* is a replaying of Avraham's sending off of Hagar and Yishmael, underscored by the Torah's reference to both Yitzchak and Yishmael as an anonymous *na'ar:* both *ne'arim* who need God's intervention following Avraham's actions.

The *akeidah* should thus not be read as a distinct narrative but as a continuation and resolution to what comes before. Having so willingly sacrificed Yishmael, Avraham repeats the same act with Yitzchak and, in so doing, reveal the motivation behind his earlier action. This also explains why God's intervention only happens at the very moment Avraham is about to slaughter Yitzchak (22:10–11). Only when Avraham is truly willing to repeat what he did to Yishmael can his test be deemed a success. Likewise, this explains why God learns something from the *akeidah,* that He "now knows" that Avraham truly fears God (22:12), a

[22] Though there is a narrative between the two episodes (Gen. 21:22–34) in which Avraham makes a pact with Avimelekh, the story of Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael is the narrative that shares a clear linguistic link with the *akeidah,* as seen below.

[23] Many of these comparisons are drawn from Levenson's *Inheriting Abraham*, 75–84.

term replete with connotations of loyalty.[24] Until the very moment Avraham is willing to kill Yitzchak his loyalty is uncertain. Only when he fully shows his previous action – his sending off of Hagar and Yishmael – to have been motivated solely by divine command does God learn that Avraham's previous actions were also solely predicated upon the divine command.

When read together, chapters 21 and 22 present both the question and resolution of Avraham's loyalty. Though Avraham shows a willingness to kill Hagar and Yishmael, the *akeidah* story clarifies that his actions were motivated solely by God's command. Reading the *akeidah* not as a philosophical story but as a true test of Avraham's faith and a clarification of his motivations allows for a rich understanding of these two stories.

Rabbi Mark Glass is the rabbi of the Adams Street Shul in Newton, MA and a Judaic Studies teacher in Maimonides School.

[24] Cf. Jon. D. Levenson, *The Love of God* (Princeton University Press, 2016) 29–36.