

## A Thought on Parashat Vayeira 'Heroic Faith'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchak Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



Tests, trials, challenges are so much a part of our lives. Avraham's greatest trial, the Akeidah, is a pillar of our faith and held up as the ultimate focal point to which we aspire in our fear and love of Hashem. Let us examine the way our great Rabbis have scrutinised Akeidat Yitzchak, and with greater understanding of His intentions in testing us, perhaps we will approach and negotiate each of life's hurdles with greater confidence, and with the peace of mind that follows from the sense that everything has intrinsic purpose and benefit.

We shall begin our journey through the commentaries on this episode with the thoughts of Rabbi Avigdor Miller. Note, first, however, that as we discuss the different approaches, it will nevertheless be possible to discern similarities, overlaps and levels of interplay between them. Try to watch out for these, and you will surely find the journey more enriching as a reward for that effort.

Rabbi Miller teaches that,

"There are three reasons which make Avraham's ordeal far greater than any which a human being has ever undergone...

1) His (Avraham's) only desire in life was to have a son who would continue the teachings and practices of G-d, until a nation with such teachings and practices was established. This was his only hope and motivation... To destroy his only son, and so to destroy the future of a holy nation with its many millions of holy men who would establish the honour of G-d and so justify the great work of the Creation, was a tragedy far beyond the worst ordeal that any heroic father ever faced in the history of Mankind (R. Elchonon Wasserman)

2) Abraham understood that all the celestial worlds and the vast spaces of the universe were for the sole purpose of Man. He further understood that all of Creation is justified by the existence of a single man... To the mind of Abraham, a human being was a G-d-like being, vaster and more important than the Universe. Even to cause grief to a human being was considered by him as casting a darkness and sadness over the universe. To destroy this universe of a man by killing Isaac was to Abraham the sorest of tests that any man ever faced...

3) When Abraham saw the three guests, he at first thought them to be idolatrous nomads. Yet he treated them with a hospitality which was fit for kings. He loved every man, even the worst, more than we love our own sons. You see how he exerted himself and dared to bargain with G-d to rescue the wicked Sodomites from destruction (Bereishis 18:23-32), although they negated all of Abraham's teachings. But as much as he loved men, he loved his own son with far greater intensity. No father ever possessed a love for his son which was remotely similar to the love of Abraham for Isaac. What this master of lovingkindness endured when he prepared his son for slaughter, no human tongue can describe.

For these reasons, the ordeal of the sacrifice of Isaac is unequalled in the great deeds of Mankind."

(Rejoice O Youth, Avigdor Miller: pp.123,124)

Rabbi Miller has clearly outlined some formidable reasons for why the Akeidah was the ultimate test of Avraham's faith, his love and his fear of the Almight-y. However, Rabbi Miller does not stop there. He asks:

"But why was it necessary to test him to know that he feared G-d? The Creator surely knows beforehand."

He answers:

"The test is not for discovering the soul of a man. It is rather a gift from Heaven. The potential greatness of a man is transformed into a higher form of greatness by the physical accomplishment of the virtuous intent. Thus, Abraham became greater by the act than he was before he had bound Isaac as a sacrifice."

(ibid. p.124)

These words of Rabbi Miller constitute something of an eloquent synopsis of Ramban's commentary, for Ramban writes:

"...המנסה יתברך יצוה בו להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל,  
להיות לו שכר מעשה טוב לא שכר לב טוב בלבד..." (רמב"ן, בראשית כ"ב:א)  
"...The Tester, may He be blessed, commands him to bring out the thing from potential to action,  
that he should have a reward for a good action and not just a good (thought in the) heart..."  
(Ramban on the Torah, Bereishis 22:1)

Ramban wants to make clear that while Hashem knows the potential in every person for every action he or she is able to do, He assigns tests in order to bring out the potential into actuality; in particular, He tests the tzaddikim in order for them to bring their righteous thoughts into action: "ה' צִדִּיק יִבְחֵן" - "The L-rd tries the righteous..." (Tehillim 11:5)

The Almight-y knew exactly what Avraham was capable of, and also what he would be willing to do, but He gave Avraham the great 'test' of Akeidat Yitzchak in order to give him the opportunity to perform and live through the real experience, and so, as Rabbi Yehudah Nachshoni puts it, "exercise the spiritual power that was only latent until then."

(Y. Nachshoni, Studies in the Weekly Parashah, Bereishit p.99)

Let us now turn to Rambam's thoughts on this subject in his 'Moreh Nevuchim,' 'Guide for the Perplexed.'

"The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe; so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired; it is but an example for our instruction and guidance..."

The account of Abraham our father binding his son includes two great ideas or principles of our faith. First, it shows us the extent and limit of the fear of G-d. Abraham is commanded to perform a certain act, which is not equalled

by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses anything that can be done, and belongs to the class of actions which are believed to be contrary to human feelings. He had been without child, and had been longing for a child; he had great riches, and was expecting that a nation should spring from his seed. After all hope of a son had already been given up, a son was born to him. How great must have been his delight in the child! How intensely must he have loved him! And yet, because he feared G-d, and loved to do what G-d commanded, he thought little of that beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and consented to kill him after a journey of three days. If the act by which he showed his readiness to kill his son had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the Divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of G-d...

The second purpose is to show how the prophets believed in the truth of that which came to them from G-d by way of inspiration. We shall not think that what the prophets heard or saw in allegorical figures may at times have included incorrect or doubtful elements... Scripture thus tells us that whatever the Prophet perceives in a prophetic vision, he considers as true and correct and not open to any doubt; it is in his eyes like all other things perceived by the senses or by the intellect. If the Prophets had any doubt or suspicion as regards the truth of what they saw in a prophetic dream or perceived in a prophetic vision, they would not have consented to do what is unnatural, and Abraham would not have found in his soul strength enough to perform that act, if he had any doubt [as regards the truth of the commandment]...

This is how we have to understand the accounts of trials; we must not think that G-d desires to examine us and to try us in order to know what He did not know before. Far is this from Him; He is far above that which ignorant and foolish people imagine concerning Him, in the evil of their thoughts. Note this."

(Moses Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed: Transl. by Friedländer; Part III:XXIV pp.304-307)

Rambam teaches us that descriptions of trials in the Torah are there to teach us lessons. From the Akeidah we learn how great was Avraham's fear and love of Hashem, and also that the Nevi'im had complete belief and trust in the truth of the prophecies they received.

For Rambam, the Akeidah was a lesson for mankind in the great possibilities for fear and love of Hashem; it was also specifically intended to publicise Avraham's name and his righteousness among the nations. Ramban, however, sees the Akeidah not necessarily (at least primarily) as a spectacle and as instruction for others, but as a mechanism for Avraham's great faith to be brought out from potential to actual, and so benefit him with "...a reward for a good action and not just a good (thought in the) heart." Both Rishonim emphasise that there was no question regarding Hashem's knowledge of the capacity and willingness of Avraham to pass the test; the question is whether his doing so was in order to elevate himself through actualising his potential or to elevate others through a demonstration of ultimate faith.

Sforno takes a similar position to Ramban in explaining the great test of Avraham, but adds an interesting dimension:

**"נסה את אברהם: כיון שיהיה בפועל אוהב וירא כמו שהיה בכוח, ובזה ידמה יותר לבוראו שהוא טוב לעולם בפועל. כי אמנם הכונה במציאות האדם היתה שידמה לבוראו כפי האפשר, כאשר העיד באמרו "נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו" (בראשית א: כ"ו)**

"That he should in practice love and fear, just as he does in potential, and in this way he will more closely resemble the Creator, Who is good to the world in practice; for the purpose of the existence of man is to resemble his Creator."

(Translation from Y. Nachshoni, Studies in the Weekly Parashah, Bereishis p.100)

Explaining this comment of Sforno, Rabbi Nachshoni writes:

"According to Sforno, carrying out a deed from potential to actual practice is a stage in man's elevation, that his image should be like that of Hashem, Who transforms His good from potential to action." (Ibid.)

In his 'The Kuzari,' Rabbi Yehudah Halevi also explains the purpose of the Akeidah as does Ramban, in terms of Avraham externalising his great innate faith, and realising his potential through action:

"And G-d did prove Abraham, in order to render his theoretical obedience practical, and let it be the cause of his prosperity." (Kuzari, Schocken Books: Part 5:20 p.282)

We have only scratched the surface of this discussion which has challenged the minds of many Sages throughout the centuries, resulting in a large body of Rabbinic literature on the subject. In some core respects the positions of Rambam and Ramban represent two key approaches that are the main building blocks for other Mefarshim. We have seen how Ramban teaches that the test of the Akeidah was for Avraham's elevation through actualising his potential, while for Rambam its purpose was to deliver lessons and messages to the rest of the world. Either way, everyone agrees on the enormity of the test, the magnitude of the trial - though, again, there is not unanimity on the precise nature of the difficulties and challenges Avraham had to surmount in order to triumph in this greatest of his ordeals.

A powerful thought in the writings of Rav Dessler may help us to resolve that great question: in the final analysis, what, really, was the test for Avraham?

Rav Dessler cites midrashim in which Avraham is depicted speaking to Hashem and pointing out to Him that he could have challenged the command to take Yitzchak. Hashem had promised that all of Avraham's descendants would come from Yitzchak, but now Avraham was being told to take Yitzchak and offer him up as a sacrifice. Avraham notes that he could have challenged the command on the basis of Hashem's promise, but instead he hurried to do Hashem's will. Avraham then implores Hashem to remember this in the future; he asks that when Yitzchak's descendants are unworthy, Hashem should remember the Akeidah and act towards them with mercy.

Rav Dessler writes:

"From here we see that the essence of the test of the Akeda lay in not demanding from G-d that He resolve the open contradiction between His promise and His command... He was afraid that if he were to ask G-d to clear up the difficulty, his request would contain a slight element of opposition to G-d's will. Some hint of his great love for Yitzchak might have motivated the question. Therefore he preferred not to approach G-d with any prayer or any question whatsoever - even one word. He accepted the command totally, with all the difficulties and questions it entailed. This is the deeper meaning of G-d's words: "Now I know that you fear G-d and you did not withhold your son..." Avraham's desire to withhold his son had not the slightest power over him. This was the clearest sign of his greatness regarding the service of Hashem."

Rav Dessler then explains:

"...There is an inner point in the Jewish heart which is ready to suppress personal desires in favour of G-d's will. Even though the person may not understand the reasons why G-d did something and His qualities of goodness and chessed are completely hidden, he nevertheless rejoices at fulfilling G-d's will. This inner point, which is present in every Jewish heart, is often deeply hidden and fails to break out into the open. But it is still alive, and in special circumstances, it may be activated... This point of truth in the Jewish heart is a result of Avraham Avinu's great achievement in this sphere. (Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler - Strive for Truth, Aryeh Carmell Part Five: pp.106-109)

In this remarkable way, Rav Dessler connects Avraham Avinu's deepest capacity for spiritual achievement with a spark for a similar inner strength that he says can be found in ourselves, millennia after Avraham lived. In this sense, Avraham's passing this great test was not merely a lofty accomplishment by a tzaddik of yesteryear to which we are to aspire; rather, it was the launch of a spiritual genetic chain, one that remains and is perpetuated as an "inner point" within the Jewish heart and soul, carried forward by the biological and spiritual descendants of Avraham Avinu.

Let us now add a quite remarkable and important insight which we find in the sefer Netivot Shalom, by Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky.

We saw above in Rav Dessler's words:

...This is the deeper meaning of G-d's words: "Now I know that you fear G-d and you did not withhold your son..."

The Netivot Shalom points out that this statement seems incongruous: the middah, the trait in which Avraham Avinu excelled and by which he is particularly characterised is not 'יראה' – fear, but 'אהבה' – love. We know Avraham as the exemplar of love and 'חסד' – 'chessed,' kindness, yet here, when Avraham has just reached the apex of his spiritual accomplishments, the Almighty chooses to invoke the notion of 'fear' in describing the unique achievement of the moment.

Let us see how the Netivot Shalom solves this conundrum with a remarkable insight which throws new light on the Akeidah episode, and on Avraham in particular:

... אצל כל אדם בעת נסיון כאשר פחו עליו יצרו ואינו יודע איך להתגבר, עצתו יראת ה', שע"ז יעמוד בנסיון. וכמד"כ באברהם אבינו אחר נסיון העקדה (בראשית כב) עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה. שלכאורה הרי אברהם מדתו חסד ואהבה, ומדוע כתיב כי ירא א' אתה. אלא לפי שהעקדה היתה הנסיון הקשה ביותר, וראה אברהם שבמדת אהבה לחוד לא יעמוד בנסיון, והוצרך להשתמש גם במדת היראה ורק ע"ז עמד בנסיון. וכמד"א מהאר"י הק' שעקדה היא מלשון קישור, שאברהם אבינו קישר את עצמו למדתו של יצחק מדת היראה כדי לעמוד בנסיון. וזהו שאמר לו הקב"ה עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה, שגם במדת היראה אברהם גדול ביותר.

(נתיבות שלום על ספר בראשית, נח: ב"צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו" עמוד מז)

Regarding every person, at a time of challenge, when he finds himself gripped by his negative inclination and does not know how to overcome it, the resolution lies for him in Yirat Hashem – Fear of Hashem, for through this will he withstand the test. And as is written in respect of Avraham Avinu after the trial of the Akeidah (Bereishit 22): “Now I know that you are a G-d-fearing person.” Now [we may ask], surely Avraham’s trait was chessed – lovingkindness – and ahavah – love, so why is it written, “...that you are a G-d-fearing person”? Rather [we may understand it as follows]: since the Akeidah was Avraham’s greatest test, Avraham saw that through the trait of love alone he will not be able to prevail in the test and that he needed to employ also the middah of fear, and only in so doing did he triumph in the test. And as it was taught by the Ari HaKadosh, that the word ‘Akeidah’ [binding] is related to the idea of ‘connecting,’ and Avraham Avinu connected himself to Yitzchak’s middah of ‘fear’ in order to [help himself] succeed in the trial. So this is why the Holy One Blessed Be He said, “Now I know that you are G-d-fearing,” because also in Fear of Hashem was Avraham the greatest exemplar.

(Netivot Shalom on Sefer Bereishit, Noach: p.77)

And so, if we bring together what we have seen in the writings of Rav Dessler and the Netivot Shalom, we are able to discern the following components in the Akeidah episode:

1. Avraham’s great triumph was in managing to hold himself back from challenging the contradiction between Hashem’s command to sacrifice Yitzchak and His promise that it was from Yitzchak that Avraham’s descendants would emerge;
2. This tenth test was of such a magnitude that, in order to triumph in it, Avraham had to draw from beyond his most natural and instinctive spiritual resources in order to employ the middah of יראה, fear, in addition to the middah of אהבה, love, the trait by which he is more commonly characterised;
3. An extraordinary insight: Avraham needed to draw from the middah of יראה, fear, that was more naturally within his son, Yitzchak, and he drew it from Yitzchak, himself! As much as Avraham is normally the archetype of חסד and אהבה, of kindness and love, so is Yitzchak the paradigm of גבורה and יראה, of might and fear. It was therefore necessary, according to the Ari HaKadosh, for Avraham to arm himself with יראה by taking it from his very son, his beloved Yitzchak, whose impending sacrifice required in Avraham the attribute of fear to achieve his colossal task. This means that Yitzchak was required to provide spiritual resources from deep within himself in order to make possible the sacrifice of his own life! Perhaps this helps us to understand a little more why this greatest of Avraham’s tests is known as ‘Akeidat Yitzchak,’

since without the emboldening wellspring of יראה within Yitzchak from which Avraham needed to draw, the offering of Yitzchak himself to the Almigh-ty would not have been possible!

Let us conclude how we began:

Tests, trials, challenges are so much a part of our lives. Avraham's greatest trial, the Akeidah, is a pillar of our faith and held up as the ultimate focal point to which we aspire in our fear and love of Hashem.

May the enormous and heroic אמונה, faith, of Avraham and Yitzchak, the אמונה of each of them and of the two of them combined, continue to inspire and strengthen us in our personal spiritual journeys; and as those two joined forces in fulfilling Hashem's will, however unfathomable, may we draw from their intrepid faith in our quest to edge ever closer to the Almigh-ty in our own lives.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy