

Parashat Vayera 5776, 2015

Akeidat Yitzhak: The Greatness of Yitzhak

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And it came to pass after these things, that G-d tested Abraham, and He said to him, “Abraham,” and he said, “Here I am.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 22:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our *pasuk* (verse) is the introduction to the celebrated narrative known as the “*Akeidat Yitzhak*,” (the Binding of Isaac). References to this passage abound throughout Rabbinic literature, and serve as the subject for many of the Rosh Hashanah prayers. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) note that Avraham underwent 10 trials in order to proclaim his love for the Creator: “With ten tests our father Abraham was tested and he withstood them all - in order to make known how great was our father Abraham's love [for G-d].” ([Pirkei Avot 5:3](#)) Beyond a doubt, the *Akeidah* was Avraham's most challenging and heart-rending trial.

The beginning phrase of our *pasuk*, “And it came to pass after these things,” is very mysterious, since there is no clear indication as to what “these things” actually were. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on various Midrashic traditions, suggests these explanations:

After these things: Some of our Sages say [that this happened]: after the words of Satan, who was accusing and saying, “Of every feast that Abraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!” He [God] said to him, “Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, ‘Sacrifice him before Me,’ he would not withhold [him].”

And some say, “after the words of Ishmael,” who was boasting to Isaac that he was circumcised at the age of thirteen, and he did not protest. Isaac said to him, “With one organ you intimidate me? If the Holy One, blessed be He, said to me, ‘Sacrifice yourself before Me,’ I would not hold back.”

Allow me to focus my attention upon Rashi’s second interpretation. The actual texts of the Talmud and Midrash from which Rashi created the dialogue between Yishmael and Yitzhak are worded a bit differently from that which he presents. As such, the original versions contain nuances that are not found in Rashi’s commentary. The most striking example of these differences is the following Talmudic passage from *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 89b:

Rabbi Levi said [“after these things” connotes]: “After the words of Yishmael to Yitzhak.” Yishmael said to Yitzhak: “I am greater than you in [the fulfillment] of the commandments, since you were circumcised when you were eight days old, and, [in contrast,] I was 13 years old [and, I was therefore able to protest – yet, I remained silent!]” Yitzhak responded to him: “Regarding one limb you attempt to anger me [with your specious claim of superiority in *mitzvot* observance?] If the Holy One Blessed be He were to say to me: ‘Sacrifice yourself before me,’ I [would unhesitatingly] sacrifice myself!” Immediately [the Torah then states:] “And it was after these things.” (Translation and brackets my own)

Leaving aside some of the relatively minor variations between Rashi’s presentation and our Talmudic narrative, one is swiftly struck by the Gemara’s point of contention between Yishmael and Yitzhak, namely, *mitzvot* observance. At first glance, this seems rather odd. After all, the Torah was not given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai until the time of *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher, Moshe). The notion that Avraham, and by extension, his entire family, kept the Torah prior to the Sinaitic Revelation, however, is presented in a well-known statement in *Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 28b:

Rava said, while others say it was actually Rav Ashi: “*Avraham Avinu* (our father Avraham) fulfilled the entire Torah, up to and including *erev tavshilin* (the Rabbinic enactment allowing cooking on the second day of *Yom Tov* for Shabbat). As the Torah states: ‘[Because Abraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and] My instructions (*Torotai*, *Sefer Bereishit* 26:5).’ “*Torotai*” [the plural of Torah] – This means both the Written Torah and the Oral Law.” (Translation, parentheses and brackets my own)

Thus, according to the Talmud, the encounter between Yishmael and Yitzhak was nothing less than an epic battle for the spiritual future of the Jewish people. Clearly, Hashem weighed in on the side of Yitzhak, since the Holy One Blessed be He immediately gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his absolute loyalty to Him.

Rav Nissan Alpert *zatzal* (1927-1986), perhaps the greatest disciple of Rav Moshe Feinstein *zatzal* (1895-1986), in his posthumous work entitled *Limudei Nissan*, asked a fundamental question on our Talmudic passage from tractate *Sanhedrin*:

[At first glance,] it is very difficult to state that “after these things” refers to [the fractious] interchange between Yishmael and Yitzhak. If this were to be the case, the text should have read, “And the L-rd tested Yitzhak,” [rather than, “and G-d tested Abraham.”] (Page 175, translation and brackets my own)

Rav Alpert responded to his query by suggesting “the trial of one’s son is ultimately the trial of the father, if the father has properly taught him to withstand the tribulations of the test.” He suggested this idea based upon the grammatical construction of the Hebrew phrase, “*v’haElokim nissah et Avraham*” (“and G-d tested Avraham”), wherein the word “*et*” is seemingly superfluous. Utilizing the exegetical principle that everything in the Torah is absolutely necessary, Rav Alpert suggested the “*et*” really means “with,” i.e. that Yitzhak was simultaneously tested at the moment of Avraham’s greatest trial; alternately, the “*et*” can refer to that which was secondary to Avraham, namely, his son, Yitzhak.

Therefore, the Torah's phrase, "and G-d tested Avraham," can be interpreted quite properly as "and G-d tested Avraham and Yitzhak."(Page 176)

The second best-known narrative in Parashat Vayera is that of the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed, that story, coupled with Avraham's heartfelt pleading before the Almighty for the inhabitants of these wayward cities, captures our imagination to such a degree that the following verses are often all but forgotten:

And the L-rd said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing? And Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him. For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the L-rd bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him." (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:19)

The original Hebrew of the phrase, "that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice" is "*v'shamru derech Hashem la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat*." In his posthumously published work, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, notes that the Hebrew words "*v'shamru derech Hashem*" refer to the pursuit of holiness (*kedushah*), whereas the expression "*la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat*" connotes practicing righteousness and justice. Thus, *Avraham Avinu's* "... testament was twofold: keeping the way of the L-rd, which requires *kedushah*, and also practicing righteousness and justice." (Page 106)

In my estimation, *Yitzhak Avinu* (our father Yitzhak) perceived himself as the next link in the chain that connected he and his father, and Jews for all time to the Almighty. Therefore, he proved his loyalty to G-d and the mitzvot, by undertaking the potential

ultimate sacrifice of dying *al Kiddush Hashem* (to sanctify G-d's Name). Thus, he stood steadfast in his resolve to continue the primacy of “*v'shamru derech Hashem la'asot tzedakah u'mishpat.*”

With G-d's help and blessings, may we, too, continue to uphold the spiritual values of Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Moreover, may we lead lives dedicated to the pursuit of holiness and the practice of “righteousness and justice.”
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: [@theRavZatzal](https://twitter.com/theRavZatzal) and [@Torahtech613](https://twitter.com/Torahtech613).