

Parashat Vayera 5784, 2023:

Akeidat Yitzchak—And Then?

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

The stirring drama of *Akeidat Yitzchak* is one of the most celebrated passages in the Tanach. While much of this storied narrative is accessible, its final *pasuk* conceals more than it reveals: “And Avraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer Sheva; and Avraham remained in Beer Sheva.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 22:19, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). The Torah informs us that *Avraham Avinu* returned to his young men; we know nothing, however, of the whereabouts of *Yitzchak Avinu*, the survivor of the *Akeidah*. This leads *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 56:19 to ask, “*v’Yitzchak heichan hu*—and where was Yitzchak?”

In their commentaries on the Torah, the Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), the Radak, (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235) and the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel Wisser, 1809-1879) explain the absence of Yitzchak from our *pasuk* in a naturalistic manner. The Ibn Ezra suggests that there was no need to ask this question, since “he was within his own agency,” that is, he was his own person and free to travel wherever he so desired. The Radak opines: “It was not necessary [for the Torah to write] that Yitzchak was with him [Avraham]. [Rather,] it mentions Avraham as he was the *ikkar*—the essential one.” In sum, these approaches maintain that Yitzchak was certainly with Avraham, the protagonist of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, and as such, it was unnecessary to mention him in by name. In contrast, the Malbim focuses on a different side of the story, and portrays Yitzchak’s nonappearance in the text as driven by *kibbud av v’ame*:

Sarah lived in Chevron at this time. And when Avraham returned from the *Akeidah*, he sent Yitzchak to Chevron to notify his mother that he was alive [after having] withstood his great test. Therefore, the text writes that Avraham, alone, returned, and they [Avraham, Yishmael and Eliezer, see Rashi] went to Beer Sheva—whereas Yitzchak went to Chevron. Therefore, [following Sarah’s passing,] there is no mention of Yitzchak coming to eulogize Sarah in Chevron as he already was there. (Translation my own)

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 56:19 follows these true-to-life approaches, as well, in its answer to its question, “v’Yitzchak heichan hu?” and suggests: “Rav Berechiah, in the name of the rabbis of the South, said that [Avraham] sent him [Yitzchak] to learn Torah from Shem.” This response raises two questions: “Why did Avraham send Yitzchak to study precisely at this time?” and, “If Avraham felt this was the moment for Yitzchak to double down on his Torah learning, why did he feel it was necessary to send him somewhere else to learn, rather than teach him himself?”

In his Torah commentary, *HaEmek Davar*, the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893), in his inimitable manner, simultaneously addresses both queries:

It is possible to suggest that since Hashem proclaimed in the penultimate verse of the *Akeidah*: “*eikev asher shamata b’koli*—since you have hearkened to My voice,” [22:18] Avraham thought deeply about this statement and realized that it is the will of Hashem for one to be powerfully engaged in words of Torah. Moreover, even though Avraham had learned with him [Yitzchak], nonetheless, he realized that when it comes to depth-level mastery of the words of the Torah, it is better to base one’s learning on what one garners from two places [in this case, from Avraham and the yeshiva of Shem] ... (Translation and brackets my own)

The Netziv’s trenchant analysis is based on the well-known passage in *Chazal*:

Rav said: *Avraham Avinu* fulfilled the entire Torah before it was given, as it is stated: “Because [*eikev*] Avraham hearkened to My voice and kept My charge, My mitzvot, My statutes and My Torahs” (*Sefer Bereishit* 26:5)... Rav said, and some say Rav Ashi said: *Avraham Avinu* fulfilled the entire Torah, even the mitzvah of *eruv tavshilin*, a rabbinic ordinance instituted later, as it is stated: “My Torahs.” Since the term is in the plural, it indicates that Avraham kept two Torahs; one, the Written Torah, and one, the Oral Torah. In the course of fulfilling the Oral Torah, he fulfilled all the details and parameters included therein. (Translation, *Talmud Bavli, Yoma 28b, The Koren Talmud Bavli*, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz *zatzal* editor, with my emendations)

I believe that the explanation of what transpired after the *Akeidah*, as found in *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* and the *HaEmek Davar*, offers us a *derech hachaim*, a path we can follow when confronting great challenges. Rather than asking “Why did we have to bear this suffering?” Avraham and Yitzchak asked, “What is the proper response to this suffering that will enhance our relationship with Hashem?” Their answer is our guide: Learn Torah! As *Dovid HaMelech* taught us so long ago, “*Torat Hashem temimah meshivat nafesh*—The law of Hashem is perfect restoring the soul...” (*Sefer Tehillim* 19:8)

Shabbat Shalom

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