

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

The Akeydah – Its Uniqueness, Impact and Legacy

The final section of our parsha deals with the *Akeydah* – the Binding of Yitzchak. According to most commentators, it is the last of the Ten Trials of Avraham, and from a certain point of view, it is in a category all unto its own, whose enduring significance is reflected clearly in the focal place that it occupies in our prayers to this day. This idea receives ultimate expression in the blessing of *zichronos* (remembrances) in *Mussaf* of Rosh Hashanah, which culminates with the single plea: “ועקידת יצחק לזרעו היום ברחמים תזכור – Remember the binding of Yitzchak on this day for his descendants with mercy.”

REFLECTION AND CONNECTION

Although the events of the *Akeydah* are well-known, a moment’s reflection on the elements involved will allow us to appreciate the magnitude of this trial. At the outset, we will appreciate that much of the *Akeydah* can be lost on us, since we approach and discuss the *Akeydah* with the knowledge that it didn’t happen in the end. To this end, putting ourselves back for a moment in “real time”, where Avraham had no notion that it would not occur will also contribute most meaningfully to appreciating this test.

And what was the test? Avraham and Sarah had been childless for decades. Finally, when Avraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety, they are given a son, the answer to all those years of longing and in whom all their hopes for the future were invested. Now, Avraham is being told to offer him up, with no notion of being left with any other child to replace him, leaving any hope for continuation devastated. Moreover, the act itself of offering one’s child as a sacrifice was one against whose fundamental immorality Avraham had preached for all these years. To do so now himself would be the complete undoing of his life’s work. There was to be, essentially, no future to speak of after the *Akeydah*. Additionally, the command to offer up his son is directly contradicted by an earlier promise he had received from Hashem Himself stating that Yitzchak would continue his line. Finally, it is clear that Avraham understood that he could tell no one about this, including his wife Sarah. This means he had to embark on this task without her knowledge or support, utterly alone.

Bearing all of these points in mind will begin to yield a sense of the magnitude of this test of Avraham’s absolute devotion to Hashem’s word. Nor can this be a matter of a spur of the moment decision, made in haste or without adequate forethought. It was three days of journeying before Avraham reached the site where the *Akeydah* was to take place.

NAMING THE MOUNTAIN

In the present discussion, however, we would like to focus not only on the event of the *Akeydah* as the ultimate test that Avraham passed, but also on the impact and reverberations of the test beyond that point. To this end, we note that, having passed the test, Avraham proceeds to name the place where it occurred. Verse 14 states:

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא ה' יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֵאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר ה' יִרְאֶה

Avraham called the name of that place “Hashem will see”, as it is said this day, “on the mountain Hashem will be seen.”

None of the earlier tests resulted in the place where they were passed receiving a new name. What is the significance of this occurrence after the *Akeydah*?

In truth, the words that describe the renaming are themselves somewhat enigmatic. Let us ask:

1. What, specifically, is Avraham saying that “Hashem will see”?
2. Why does the sentence begin referring to Hashem “seeing” and then conclude with Him “being seen”?
3. What day is being referred to by the words “this day”?
4. How is all of this connected to the *Akeydah*?

Not surprisingly, the commentators from Rashi onwards discuss and deal with these basic questions. Let us consider a most fascinating explanation which is offered by the Vilna Gaon. The basis of his comment is a midrash¹ which states that initially, the Divine Presence resided below in this world. However, as a result of Adam’s sin, it distanced itself from the world and ascended heavenward, residing in the first and lowest level of heaven. The major wrongdoings of six notable subsequent generations² resulted in the Divine Presence ascending six levels higher until it was at the seventh and highest level of heaven, the nth degree removed from this world. However, the midrash proceeds to relate that Avraham brought about a turning point, bringing it one level closer, with the next six generations³ bringing it closer still, until in the days of Moshe the Divine Presence had returned to reside in the world below. It turns out the process of returning the Divine Presence to this world was one which began with Avraham and culminated with Moshe. Both of these initial and final stages are described in verse 14, as follows:

- ▷ The verse begins by saying that Avraham called place “Hashem will see”. This reflects his achievement in bring the Divine Presence closer to the world so that all may know that Hashem sees and supervises the events of this world. At this point, the verse has finished quoting Avraham’s words at that time.
- ▷ The concluding words of the verse are **those of the Torah itself**, as it proceeds to describe how that process, initiated by Avraham, was concluded six generations later, in Moshe’s days. Thus, it says “which today may be said as ‘Hashem can be seen on the mountain.’” In other words, “today” is the Torah referring to when the Torah had been given at Mount Sinai, where the people apprehended a vision of Hashem’s Glory, in the culmination of the process which began as “Hashem seeing” in Avraham’s time.

Truly amazing.

We can see through this that the *Akeydah* went beyond being an event; rather, it began a process which ended in the giving of the Torah. Still we persist and ask, what was it about the *Akeydah* which marked it as

1 Bereishis Rabbah 19:7.

2 [Cain, Enosh, the generation of the Flood, of the Tower of Bavel and, in Avraham’s own time, the wrongdoings of Egypt and of Sodom]

3 [Yitzchak, Yaakov, Levi, Kehos, Amram and Moshe]

the beginning of this process? To answer this question, let us consider another fascinating understanding of Avraham's words in renaming the mountain – "Hashem will see".

ESTABLISHING THE NATURE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

There are a number of statements from Chazal which reflect something unique about the nature of the Jewish people. For example, the Gemara⁴ states that if a Jew wanted to perform a mitzvah but was unable to do so, it is nonetheless considered as if he performed the mitzvah. The reason is that since his inner will desires the performance of mitzvos, any external impediment to its performance does not detract from his intention as a true expression of his will. Indeed, this idea even has implications in the realm of halachah. The Gemara elsewhere⁵ states that if a person is halachically required to perform a mitzvah that requires his consent (e.g. offer a korban or give his wife a divorce), yet he does not consent, we coerce him until he says that he consents. The Rambam⁶ explains that since his inner will is to fulfill the mitzvos, it is actually his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) that is interfering. Once coercion has been exerted, his *yetzer hara* has been subdued and the consent he expresses indeed reflects his actual will!

Both of these statements reflect the idea that the innermost will of the Jew is aligned with that of Hashem. Where does this nature come from?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah,⁷ is that it comes from *Akeydah*.

When Yitzchak allowed himself to be brought as an offering, and was prepared to nullify his entire existence in response to Hashem's command, this fused within his nature the absolute alignment of his will with that of Hashem, and became an inherent quality which he bequeathed to his descendants. The fascinating idea here is that this alignment was, by definition, already latent within Yitzchak before he was called upon to act on it. However, by responding to Hashem's word and expressing this quality *outwards*, it then became *further embedded inwards* as a fundamental part of his essential makeup to the extent that it now could be passed down to his descendants.

This idea has ramifications not only for when the Jewish people seek to do – or are coerced to do – that which is right, but also when they do that which is not. An incorrect act will be judged very differently if it represents the essential will of the perpetrator, or perhaps some outside influence. Jewish nature, as established through the *Akeydah*, is such that no wrongdoing ever expresses their true will, which is ultimately aligned with that of Hashem. This core nature, which lies beneath every other layer of consciousness and will, is something that can only be perceived by Hashem Himself. Thus, the Yerushalmi⁸ states that while Hashem initially judges in conjunction with the Heavenly Court, He concludes the judgment alone, basing it on innermost nature of Israel that He alone can see.

This, says the Meshech Chochmah, is the meaning of the name Avraham gave to the mountain upon completing the *Akeydah*: "Hashem will see." With this, Avraham was praying that He will always see the essential nature of the Jewish people which was set during the *Akeydah*, and judge them accordingly.

Indeed, perhaps it is with this in mind that we conclude the blessing of *zichronos* by asking Hashem to remember the *Akeydah* for us with compassion. We are not simply asking Him to recall the great merit of that event, for why limit the merits of our forefathers that might help us? Rather, we are asking Him to recall the *Akeydah* for what it says about our essential nature and judge our deeds – both the positive and the negative – in that light.

4 Kiddushin 39a.

5 Ibid. 49b.

6 Hilchos Geirushin 2:20.

7 Bereishis 22:14.

8 Sanhedrin 1:1.

WHAT BRINGS THE DIVINE PRESENCE CLOSER?

Putting the above two ideas together, we will appreciate that they are essentially two expressions of the same concept. The extent to which the Divine Presence is close to the world is a product of the extent to which people relate to the Divine will. The initial distancing of the Divine presence came about through Adam choosing a path which diverged from that which Hashem had prescribed for him. This distancing process continued until it was reversed by Avraham and Yitzchak through their total embracing of Hashem's will. Thus, the personal (the level of Avraham and Yitzchak), national (instilling that nature within their descendants) and global (bringing the Divine Presence closer to the world) reverberations were all emanations of the same idea.

Moreover, the completion of this process seven generations later likewise took place not only in the world, but also in the Jewish people. The link between these two events is expressed by the sages who state that the shofar which sounded at the giving of the Torah was one of the horns of the ram that Avraham offered in Yitzchak's stead. In fact, the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos⁹ informs us that this ram was part of a special list of items that were created at twilight on the sixth day of Creation. The Alshich¹⁰ explains that the significance of this timing – for clearly Hashem has the capacity to create these things earlier on that day – is that they came into the world after Adam had sinned. This means that these items were created *as a response to that sin* and in order to facilitate its rectification. Hence, the ram was offered up on the occasion which marked the beginning of mankind's recovery and re-connection with the Divine Will. This re-connection found national expression when we stood at Har Sinai and proclaimed “naaseh ve'nishma – we will do and we will hear!” By first stating that “we will do,” even before “hearing”, we were indicating a total acceptance of the Torah, whatever it may say. This complete alignment of our goals with those of Hashem was, in national terms, an *Akeydah* event and hence, it was only fitting for the shofar which sounded at that time to come from the ram which Avraham had offered at the time of the *Akeydah* itself.

And indeed, the Midrash further states that the second shofar from that ram will be the one that sounds to herald the arrival of Mashiach. That time will represent the full and final connection between the world and Hashem and will reflect the full realization of the idea which began with the *Akeydah* all those centuries ago.

Perhaps this will give us deeper insight into our connection with the *Akeydah* and its meaning for us. When we read of it, we are not only recalling a great episode in our early history, but we are reminding ourselves of the capacity that it instilled within us, from where the ability to realize our highest aspirations can come. The full legacy and message of the *Akeydah* is: Look forward to the final redemption of Israel and the world – by looking inward for the wherewithal to bring it about!

9 5:8..

10 Bereshis 22:13.

The Akeydah and the Land of Israel

After successfully completing the *Akeydah*, Avraham receives a blessing from an angel in Hashem's name, part of which says:

וַיְרַשׁ זֶרְעֶךָ אֶת שַׁעַר אֹיְבֵיךָ

And your descendants shall inherit the gate of their enemy.¹¹

One of the great Chassidic masters, the Be'er Mayim Chayim,¹² explains the connection between the *Akeydah* and meriting the land of Israel as follows. The land of Israel is intimately bound up with the performance of the mitzvah of *milah* (circumcision). Thus, we find that as part of commanding Avraham with this mitzvah, Hashem says:¹³

וְנָתַתִּי לָךְ וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ אֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֶחְזָת עוֹלָם

I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojourns, the whole of the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession.

Indeed, in recognition of this, we make special mention of the mitzvah of *milah* in the second blessing of Birkas Hamazon, the blessing over the land of Israel.

However, Yishmael and his descendants were also included, to a degree, in the mitzvah of *milah*, for which reason the Zohar states that they too, have a certain holding in the land. What is the response to their claim?

According to Chazal, the *milah* of Yishmael formed the basis of the *Akeydah*. The Gemara¹⁴ relates that Yishmael was boasting to Yitzchak that his mitzvah was more complete, seeing as he consented to undergo *milah* at the age of fourteen, an age when he could have protested, while Yitzchak's *milah* took place when he was only eight days old. To this Yitzchak responded that even if Hashem were to tell him to offer his entire life he would do so without hesitation. This formed the backdrop to Hashem actually calling on him to do so in the form of the *Akeydah*. In this regard, the *Akeydah* is the refutation of Yishmael's claim to the land.

Rabbeinu Bachye¹⁵ informs us that the term “אויב” used for enemy in the Chumash refers specifically to the descendants of Yishmael.¹⁶ Therefore, having completed the *Akeydah*, Avraham was told that in its merit, his descendants would be able to inherit the gate of their enemy, Yishmael, overcoming any holding he may have in the land of Israel.

THE COMPLETION OF THE AKEYDAH

When did the *Akeydah* finish? There are number of points within this episode that could be identified: when Avraham was stopped from killing Yitzchak, when he offered the ram in his stead etc. However,

11 Verse 17.

12 Rabbi Chaim Tirar of Tchernovitz (1760-1816).

13 Bereishis 17:8, see Rashi there.

14 Sanhedrin 89b, cited in Rashi to Bereishis 22:1, s.v. *achar*.

15 Commentary to Devarim 30:7.

16 This is on contrast to the term “שוונא”, which refers to the descendants of Esav.

an entirely new dimension in this matter was revealed by R' Klonimus Kalman of Piasezno, Hy"ד, in his derashah on the first yahrzeit of his son, R' Elimelech, Hy"ד, delivered on the second day of Sukkos, 5701 (1940).¹⁷ There, he addresses the uniqueness of the martyrdom in his times. Throughout history, the martyrdom of the Jewish people was a result of their choice not to relinquish their Judaism. Here, however, Jews were bring killed without being given the choice in the matter. R' Klonimus Kalman explained:

The Akeydah was not a trial for Yitzchak alone; rather, it was the beginning of a Divine service of the Jewish people offering their souls for Hashem and His people. Since the trial of Avraham and Yitzchak took place solely within the realm of will and thought that were not realized in action, therefore, any Jew who is killed in the opposite manner, with action and without thought, represents the completion of the Akeydah of Yitzchak. For what began there with thought is completed here with action, thereby constituting one unified act.

These harrowing words, which could probably not have been said by anyone else, cast the *Akeydah* in a completely new light as a composite historical process spanning thousands of years and culminating in the decimation of European Jewry. In light of the idea mentioned earlier from the Be'er Mayim Chayim, it is left for us to contemplate the miraculous return of the Jewish people to their land three short years afterwards, overcoming their enemies against all odds, as a fulfilment of the blessing "*And your descendants shall inherit the gate of their enemy.*"¹⁸ May we merit to see the completion of this process, too, speedily in our days!

17 *Aish Kodesh* p. 72.

18 Rav Mordechai David Neugershal, *Galut Yishmael*, pp. 62-63.