

The Akeidah

By Rabbi Debra Smith, 2021

After centuries of discussion by historians, commentators and writers, The Akeidah remains one of the most puzzling and troubling stories in Genesis. The questions raised by this story are endless. What was Avraham thinking to have obeyed G-d's command? What kind of G-d would ask this test of faith from someone? Why did G-d test Avraham in this way? What was Yitzhak thinking? The questions go on and on...

While the questions go on and on, when we read the simple storyline, especially in English translation without the nuances embedded in the Hebrew, it is easy to have a negative take on this challenging narrative. Our reactions to Avraham's apparent compliance with a horrific interpretation of God's instructions, leave us shocked; not to mention leaving G-d in a negative light as well.

Today, I'd like to offer an alternative interpretation of the Akeidah from a historical perspective. Every Torah story can and must be encountered on many levels. The simple historical context should not be overlooked. Sometimes --as in this story --it is more obvious, but sometimes takes considerable careful investigation.

A historical perspective takes us back to a time in the spiritual evolution of our People's religious journey in which we needed a Torah story that irrevocably broke with a deeply ingrained and very ancient tradition and custom of human sacrifice.

Up to this point in history, all other neighboring peoples out of which Judaism arose shared common practices which had been traditional for thousands of years: a belief in many gods; animal sacrifice; human sacrifice; the sacrifice of the first born; making sacrifices in times of adversity and stress. The many gods were power brokers. There was a

corporate religious structure, a hierarchy of gods. In fact, the Midrash tells us that Avraham's father was an idol maker in the town of Ur.

Breaking from most --though not all --of these traditions and forging a NEW WAY, took time and was not easy. We needed powerful counter-narrative to establish our path as unique from that of all others in its ritual practices and in its moral beliefs and values. The Akeidah is ONE MAIN story that does that.

Abraham hears himself called by an invisible formless god, to undertake a profound and original spiritual quest—to journey to an unknown place and take others with him.

He is told to start a new faith.

As the Avrahamic saga unfolds, many teachings about the relationship of our emerging faith path will be explored. The story of the Akeidah is an integral part of this story of the founding of a new religion dedicated to a new and unique G-d. As part of its story, the Akeidah poses the question: is human sacrifice part of this new religion that Abraham has started or not?

As we learned back in parshat Lech Lecha, after a process of deep discernment, Avraham follows this revolutionary new G-d who has summoned him. He sets out with his family, looks out for others to travel with him and share his belief in the one G-d. He picks he up other followers along the way. He builds a movement based on his radical ideas which reject the religious practices of the dominant cultures surrounding him. His movement is small but is growing as he travels on.

Let's understand the story of the Akeidah from its cultural and historical context. The Akeidah is set in a context in which in which human sacrifice, child sacrifice and even the sacrifice of one's own children is the norm.

Torah itself, even generations later, retains and elevates the deeply held conviction that first-borns, not only of humans, but of animals and plants belong to God. In Exodus we read: ““Set apart all the firstborn for me, the firstborn of every mother among the Israelites, both people and animals. The firstborn belongs to me.” First Fruits also, as we know, were set aside as offerings brought to G-d in the Temple.

Avraham had learned that there were not many Gods, but one unique Source of all of Creation. BUT still, If firstborns belong to God, what might this mean? Was the ancient norm of child sacrifice still in place???!?

The Akeidah responds to this question with the shout of the angels who call out: “NO.”

Let’s look closely:

Avraham, Yitzhak, the servants and the donkey take a very slow trip to Mt. Moriah. Avraham takes three days for a half-day trip. He listens for a message from that one G-d of his. Does that GOD truly want him to kill and sacrifice Yitzhak the same as the other religions do?

Yitzkah too is a player. Torah says he and Avraham are yachdav- together.. united... Yitzhak is also an enlightened follower of the one G-d who goes along with Abraham: “yachdav” (together). They are of one mind and one heart! And both father and son are equally uncertain of what G-d wants. The Akeidah is a test for both of them.

Abraham and Yitzhak travel on slowly, still listening for clues... still discerning, still not knowing for certain what to do. In fact, we can see that Abraham’s discernment doesn’t produce results - it is a failed discernment. Abraham is distracted and confused by the outside environment around him, the cultures in which he is used to living. Abraham has tunnel vision. It has to be this way, he thinks because it is this way and has been this way

forever, for all faiths. Abraham continues. He ties Yitzhak to the altar ... raises the knife. Yitzhak lies waiting, also uncertain himself.

Avraham is in a trance of pain and confusion... and hears no counter-instructions... UNTIL THE LAST MOMENT WHEN THE ANGELIC VOICES SCREAM AND HE HEARS.

Sometimes in our process of discernment we need help, we need a loud voice to wake us up ! At the last moment, Abraham and Yitzhak hear this voice screaming THIS changes the outcome. Avraham hears the voice and sees the ram. The ram is sacrificed and not Yitzhak.

The Akeidah signals an end to the practice of human sacrifice which as we saw, for untold millenia was routine.

This break with the past was radical and permanent... This change is indicative of a tikkun, a healing of a terrible past and the beginning of a more hopeful future.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION:

Have you experienced a process of discernment which resulted in unexpected healing? If so, what was the experience like? And what was your process?

