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Akedat Yitzchak: On the Perception of Historical Experience in Judaism

Immediately [the emperor] commanded that he should be killed. His mother fell upon him, hugged him and kissed him and said to him: my son, go to your father Abraham and tell him: Thus said my mother. Feel not proud of yourself and say that I built an altar and placed my son, Isaac, upon it, for my mother built seven altars and put seven sons upon them in one day. For you it was a trial, for me it was reality. [Midrash Eichah Rabbah, parshata 50].

Look and see, our G-d, what we do to write a chapter in the history of the sanctification of Your great name, never exchanging Your Torah for another faith ... and the dear sons of Zion, the sons of Magentza were put to the test ten times like our father Abraham and they also bound their children just as Abraham bound Isaac... [The Decrees of the Year 1096 / 4856 by Rabbi Shlomo ben Shimshon]

Bound on Mount Moriah, forced by his father

He slept so not to kick and mar the slaughter

We though untied are slaughtered for His love

Our souls rejoice in His salvation from above.

[from "Foreign Gods Rose Up Against Us" by Rabbi Eliezer ben Natan (Ra'avan)]

In the many discussions which have been devoted to the Akedah the common tendency is to deal with the philosophical and moral questions it raises. However the influence of the Akedah story was not limited to the abstract, academic dimension in Judaism. The opposite is true. More than it provided material for lively intellectual discussion the Akedah served many generations of Jews as a tangible, living memory which gave them inspiration in those many hours when they themselves were put to the test. This dynamic role fulfilled by the Akedah narrative can also teach us something about the attitude of Judaism towards history.

Three sources which recall the Akedah were cited above.

The first is the conclusion of the story of Miriam bat Tanchum (called "Hannah" in the historic consciousness of later generations) who lost her seven sons during the persecutions by Antiochus Epiphanes because they refused to worship idols. [In point of fact, according to Talmudic tradition this event took place during the period of the decrees of Hadrian after the suppression of the Bar Kochba rebellion. Cf: Gerson Cohen, "Chana V'shivat Baneha", *Sefer Hayovel l'Mordechai Kaplan*, Hebrew section, New York, 1953, pp. 109-122]. In the source before us the mother sadly relates how she sacrificed more than our father Abraham, both in the number of the sacrifices and in the essence of the act itself ("for you it was a trial, for me it was reality"). She sees herself as having been tested just as Abraham was, though her role was passive.

The other two selections are taken from the body of literature which appeared following the pogroms which afflicted the Jews of the Rhineland province in Germany during the First Crusade in the year 4856 (1096 - exactly nine hundred years ago). As we know, the Crusaders made their way to the Holy Land in order to liberate it from the Moslem "heretics" as part of worldwide strategy for extending the borders of Christendom. Therefore the Crusaders, when they came upon the many Jewish communities on their way, drew a simple conclusion: here we are embarking on a long journey to reach the church of the Holy Sepulcher and take our revenge from the Ishmaelites, and here are the Jews who live among us whose fathers killed him (Jesus) and crucified him for no reason whatsoever. Let us take revenge upon them first, destroy them as a nation and the name of Israel will no longer be remembered, or let them be like us and recognize Jesus". [A.M. Haberman, *Sefer Gzeirot Ashkenaz v'Zorefat*, Jerusalem, 1971, p.24. This statement is also quoted by the well known churchman Gubert de Noigent in his autobiography, *Histoire de sa Vie*, Ed.G.Bourgin, Paris 1907, p.118].

Thus the Jews were offered the choice of conversion to Christianity, or death for the sanctification of the Name of G-d (Kiddush Hashem). The reaction of most of the Jews seems to have been to prefer to die, to sanctify G-d's Name, rather than to save their lives by being baptized. However, they did not wait for the Crusaders and their local collaborators carry out this horrible task. They decided to deny them the spiritual satisfaction, preferring to kill one another and commit suicide. The historical accounts (in both Hebrew and Latin) are filled with stories of how fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives killed each other in order to avoid falling into the hands of the Crusaders. Even now the descriptions of those events shock their readers.

The selections above were taken from among the historical account and liturgical poems (piyutim) which were written about the events of 1096. They shed a great deal of light on the spiritual consciousness of those who perished. Just as in the Midrash about the woman and her seven sons (and almost certainly taking inspiration from it) the Akedah story holds a central place in these texts. The Jews are seen (and see themselves) as those who continue the path of Abraham, in their willingness to sacrifice that which is most dear to them in order to assert the Oneness of G-d. (in contrast, of course, to the Trinity). Their conduct is demonstrative, indicating a complete awareness of the meaning of their actions. They are definitely, wholeheartedly imitating the image of Abraham, and in fact, competing to outdo him. Unlike the woman and her seven sons they died by their own hands. Unlike the original Akedah story the "sacrifices" are not bound but go voluntarily and with willing souls to the altar. This is the significance of the third selection, written by Rabbi Eliezer ben Natan:

"Bound on Mt. Moriah (Isaac), forced by his father,

... We, though untied, are slaughtered for His love".

We should emphasize that, for the author of Midrash Eichah and for the generation of 1096 the use of the Akedah story is not simply a literary device. The Akedah loomed before them as a living event, tangible and imminent in their consciousness, a part of their personal experience as Jews. When the Jews of Ashkenaz sacrificed their loved ones they followed, as it were, that shining example, believing that in doing so they were expressing the historical and spiritual continuity which linked them to their father Abraham.

This point is significant on its own terms, but it also helps to explain the immense difference as to the sense of time in traditional Jewish society in contrast to the historical perception of the modern world. As described by the anthropologist M. Eliade in his book "The Myth of the Eternal Return" (New York, 1974), traditional society retains a sensitive, vibrant feeling about the past, that is, man feels the continuity which links him to the past, that he is living in a "permanent" present. He derives his identity from the cumulative experience of former generations. He judges the present in the light of the past and also in the light of his vision of the future, without ever losing his sense as to the uniqueness of the present. As a result, traditional man understands his place in the universe and in history as part of "the great chain of being" (a phrase coined by the philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy). In Jewish terms, the Jew builds his world as a part of a chain of tradition and defines himself by making use of the collective memory of his people throughout its generations and the far reaching localities of its dispersion.

This feeling / perception of history is the basic reason why Akedat Yitzchak has made so profound an impression on the consciousness of the Jewish people in generation after generation. It explains how Jews found inspiration in the life of Abraham, (as well as of other past figures) and carried on "dialogues", debates, and even "competitions" with him when they reached the day of their own trial. The vibrant nature of the Akedah story in the collective memory of the people helped the Jews of 1096, in the end, to make that supreme effort to sanctify the name of G-d in sadness and sorrow but also with a feeling of deep dignity, as summed up in the words of the chronicler: "This is the generation that has been chosen by Him to be His own, for they had strength and courage to stand in his Sanctuary, to do his will, and to sanctify His great name in His world..." (Haberman, p. 25).

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Kibbutz Beerot Yitzchak

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