

Geulas Yisrael #23- Vayeira: The Jews and the Ram

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There are few scenes in sefer Bereishit as dramatic as akeidat Yitzchak. Father and son walk hand in hand, honored to fulfill Hashem's impossible command. Bound and constrained, Yitzchak is prepared to pay the ultimate price for his steadfast belief. For his part, Avraham is willing to sacrifice the child he had waited for with the patience of a hundred years. Avraham is not only surrendering his lone successor, but is also sabotaging his life's work and his celebrated career. You can imagine the jeers the day after he walks down the mountain as a "murderer". This "saint", who had spent a lifetime preaching morality, has now been exposed as a fraud and as a child killer. Undeterred by the cost and unafraid of the consequences, Avraham and Yitzchak ascend the mountain, ready to submit to the divine mystery.

Of course, Hashem has no interest in human sacrifice; if anything, the entire akeidah is designed solely to debunk the concept of human sacrifice. Avraham and Yitzchak are brought to the brink of human sacrifice specifically to discredit any thought that Hashem desires human blood. Though no life would be taken that day, Avraham and Yitzchak are still willing to sacrifice everything for their love of Hashem. In a dramatic climax, a Heavenly angel intervenes at the last second, barely sparing Yitzchak's life and halting the akeidah.

Just when you would think the akeidah has concluded, the Torah describes a seemingly trivial sidenote. As he withdraws the knife from his son's taught neck, Avraham notices a ram which happens to be caught in the thicket, wildly flailing its horns, but unable to release itself. Avraham sacrifices this trapped ram in place of his son.

Of course, there is nothing random about this ram; Chazal assure us that this ram was created at the dawn of history during the final stages of creation. Why is the sacrifice of the ram so noteworthy? Sacrifices were always offered throughout Bereishit without any fanfare or notable mention. Why is this "historic" ram positioned upon such an epic mountain? Would the akeidah have been incomplete without an

ordinary ram sacrifice? Finally, why is the ram's struggle to free itself from the thicket even mentioned? Why is this seemingly inconsequential information about horns stuck in a bush, crucial to the overall story?

Evidently, the thrashing ram possesses deeper symbolism. When a ram's horn, or for that matter, a human limb becomes entangled in a thicket, it can be tricky to separate from the bush. Even if you succeed in disentangling from one branch, a different branch entangles you. Chazal saw the ram's struggle with a knotty bush as a metaphor of Jewish history. Throughout our arduous but heroic journey in exile we would become ensnared in thorny and trying situations. We would face hatred and persecution. True we would survive horror and hostility but upon extracting ourselves from one predicament we would soon become entangled in a new and different set of adverse conditions. The ram thrashing its horns is a metaphor for the odyssey of Jewish history and the miracle of Jewish survival under unimaginable circumstances.

This powerful metaphor for Jewish survival is implanted as an integral element of the akeidah. By ascending the mountain and abandoning human logic below, Avraham and Yitzchak set a paradigm for their descendants. They enshrined mesirat nefesh at the core of Jewish identity. The love for Hashem runs so deep in Jewish consciousness that we are prepared to defend His presence in this world even at the cost of our own very lives. Avraham and Yitzchak were each prepared to forfeit everything to display their love of God and their submission to His will. Every Jew possesses this trait as part of his genetic composition. Some are more aware of this capacity, while for others it lies buried deep within the recesses of Jewish identity. Either way, mesirat nefesh is part of our national ethos and it was injected into the Jewish heart by Avraham and Yitzchak upon this mountain. Jews do not have a death wish and don't pursue martyrdom. However, every Jew lives with an unspoken awareness that we are placed upon this globe with a mission. We will rally to that mission with every breath we are given by Hashem and if necessary with our last one.

Our willingness to die on behalf of our belief is largely responsible for our miraculous survival during the past two thousand years of history. Without this courage, defiance, and commitment we would have buckled under the relentless efforts to annihilate our people and our

faith. Ideas are rarely defeated by violence and certainly the eternal idea of Hashem can never be eliminated from the Jewish imagination by pressure or persecution. As the akeidah ebbed to a close, the ram signals to Avraham that this trial was essential to empower his children for survival through the thicket of Jewish history. The Jews would journey along a terrifying historical path and without the love and faith programmed at the akeidah, this journey would be unmanageable. This thrashing ram would be sacrificed but the Jewish nation would survive their thicket of history because of this epic moment and due to the indefatigable love for Hashem that every Jewish heart harbors.

With Hashem's help we have finally disentangled ourselves from that thicket and we stand once again upon the mountains of Israel -proud of this incredible legacy and awaiting our destiny. We have come full circle since that heroic morning of the akeidah.