



Parshat Vayera 5782

The Altar and the Heart

Avraham has spent his entire career identifying the one God of this diverse universe. He didn't just detect a Creator through the beauty of Nature or the structured order of the cosmos. Avraham sensed a moral spirit at the foundation of our world. He innately sensed that Hashem didn't just randomly create our world but cares about his creatures and their welfare. For two thousand years, Nature seemed cold and impassive and G-d seemed distant, angry and militant. Avraham revolutionized religion, preaching of a compassionate G-d who lovingly created this world and who mercifully sustained life. Avraham yearned to better understand this ethical spirit and to fashion his own identity in this moral image.

Finally, after two millennia of chaos and confusion, commitment to G-d and human interest were synchronized. The will of Hashem was translated into the human heart. Religious commitment and human prosperity were aligned. A dark world which had pitted frail humans against angry gods was now rebooted. The will of Hashem and the whisper of the human heart were finally in synch.

All this changed on the mountain top of the akeidah. Having proven that he could serve Hashem by understanding His will, Avraham was now asked to prove if he could serve when he could not possibly decipher Hashem's will. There is no human heart nor human conscience which can justify a father murdering a child. Yet, Hashem commanded this unthinkable deed and Avraham issued his simple, unadorned one-word consent: "hineni." Avraham could not possibly fathom this strident command which undermined everything he had learned of Hashem. Heroically, he surrenders human judgement to the Divine mystery. In doing so Avraham, carved the cornerstone of monotheism- the ability to suspend human logic and surrender human convention to the unknowable word of Hashem.

Ironically and sadly, about six hundred years later the first Jewish monarch, Shaul Hamelech would fail to live up to Avraham's achievement. Faced with the irrational and seemingly immoral task of committing genocide and murdering the entire Amalek nation, a horrified Shaul can't imagine that a merciful G-d would demand such atrocity. Distracted by moral self-arbitration, he spares an elderly chieftain thereby failing his own akeidah moment. Because of this flinch Shaul is stripped of Jewish monarchy.

The akeidah story is perennial. It is the story of human beings submitting their judgement in deference to Divine instruction. Avraham establishes the akeidah as the template of religious success.

Though the actual text of the Torah tells the story of human submission, our Chazal portray a very different story – one which my Rebbe, HaRav Yehuda Amital would annually underline when discussing the akeidah. Several midrashim "color in" distinctly human shades to the akeidah. Repeatedly, Chazal paint the story of a father and a son who, though challenged to act beyond human logic, refuse to empty themselves of human emotions.

One midrash speaks of Yitzchak's last-minute concerns, while bound to the altar. He worried about his aged father's welfare: who would tend to his senior father's increasing needs now that he himself would be "out of the picture." Additionally, Yitzchak encouraged his father to gently break the news of his death to his worried mother. Otherwise Sarah would be overcome with grief and possibly even turn suicidal. Though Yitzchak rallied to fulfill the heavenly will, he didn't muffle the natural love and concern for his aged parents.

A second midrash speaks of Avraham agonizing over the pending sacrifice of his son and fervently praying to Hashem to rescind this unbearable decree. Though Avraham acknowledges that the akeidah will forever alter religious history, he none the less davens for its repeal. As a merciful father he cannot sheepishly accept this decree. Of course, if the will of Hashem remains unchanged, he will accede, but he campaigns for the cancellation of the akeidah. Ultimately his prayers

are answered.

Perhaps the most well-known midrash to “humanize” the akeidah depicts the tears rolling down the cheeks of a sobbing Avraham. Some may wonder: how could Avraham weep as he performs the Divine will and reshapes religious history? Emphatically, the midrash “responds”: how could he NOT cry! Though Hashem summoned him to perform the unspeakable, he does not renounce his fatherly love for his child. Avraham stands atop the mountain as a full-hearted human being submitting to God, not as a barren robot who has vacated all human emotion or fatherly love.

By coloring in these human emotions, Chazal provide a more complex and nuanced image of the akeidah. The litmus test of religion is our submission to the Divine will. We believe that with sufficient effort and imagination we can reconcile Hashem’s will with human instinct and with human welfare. Divine commands are beneficial for human experience – both individually and collectively. There is a fundamental moral backbone to the Torah which is synchronous with our basic sense of right and wrong. Hashem endowed humanity with a moral compass and He crafted the Torah based upon that morality. We expect the revealed and direct word of Hashem to accord with the moral conscience he vested within the human heart. The two are meant to coincide.

However, every Jew arrives at an “akeidah moment” standing before the unintelligible will of Hashem. At some point, we are all baffled by the mystifying will of Hashem which appears to be irreconcilable with human interest or human conscience. There is only one correct answer to this trial: submitting human instinct and intuition to the higher wisdom of Divine command.

Chazal’s more nuanced version of the akeidah urges us that while submitting to Hashem’s will, we should not abdicate human emotions. Facing the grand mystery, Avraham does not divest his fatherly love – but performs his duties despite the emotional storm raging within. Hashem desires humans, not robots and certainly not cold-blooded killers.

The midrash portraying Avraham’s tears concludes with a phenomenal phrase: [though he was tearing] his heart “joyful” at the prospect of fulfilling Divine will. It may seem odd that he was saddened with tears but thrilled to fulfill Divine command. That is precisely why the human heart is multi-chambered. As we encounter his will, Hashem expects us to process different and sometimes contradictory emotions.

Each generation faces its own akeidah moments. The previous generation’s akeidah was the horror of the Holocaust and the prospect of rebuilding Judaism in the shadow of a frightening Divine mystery. Our generation faces many dilemmas in which the Divine will appears to contradict basic human instincts or current scientific convention. Just as Avraham stood, we are expected to submit to the will of Hashem without abdicating our humanity or our conscience.

