

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



DOES AKEIDAT YITZCHAK CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING TO A TORAH UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Take, please, your son . . .

I have two sons.

. . . *your only* . . .

This one is 'the only' from his mother,
and that one is 'the only' from his mother.

. . . *whom you have loved* . . .

I love both of them.

Isaac.

Why didn't Hashem reveal to Avraham from the outset that He was referring to Yitzchak?

Rashi answers that He was trying to cushion the blow:

"So as not to discombobulate him suddenly, lest his mind be disturbed and become torn; or to endear the mitzvah; or to give him reward for each statement."

Torah Temimah raises a difficulty. Rashi's initial answer – and maybe all three answers – assume that Avraham realized from the outset that G-d would ask him for something extraordinarily traumatic. But the command *and bring him up there as an olah* comes later in the verse, **after** Avraham learns that G-d is referring to Yitzchak! The gradual revelation that *your son* meant Yitzchak therefore provided no psychological cushion at all against the enormity of the command to sacrifice him.

Torah Temimah answers by citing the previous Rashi:

"*Kach na*" – *na* must be understood as expressing a request.

G-d said to Avraham: I ask of you: Withstand this *nisayon*/test for me, lest they say that the earlier ones were not substantial.

Avraham understood that G-d says 'please' only in advance of an exceptionally difficult request.

This answer rests on at least two assumptions. First, that *na* should be translated as "please"; and second, that G-d says 'please' only when making exceptionally difficult requests. Neither assumption seems textually compelling.

Regarding the first: Consider Bereishit 18:21, where G-d says to himself: "*I will descend na and see*..." See also Shemot 3:3, where Mosheh similarly speaks to himself: "*I will turn aside na and see*..." Such contexts demonstrate that *na* doesn't always mean "please", and perhaps never adds any specific meaning to the verb it's attached to. So *kach na* might better be translated along the lines of "*take now your son*", with no 'please'.

Regarding the second: Consider for example Bereishit 13:14: *Hashem said to Avram after Lot had separated from being with him: "Lift your eyes na and see from the place where you are, North, South, East, and West"*. See also e.g. Bereishit 15:5: "*Gaze na toward the heavens*". In both these contexts, G-d uses *na* – however translated – when introducing promises of rewards, not traumatic tests.

Nonetheless, Rashi's reading can be justified by narrative context even if it has no specific linguistic trigger. Avraham may have recognized a pattern of *nisyonot* relating to his presumptive heirs. He failed to prevent Lot's death in Sodom (so far as he knows); he actively sent Yishmael out to the desert with insufficient water (and does not know whether he survived); so he expected something like the *akeidah* with regard to Yitzchak, and desperately tried to protect him.

This justification also rests on unprovable assertions. Note for example the Rabbinic identification of the two servants at the *akeidah* as Lot and Yishmael, which assumes that Avraham is aware they survived (unless they returned in disguise or transformed beyond recognition).

Deborah Klapper suggested a third sort of justification for Rashi. Perhaps Avraham's experience of the command was not linguistic, and so he experienced the entire verse simultaneously. Since we only have the language of the Torah to work with, this approach is necessarily speculative.

Let's return to our opening question "Why didn't Hashem reveal to Avraham from the outset that He was

referring to Yitzchak?” with a twist. If Avraham was not expecting something terrible, why did he resist understanding that G-d was referring to Yitzchak?

Considering this question brings to light a possible moral difficulty with Rashi’s reading. “I have two sons” seems to imply that Avraham wanted to put Yishmael rather than Yitzchak through the horrible *nisayon* he expected. Would that have been a moral desire on Avraham’s part?

Deborah suggested that the *akeidah* is a fulfillment of G-d’s initial command to Avram to leave “his father’s house”, meaning that he needed to put G-d above family. On this reading, the test is necessary precisely because, as Avraham’s resistance demonstrates, he cannot yet be a fully objective medium for transmitting or implementing Divine commands. (Compare Anakin Skywalker.)

I wonder whether G-d actually wants bloodless objectivity from His messengers. The narrative of Sodom can be read as making the opposite point. Avraham’s purely objective argument saves no one, while Lot’s self-interested requests saves some of his family, and perhaps an entire village. Lot himself is saved only because *G-d remembered Avraham*.

I therefore suggest very tentatively that Avraham thought that *na* actually was a prelude to something wonderful. He objected to G-d giving it to only one of his sons. This is consistent with his reaction when G-d first tells him that Yitzchak will be born: “*Let it be that Yishmael will live before You*”. (Avraham’s concern may be echoed by interpretations of the Qur’an that substitute Yishmael for Yitzchak at the *Akeidah*, and by Christian understandings that understand Jesus as superseding Yitzchak.) Rashi understood Avraham as trying to deflect G-d’s choice. My suggested reading is that he is actually trying to argue against the idea of choosing¹.

Take, please, your son . . .

I have two sons.

. . . your only . . .

This one is ‘the only’ from his mother,
and that one is ‘the only’ from his mother.

. . . whom you have loved . . .

I love both of them.

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On this reading, however, the delayed revelation of the actual test seems cruel. How should Avraham feel when he discovers that he was arguing for sacrificing both his sons, not just one?

Bear *na* with me. Avraham wants both sons to have whatever G-d is offering. That would be true even if he knows that what G-d is offering is a *nisayon*, because *nisayonot* are necessary for growth. But death is not a *nisayon*; what kills us doesn’t make us stronger. Yet Avraham makes no protest at all when G-d finally tells him what the test consists of. That might indicate shock; or absolute submission to an explicit command. Or: What if it shows that Avraham knew from the start that it was only a test? What if the point of the *Akeidah* is not to show that Avraham loves G-d more than he loves Yitzchak, but rather to convince Yitzchak of that (whether or not it is true)?

In countless works of art in every medium over millennia, *Akeidah* Yitzchak becomes a metaphor for the hardest decisions of parenting. One of the hardest parenting challenges is to teach children that unconditional love is not the same as license, that there are things I will not do for you, and will not support you in doing, no matter how much I love you – which doesn’t mean that I love you any less, or that my love is conditional.

It may be that most relationships are better served if both parents and children ensure that the conflict is never faced directly. Certainly there is no need to artificially construct *akeidah*-style conflicts. Avraham and Yitzchak face it directly, and as Nechama Leibowitz z”l taught, they return from Mount Moriah no longer *yachdav*, together, and so far as the Torah tells us, they are never *yachdav* again.

Maybe the purpose of *Akeidah* Yitzchak was for it to happen once, so that we could point to it forever and never have to do it again.

¹Deborah suggested that Yitzchak and Rivkah plan to have only one child to avoid being forced into any similar choice. So G-d gives them twins. They respond by each choosing one as “*your only whom you have loved*”.