

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

RELIGIOUS SACRIFICE: BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL?

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Imagine yourself as the kindest man on earth, and that G-d commands you to bring Him a human sacrifice. Imagine yourself as the most loving father on earth, and G-d commands you to slaughter your son. How would you react at the moment of decision if your knife just melted away? If an angel told you to stop? How would you react afterward if G-d told you that it was just a drill?

I imagined that your immediate reaction would be a deep sign of relief, perhaps accompanied by a huge smile. But then afterward, you would wonder about the relationship. Why didn't G-d have faith in you? Could you ever take His statements at face value again, or had he condemned you to live as a postmodern?

Chazal's imagination seems to have differed markedly from mine (*Beresbit Rabbah* 56:12):

"Do not send your hand toward the lad" –

Where was the knife?

The tears of the ministering angels dripped onto it, and it dissolved.

So Abraham said: I will strangle him!

The angel said to him: "Do not send your hand toward the lad".

Let us extract a drop of blood from him!

"Do not do anything (meumah) to him" = *Do not make a blemish (moom) on him.*

Rashi accentuates the difference:

"Do not send your hand toward the lad" –

If so, I have come here for nothing. I will make a wound in him, and extract some blood from him!

"Do not do anything (meumah) to him" = *Do not make a blemish (moom) on him.*

The Kotzker Rebbe in **Amud HaEmet** adds an exclamation point.

הורדת יצחק מן העקידה היתה קשה לאברהם יותר מן ההעלאה.

וזה שאמר במדרש: אמרתי לך אסקיה – אחתיה.

וע"ז נאמר: **עתה** ידעתי כי ירא א-להים אתה

Bringing Yitzchak down from the Akeidah was harder for Avraham than bringing him up.

This is what the Midrash means: "I said bring him up – bring him down."

*Regarding this Scripture says: **Now** I know that you are a G-d fearer . . .*

What demonstrated Avraham's ultimate religious commitment was his willingness to listen to the second command, to bring Yitzchak back down from the altar. But the angel had to call him twice; he continued on after a clearly miraculous angelic intercession; he tried to shed blood when he was constrained from killing; and after all that, perhaps he genuinely still needs to kill something, and so the ram dies.

I once read the Kotzker convincingly understood, or transmitted, along the following lines: All human beings have a *yetzer tov* and a *yetzer hora*; we experience satisfaction and discontent as we follow or violate these generally conflicting inclinations. Great evil genuinely provides great satisfaction, but can be restrained by the recognition that it also generates great discontent, even self-loathing. So ultimate temptation occurs when we become convinced that the greatest evil is actually a good, in other words when we are convinced that G-d wants us to do evil. This was Avraham's test – having been given the green light, even the order, to commit ultimate evil (perhaps there is a reverse Oedipal impulse as well), could he stop when the light suddenly turned red? The answer is yes, he passed – but

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barely. Those of us ordinarily less kind than Avraham Avinu must be constantly vigilant lest our *yetzer hora* fool us into believing that God commands evil. One need look no further than the Orthodox blogosphere for ample confirmation of this thesis.

Bleak as the Kotzker's vision is, it is surpassed by the tradition, often connected to the Crusades, in which Avraham does succeed in slaughtering Yitzchak – perhaps without a knife! and only succeeds in stopping himself from doing it **again** after G-d resurrects Yitzchak.

And yet – even that tradition's darkness is, to my mind, surpassed by R. Itzile Volozhin in his **Peh Kadosh**.

פירש"י ז"ל: לכך אמר לו באריכות – כדי שיתן לו שכר על כל דיבור

ודיבור

ולכאורה קשה: למה צריך ליתן לו שכר על דיבוריו של השי"ת

ותירץ כך שאברהם רצה מאד להקריב את שני בניו לקרבן

לכך כתיב "קח נא את בנך" לשון יחיד

אמר אברהם: שניהם הם יחידים לאמותם

אמר לו השי"ת: אשר אהבת

אמר אברהם: את שניהם אני אוהב

עד שאמר לו בפירוש "את יצחק"

ולכך צריך ליתן לו שכר על מה שטען עם השי"ת ורצה להקריב את שני

בניו

וע"כ ניהא שצריך ליתן לו שכר על כל דיבור ודיבור שטען נגד ה'

Rashi of blessed memory explained that G-d commanded the Akedah at great length so as to give Avraham reward for each and every speech-act.

But this seems difficult: Why should G-d be compelled to reward

Avraham more because He chose to speak more?

*So Rashi answered that Avraham very much wanted to sacrifice **both** his sons.*

Therefore Scripture writes "Take, please, your son" – singular.

But Avraham said: Each of them is single to his mother!

So G-d added: Whom you have loved.

But Avraham said: I love both of them!

Until G-d told him explicitly: YITZCHAK!

Therefore G-d was compelled to give him reward for his arguments to The

Holy Blessed One expressing his desire to sacrifice both sons

and therefore it makes sense that he was give reward for each speech-act of his own, arguing against G-d.

In other words, the Kotzker saw G-d needing to persuade Avraham away from bloodshed at the very end,

when he had been wearing the ring of power or horcrux for three days already. But R. Itzile writes the very same dynamic into the first moment of the *Akeidah*. It seems from R. Itzile that Avraham has been eagerly waiting for just this command.

I suggest tentatively that Rav Itzile is actually grounded in a very different psychology than the Kotzker. For the Kotzker, the desire to sacrifice human beings is always a product of the evil inclination, and is absorbed into religion through deception and error. By contrast, for Rav Itzile, the desire to sacrifice whatever one considers most precious is endemic to religion, and human sacrifice – meaning the sacrifice of one's own conscience and another's body – is a genuine and natural outlet for that religious impulse. And yet acting on that impulse is terribly wrong, and Avraham is rewarded for his arguments only because he accepts their rejection.

The current wave of politico-religious murder in Israel has produced two signs of hope. The first is that, to my knowledge for the first time, a number of Palestinian voices have clearly, publicly, and convincingly stated moral rather than pragmatic objections to killing Israeli Jews. May those voices survive and flourish! The second is the continuing matter-of-fact efforts of Jewish bystanders and health professionals to save even terrorist murderers once they no longer pose a threat.

By the same token, the public and social media voices calling for those efforts to stop are terrifying. We have already seen that they lead in practice to the murder of innocents, but I too wish to avoid making pragmatic objections to moral wrongs. Instead I wish to reiterate the lessons of both the Kotzker and Rav Itzile. We must be **willing** to take the life of an attempting murderer to save the life of his or her victim. But the **desire** to take a human life should be most suspect when it seems to be a mitzvah, and absolute Torah commitment provides no immunity against grievous moral error. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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