

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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## AKEIDAH THEOLOGY?

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"My thoughts are not your thoughts, and My ways are not your ways, says Hashem" (Isaiah 55:8). Maimonides read this verse as a statement of fact – the word "thought" means something utterly different in kind when ascribed to G-d than it does when ascribed to human beings. Acquiring human wisdom requires recognizing and accepting that we cannot truly understand G-d.

Rashi reads the verse as a critique – human thoughts and ways are not the same as G-d's, but they should be! We should try our best to bridge the gap by thinking and acting as much like G-d as we can.

Chazal mostly took a third approach. They illustrated the verse with examples of behaviors that **make sense for G-d but not for human beings**. (In the modern era, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan adopted this approach in *If You Were G-d*, which tries to demonstrate the rationality of G-d's choice of the Jewish people to bear His message to the world. The Mormon science fiction author Orson Scott Card does something similar in his Homecoming saga.) Here is an example from Midrash Tanchuma (Vayeshev):

*This can be compared to a flesh and blood king  
who was sitting in judgement over another human being.*

*The king says to him:*

*Say whether you killed or did not kill!*

*If the defendant replies: "I killed" – the judge kills him;*

*But if he does not confess – the judge does not kill him.*

*But The Holy Blessed One is not like that.*

*When someone confesses, The Holy Blessed One has mercy on him.*

Flesh and blood judges in the pre-forensics era had little choice but to rely on confessions, since the evidence was rarely completely dispositive. Conscience and public opinion also combined to make them leery of executing the possibly innocent (as seems to still be the case in China). Finally, religious scruples might prevent them from executing someone unshriven.

The first two rationales have no reasonable relevance to G-d, the omniscient judge Who knows all relevant facts and motivations. What about the third? Human courts encourage confession so that the defendant can achieve forgiveness from G-d before dying. But they cannot forgive just because G-d forgave, or every defendant would game the system by confessing. But G-d knows which confessions are sincere and which spurious.

Of course, Halakhah never accepted confessions in criminal cases. The midrash draws its contrast between G-d and royal justice

without telling us where a Sanhedrin fits in. I suggest tentatively that this midrash prefigures the Derashot HaRan's famous contention that Halakhic criminal law is not intended to achieve the practical ends of social order and justice, but rather to bring the Divine overflow into this world, while an adjacent royal law (maybe parallel to *dina demalkhuta dina*) accomplished the practical ends. Halakhic criminal law models Divine justice as administered by human beings. It serves as both an inspiration and a caution.

To sum up: Human judges and the Divine judge are motivated by the same ethical concerns. However, our inferior access to knowledge properly yields different practical legal standards. Human societies should derive principles from G-d's judicial behavior but not thoughtlessly ape the specifics.

Chazal's approach, unlike Rambam's, allows us to ethically evaluate G-d's choices. But lehavdil elef alfei havdalot we must be careful to evaluate as if we were k'b'yakhol standing in Hashem's metaphorical shoes. So, for example, when Avraham challenges: "Shall the judge of all the land not do justice?" he is within his rights and obligations to establish justice as the standard. But the judge of all the land may have freedoms and constraints that give justice a different expression than when administered by local judges.

Let's see whether this approach can be productively applied to the narrative of Akeidat Yitzchak. Our focus will be on how G-d could ask or command Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, whether or not He intended to withdraw the request/command before it could be carried out.

Prima facie, G-d's initial request/command seems unethical in at least three ways: it imposes enormous psychological stress on Avraham (and on Sarah if she knows, and Yitzchak at whatever point he begins to suspect); it imposes enormous stress on Abraham's relationship with Yitzchak (at least); and it runs the risk that Avraham will go ahead with the sacrifice of Yitzchak even if the request/command is withdrawn. (We can perhaps say in response to the last question that from G-d's perspective there is no risk, since He could miraculously rescue or even resurrect Yitzchak, but that answer raises a host of different theological questions, and also seems evasive.) These costs must be justified if we want to reconcile them with belief in an ethical G-d.

Halakhically, the standards for justifying interpersonal damage for a greater cause include: The damage caused must be less than the gain, it must be the minimum necessary to achieve the gain, it must

be likely to achieve the gain, and it must not be motivated by animus. The question then is what the potential “gain” of the Akeidah is.

The obvious answer seems to be in 22:12: “He said: Do not send your hand forth against the child; and do no harm at all to him; **because now I know that you are a y’rei Elokim**, and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me.”

However, this approach can be challenged in at least three ways. First, why was it so important for Hashem to learn that Avraham was a **y’rei Elokim**? Second, why was this the only way for Him to learn this? Third, how do we know that the Akeidah succeeded, in the sense that G-d k’byakhol learned what He wanted to learn? (Please note that this last question is distinct from the question of whether Avraham behaved ideally during the Akeidah, and also that many commentators translate *ki ata yadati* as “because now I have **made known**.”)

R. David Kimchi (RaDaK, available on AlHaTorah.org) offers a comment on *y’rei Elokim* that I find frankly terrifying, and I’d love to be shown that my reading of him is incorrect:

היראה הזאת היא האבה,  
כי לא היתה יראת גופו אלא יראת נפשו שלא תאבד,  
שהיה מוסר נפש בנו, שהיה אוהב יותר מנפשו,  
תחת נפשו, שלא תאבד מהעולם הבא,  
שהיא האהבה לא-ל והדבקות בו.

*The yir’ah/fear referred to here is actually ahavah/love  
Because it was not fear for his body, but rather fear for his soul, that it not be  
lost,  
because he was ceding the soul of his son, whom he loved more than he loved his  
own soul,  
in exchange for his own soul, that it not be lost from the Coming World,  
which is love of the Divinity and cleaving to Him.*

As of now, very tentatively, I read RaDaK as saying that Avraham loved Yitzchak more than he loved himself, but not more than he loved loving G-d. He would cheerfully have sacrificed his own life to protect Yitzchak’s. But he was willing to sacrifice Yitzchak rather than lose the eternal experience of loving G-d.

This may be the epitome of what some refer to as “Akeidah Theology.” Truly loving G-d (alternatively: demonstrating that you truly love G-d) requires not self-sacrifice but rather sacrificing those that you love more than you love yourself. (I should note, though, that on this reading the **only** people one can justify harming for the sake of religious experience are those you love more than you love yourself.)

Radak’s remarkable but hard-to-accept claim that *yir’ah* means *ahavah* points to the possibility that the Akeidah was not fully successful. Perhaps the goal was *ahavah*, but only *yir’ah* was achieved.

This possibility is often raised in the context of judging whether Avraham “aced the test,” with the endpoint generally being that Avraham should have realized that sacrificing Yitzchak was not

G-d’s will even before he heard the angel calling (alternatively: the angel was calling throughout, and Avraham should have heard it earlier). But what if Avraham did everything right, but the goal was impossible?

We need to reframe our initial ethical questions in terms of relationships. Is it ever ethical to test someone else to prove their love? *King Lear* suggests to us that merely asking questions is unlikely to generate a reliable answer. But Lear also reminds us how desperate we can be to know that we are loved.

In Sefer Iyov, the stakes of the test are defined by Satan at the outset: Would Iyov fear G-d even if G-d had no way to punish or reward him? Since G-d can give or take away anything, the only way to find out is to reduce Iyov to a point of depression so severe that he cannot imagine either pleasure or worse pain. The ending is enigmatic – Iyov fears G-d as much as any human being can, but is that enough to answer Satan’s question? I understand the position in Chazal that Iyov is a fiction as meaning that the actions attributed to G-d in the book cannot be ethically justified, so it can only be understood as a thought-experiment, which ends up demonstrating that the answer to Satan’s question cannot be known. Because if human beings can think of the possibility that our suffering is a test, we can never give up hope of being rewarded if we pass.

The crucial difference between Iyov and the Akeidah is that G-d never asks Iyov to participate in the destruction of everything he holds dear. That may suggest that it has a different goal, and perhaps that goal is to teach about love rather than fear. But it may fail in the same way, even though Avraham does whatever is humanly possible. Radak’s reading tries valiantly to reach resolution by reclassifying desire for Olam haBa as selfless love rather than reward, but I find this utterly unconvincing in context. I prefer to say that what G-d k’byakhol learns is that love is subject to a variation of Heisenberg’s principle; the act of observing it destroys it. Had Avraham killed Yitzchak, his love of G-d would not have survived. (As it is, the simple reading of Bereishit is that he never speaks to G-d again, and G-d’s only speech to Him is a one-way Self-binding oath.) So G-d calls it off at the last moment.

The question I leave open – to which I invite replies – is this. If you were G-d, such that everyone who believed You existed would also believe in Your omnipotence, and therefore expressions of both fear and love are always compromised – could the experiment be ethically justified?

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