

Imagination is central to the practice of Talmud Torah as modeled by Chazal. This can be seen clearly in the standard Talmudic logical form called *tzrikhuta*, in which the rabbis construct, a *hava amina*, or what someone who disagreed with their consensus might have thought – they imagine themselves out of their own intellectual box. The purpose of this exercise is to make all such consensus statements necessary – a primary goal of Talmudic discourse is to make all rabbinic statements true but not obvious.

The *hava amina*, as a habit of thought, creates the capacity for empathy with any opponent, on the ground that “Thus but for the grace of G-d thought I”. This empathy can be used, as I argue in [Dangerous Hava Aminot](#), as a means of taming potential opposition, by demonstrating that the rabbinic conclusion was reached only after careful consideration of the alternatives. It can also be used to deepen religious understanding, as per Rav Saadia Gaon’s argument that conviction is only meaningful when the alternative has been considered.

Malbim’s commentary on Akeidat Yitzchak¹ may exemplify yet another ability potentially resulting from this rabbinic mentality, namely the ability to reconstruct the ambivalences of Biblical characters in their moments of religious glory. Our first focus this week will be developing the ground and nature of that ambivalence as deeply as we can.

Malbim’s central literary question, which has otherwise laaniyut dati received insufficient attention, is why Avraham’s two *n’arim* (I translate the term as “squires”, but that misses the resonance with Yitzchak being called *naar* when on the altar) appear in the story at all; why does Avraham take them along? Rashi comments that a man of Avraham’s stature must bring along two servants, but this seems insufficient ground for mentioning them. Rather, it seems likely that for Rashi’s interpretation the squires are brought along and mentioned so that Avraham can tell them to stay with the donkey while he and Yitzchak go on. In this reading Avraham’s instruction is taken, with good textual basis, as profoundly insulting, as equating them with the donkey. The Talmud in several places gives this reading halakhic significance.

Rashi does not quote that interpretation here, however, and Bekhor Shor and Seforno offer a pragmatic alternative: Avraham left the squires behind so that they would not prevent him from sacrificing Yitzchak. This suggestion, however, makes it very hard to justify mentioning them at all.

Here Malbim makes his first astoundingly imaginative move. Just the opposite, he contends; Avraham brings the squires precisely *so that* they can defend Yitzchak against him, so that if Yitzchak runs away Avraham will be physically prevented from recapturing him. Yitzchak, after all, is not commanded – why should he not run away?

If we read this as a definite position of Avraham, it falters – why, then, not warn Yitzchak explicitly of what will happen? But if we read it as a point of ambivalence, no such issue arises.

Regardless, this raises the question of why Avraham sent them away precisely at the moment they were most needed.

Here Malbim makes his second move. Avraham, he says, had previously lived a religious life that accorded well with his moral intuition (Malbim does not here explicitly address previous challenges such as the expulsion of Yishmael), and accordingly had felt very comfortable living a publicly transparent religious life. That changed here – this

¹ Excerpted, attached, and translated

command violated everything he had preciously intuited about G-d, everything about his soul. Avraham was *ashamed* to act this way in front of witnesses, and terrified that they would learn to be like him. He was willing to obey the Divine command, but did not want anyone to know that he had done so.

Psychologically, Malbim's reading is tremendously compelling. Avraham has two competing absolute values, both rooted in his experience of G-d: the fact of the command, and the fact that G-d desires the good and abominates human sacrifice. He makes the decision to obey the command, but only by bracketing it off from his conception of proper religious life, in halakhic terms making it a *hora'at sha'ah* (temporary or ad hoc extralegal mandate). Avraham is prepared to obey, but not to learn anything about G-d from his obedience.

Theologically and literarily, however, this reading seems very problematic. What is the purpose and outcome of the *nisayon* (test/trial)? To the very end, Avraham would apparently be unwilling to sacrifice Yitzchak if anyone could see him – so total commitment to G-d is never achieved; yet he is willing to sacrifice Yitzchak against his conscience – so ethical commitment is not achieved either. Is it the true nature of a “fearer of G-d” to be willing to do evil for the sake of G-d while being ashamed of doing so?

Malbim's own understanding of the *nisayon* involves yet another creative leap. Rashi notes that the angel addresses two commands to Avraham: “Do not send your hand forth against the child”, and “Do not do him any harm”, and comments that the second command was necessary because Avraham intended to ritually wound Yitzchak even after being told not to kill him. Malbim contends² that the test was double – both the willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak, and his removal from the altar, needed to be done absolutely *lishmah*, for the sake of Heaven. As proof that Avraham passed, that he found no joy other than the joy of service in taking Yitzchak back down, Malbim cites Rashi's claim about the intent to wound.

This seems wholly unconvincing to me in the words of the Chumash³. But more importantly for our purposes, it draws a psychological portrait of Avraham that seems utterly incompatible with the one Malbim draws in his discussion of the squires. Instead of ambivalent and struggling, Avraham simply turns on a dime – in one moment he moves to slaughter, in the next to save, and each is done wholly for the sake of G-d. Moreover, it seems to me a terrible reading of Rashi, whose whole point, *laaniyut daati*, is that Avraham seeks to wound even when harming Yitzchak is no longer required by any Divine command.

Possibly Malbim's understanding of Abraham's *hava amina*, of the reason that obedience was a genuine choice between goods, rather than simply an overcoming of self-interest, cannot stand. But the portrait he draws is so powerful, immediate, and relevant that I would very much welcome suggestions as to how it can adequately explain the *nisayon*.

Shabbat Shalom!

² I address the Kotzker's understanding of this Rashi elsewhere.

³ As Malbim formally cites this from his own “*Drushim*”, there is room to question the seriousness of his exegetical intent here.

"שבו לכם פה עם החמור" –

יספר בזה כי נבדל הנסיון הזה מכל מה שעשה אברהם עד הנה, שכל מה שהלך עד הנה בדרכי ה' וישמור משמרתו ומצותיו היו מצות שלא היו נגד שכלו, וכל מה שעשה היה עושה בפרהסיא לעיני הרואים למען דעת כל עמי הארץ את ה' ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט, לא כן מצוה זו, שהיה נגד שכלו, שעד הנה דרש ויוכח נגד ע"ז שהיו מקריבים זבחי אדם, ויוכח אותם כי לא ירצה ה' בתועבות כאלה, וכי אין תועבה גדולה בעיני ה' כשפיכות דם, כמ"ש כי כל תועבות ה' אשר שנא עשו לאלהיהם, כי גם את בניהם וכו' ישרפו באש לאלהיהם, ועתה כאשר הגיעתהו המצוה הזאת שהיא נגד השכל ונגד דרכי ה' הטובים, לא רצה לעשות זאת לעיני נערינו [שלפי דעת חז"ל היו אליעזר וישמעאל], כי בוש מלפניהם לעשות מעשה שעד עתה היה זה תועבה בעיניו, ולא רצה שילמדו לעשות כזאת, ועל כן הסתיר הדבר מהם.

"ונשתחוה ונשובה אליכם" –

וזה היה שרש גדול בנסיון הזה, שעשה מצות ה' שהוא נגד שכלו ונגד היושר והצדק ודרכי ה' הטובים, ובכ"ז לא הרהר אחרי ה'. והנה אברהם קיים התורה עד שלא נתנה, כי נפשו היתה מלוטשת כמראת הצובאת נוכח האור העליון, עד שהביט בצורת נפשו באספקלריא המאירה כל פרטי המצות, אשר שרשם בחכמה העליונה, שהיתה כשמש זורח ומגיה אור נפשו וקרנים מיד בסתרי לבבו הטהור, ומצד זה לא עמד שום כח מכחות החומר לעכב עליו שום מצוה, כי אור הנפש גבר על חשכת החומר, אבל מעשה זה, שבאמת לא רצה ה' בו, ואם היה שוחט את יצחק, הרי זה מעשה רצח ותועבת ה' אשר שנא, הנה גם נפשו הרוחניית הצופה מסתרי החכמה העליונה היתה מתנגדת למעשה זאת, עד שלכן בוש מלעשות זאת נגד נערינו, כאשר יבוש אדם לעשות מעשה תועבה במקום רואים, ובכ"ז האמונה בה' ואהבתו ויראתו גברו על כל אלה, ולא מנע מלקיים דבר ה' שהוא נגד השכל והיושר וחרפה לו נגד בני אדם, ובכ"ז אהבת ה' גברה על כל אלה ונתנסה וימצא תמים.

"ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער" –

פי' חז"ל שרצה עכ"פ לעשות בו איזה רושם וחבלה שיוציא ממנו דמים, לכן הוסיף אזהרה שנית "ואל תעש לו מאומה" . . . ובדרושי ארצות שלום כתבתי בזה כי עיקר הנסיון היה עם יעשה המצוה לשם ה' בלבד בלא תערובת איזה פנייה וכוונה זרה. והנה היה בזה שתי מצוות, שתחלה כשהעלהו קיים מצות ה' שצוה "והעלהו שם לעולה", ועתה שהורידהו קיים שנית מצות ה' שאמר "אל תשלח ידך" . . . אבל ה' יודע תעלומות לב ידע כי כמו שעשה מצוה הראשונה רק לשם ה' בלבד, כן גם במצוה השניה לא שמח על הורדתו משמחת עצמו בעבור שניצול בנו יחידו רק שמח שזכה לקיים שנית מצות בוראו, והראיה שהיה קשה בעיניו הורדתו ורצה לעשות בו עכ"פ איזה מום עד שהוצרך להזהירו ע"ז, וע"ז אמר "כי עתה" – מן המצוה השנייה שקיימת – "ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה כי לא חשכת" – ר"ל: מה שחשכת אותו מן המות – לא היה בו איזה כוונה ומחשבה חיצונית, שיעלה על לבך שחשכת ממות "את בנך" – מצד שהוא "בנך יחידך" – לא על כוונה זאת חשכת אותו, רק "ממני" – עשית זאת, רק למלאות צווי בלא כוונה אחרת זרה.

“You sit here with the donkey” –

It tells here how this test differed from everything Avraham Avinu had done up to this point...

as all the things he had done up to this point to walk in the ways of Hashem and observe His legacy and commands were not opposed to his intellect (שכל), and he would do everything publicly before onlookers so that the whole public would know Hashem and observe the ways of Hashem by acting with righteousness and justice,

but this command was different, it was opposed to his intellect,

as up to this point he has preached and rebuked the idolaters who brought human sacrifices, rebuking them by saying that Hashem would not desire such abominations, and that bloodshedding was the greatest abomination in Hashem’s view, as Scripture writes “Because all the things abominable to Hashem which He hates, they did for their gods, for even their sons etc. they would burn in fire to their gods.”

But now, when he reached this mitzvah that was opposed to his intellect and opposed to the good ways of Hashem, he did not wish to do this before the eyes of his squires (who in the opinion of Chazal were Eliezer and Yishmael)

because he was ashamed to do before them an action that until now had been abominable in his eyes,

and he did not wish them to learn to behave so;

and therefore he concealed the matter from them.

“We will bow and return to you” –

This was a great root of this test, that he did the command of Hashem that was opposed to his intellect and opposed to uprightness and justice and the good ways of Hashem, and with all this did not doubt⁴ Hashem.

Now Avraham kept the Torah before it was given, because his soul was polished like a mirror opposite the Higher Light, to the point that he could see in the form of his soul, as if in an illuminated speculum, all the details of the commandment, whose roots are in the Higher Wisdom. , which was like a shining sun which brightened the light of his soul and sent rays into the hidden places of his pure heart, and in this regard no power of any of the powers of matter could stand in the way of his doing any commandment, because the light of his soul overpowered the yearning of matter.

But this action, that in truth Hashem did not wish, and had he actually slaughtered Yitzchak, this would have been an act of murder and an abomination to Hashem which He hates,

even his spiritual soul which saw from the secrets of the Higher Wisdom was opposed to this action,

to the point that he was ashamed to do this before the eyes of his squires, as a person is ashamed to do an abominable deed before onlookers.

But despite this, his faith in Hashem and love and awe overpowered all these, and he did not refrain from fulfilling the word of Hashem that was opposite to intellect and uprightness and a disgrace to him in the eyes of people, despite all this his Love of Hashem conquered all those, and he was tested and emerged unblemished.

⁴ retranslate

“He said: ‘Do not send your hand forth toward the boy” –

Chazal explain that he wished at least to make some mark and wound that would draw blood from him, and therefore the angel added a second caution “Do not do anything to him” . . .

In my book of homilies “Artzot Shalom” I wrote about this that the essence of the test was whether he would do the commandment solely for the sake of Hashem with no admixture of interest and ulterior motive.

Now there were two commandments here, as when he first brought him up he fulfilled the command of Hashem Who commanded **“And bring him up there as an olah”**, and now that he brought him down he fulfilled the second command of Hashem Who said **“Do not send forth your hand”** , , ,

But Hashem Who knows the secrets of the heart knew that just as he did the first command solely for the sake of Hashem, so too the second command, he was not happy about the bringing down because of personal happiness, that his unique son was saved, rather he was happy that he has merited to fulfill a second command of his Creator.

The proof of this is that the bringing down was difficult in his eyes, and he wished to at least make some blemish on him, to the point that the angel needed to caution him against this.

About this it says **“for now”** – from the second command you fulfilled – **“I know that you are a fearer of G-d, because you have not withheld”** – meaning: That which you have withheld him from death – this has in it no admixture of ulterior motive and thought that would have you thin that you withheld from death **“your son”** – because he was **“your unique son”** – it was not for this motive that you withheld him, rather **“from Me”** you did this, solely to fulfill a command, with no ulterior motive.

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