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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THE AKEIDAH AND THE ARMY

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Suspense is a powerful and dangerous artistic tool. Right now, dear reader, you are wondering where that first sentence will lead. That wonder is manipulable. I could tease you into reading on with hints that this essay will address hot-button contemporary events.

Or I could tell you here at the very beginning that while you might suspect until nearly the very end that I'm engaging in thinly veiled and bracingly acerbic commentary on current events, ultimately this essay will be nothing of the sort. Instead, it will be an old-fashioned peshat approach to a text leading to a conventional moral reading of a great but very familiar text.

Which would make you more eager to read on?

Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi argues (Gevia HaKesef 14) that G-d takes the second approach in the Akeidah narrative. "*It was after those matters that G-d put Avraham to the test . . .*" Why tell us upfront that this would be a test? Ibn Caspi argues that the purpose is to ensure that we never suspect G-d of actually wanting Avraham to bring Yitzchak as a human sacrifice or consider it possible that Avraham would actually kill Yitzchak. The goal is to prevent or at least deflect suspense. Readers are intended to wonder how, not whether, the story will end with Yitzchak still alive.

Ibn Caspi's reading is built on Yirmiyahu 7:31 and 19:5, each of which denounces the burning of children on altars as something that G-d never commanded nor even considered. Talmud Taanit 4a reads the latter verse as a specific reference to three apparent Biblical narratives of child sacrifice:

וכתיב אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי –
אשר לא צויתי - זה בנו של מישע מלך מואב,
שנאמר ויקח את בנו הבכור אשר ימלך תחתיו ויעלהו עלה;
ולא דברתי - זה יפתח;
ולא עלתה על לבי - זה יצחק בן אברהם.

Scripture writes *that I did not command nor speak, and that did not arise in My mind* –

That I did not command – this refers to the son of Mesha, King of Moav,

as 2Kings 3:27 says: *He took his eldest son, who would reign in his stead, and brought him up as an olah-sacrifice;*

nor speak – this refers to Yiftach;

and that did not arise in My mind – this refers to Yitzchak ben Avraham.

Ibn Caspi further argues that the Akeidah narrative overall is intended to teach the same message as Yirmiyahu, that G-d rejects and abhors child sacrifice.

והכוונה בזה לשרש ולעקר ולרפות מלכות העם שהוא החל הנאמן שהיה להם
כי המהדרין מן המהדרין יעשו עולות מבניהם לאלוהיהם.

The purpose (of the command) was to uproot, undermine, and weaken the established belief that was in the heart of the people, that those who are punctiliously careful take of their children to make sacrifices to their gods.

(text/translation of this and subsequent sections by Rabbi Basil Herring, available on Sefaria)

However, Ibn Caspi concedes that the Akeidah can nonetheless be counter-read, and indeed that Yiftach may have based his actions on such a counter-reading.

ואע"פ שקרא אותה, ובפרט זה המעשה,
אם קרא - לא ידע זאת הסבה התכליתית,
אבל שער שמה שמנעו השם לאברהם היה לבד על צד החמלה עליו ממנו יחידו,
עם היות זקן.

ולכן מי שיעשה זה יהיה יותר מופלג ואדוק.
כ"ש עם היות יפתח אז בחור, כי היה בגבורתו.

While he read this episode (of Genesis) in particular, having read it he was not aware of this final cause, for he considered the Lord's prevention of Abraham to be only an act of mercy on account of (Isaac's being) an only son in (Abraham's) old age.

(So Jephthah thought that) whoever would carry this out would be more praiseworthy and pious, especially (for someone like) Jephthah, a young man in his prime.

But Ibn Caspi also provides a stunning alternate version of Yiftach:

ואולי הוחיל לקריאת מלאך לו לאמר:
"אל תשלה ידך אל הנער",
ועדיין היה מחל זה.

It is possible that Jephthah expected an angel to call out to him, "Lay not thy hand upon the lad," and continued to wait for it.

Yiftach in this version is descended from the rabbinic portrait of Avraham's brother Haran, who assumed that G-d would save everyone who declared belief in Him from the fiery furnace of Nimrod. No! There is no virtue in testing G-d (except perhaps with regard to agricultural tithing, possibly extended to all responsible charitable giving; see Malakhi 3:10)

Avraham was also waiting for the angel. That was his intent in saying: *G-d will reveal for Himself the sheep for the olah-sacrifice, my son*". The difference between Yiftach and Avraham, as I understand Ibn Caspi, is that Yiftach felt a sense of urgency, whereas Avraham was prepared to wait forever. (Ibn Caspi contends that many days elapsed between "seeing the place from afar" on the third day and hearing the angel's voice.)

However, Ibn Caspi is not wholly at peace with Avraham. Avraham still assumed that a sacrifice of some sort was necessary, and so when the angel's voice finally came, he was looking for a sheep and found a ram¹. Avraham thus held, and left room for his descendants/followers to incorrectly hold, that sacrifice is a necessary form of worship, and perhaps the ultimate form.

Human sacrifice in particular is wrong because it is murder. That's why Yirmiyahu can present G-d as astounded that anyone could think He desired it, when He had absolutely prohibited murder. But that leaves open the possibility that sacrifice per se remains the ultimate act of religious devotion. If killing-as-worship is pleasing to G-d, surely the more significant the thing killed, the greater the sacrifice, the more G-d is pleased - so long as one does not transgress His law against murder.

Ibn Caspi considers this possibility utterly, absolutely, and totally wrong. G-d does not want any kind of life sacrificed to him, let alone human life, let alone the life of one's child. He never commanded or encouraged Avraham to substitute anything for Yitzchak. The whole idea of animal sacrifice, indeed of sacrifice as a mode of worship, is a concession to human drives, as Maimonides argued. (I suspect that Ibn Caspi sees burning incense/*ketoret* as different in kind because it does not involve sacrifice but rather the religious purposing of a sensory pleasure.)

In immediate historical context, Ibn Caspi may have emphasized this point as an element of anti-Christian polemic. The crucifixion was not a completed and therefore superior Akeidah because G-d despises human sacrifice and abhors anything and everything resembling a completed Akeidah.

The eternal message is that no one should be eulogized or praised for having completed an *akeidah*, and certainly not as being or having been an Avraham who willingly completed an *akeidah*, even if they G-d-forbid considered participating in such an act directly².

Ibn Caspi admits that this message is extremely difficult to convey to most people, and he was presumably aware that it is in profound tension with many elements of the High Holiday liturgy, and much else. I think his argument is that nonetheless any concession on this point leads inevitably to more Yiftachs.

With that in mind, I want to introduce what may become a separate project. I've been comparing the ArtScroll Stone Chumash with the Koren Magerman (Rabbi Sacks) Chumash for the past several parshiyot. The ideological differences are often striking.

For example, consider the relevance of Parshat Lekh Lekha to a world in which the State of Israel exists. Rabbi Sacks speaks of watching the realization of prophecies in which joy returns to the streets of Jerusalem, and how this fulfills the promise of the Covenant Between the Pieces that light will always come in the

end. ArtScroll writes that Avraham was wrong to draft Torah scholars into the army he raised to rescue Lot.

For VaYera, consider in light of Ibn Caspi the opening morals they respectively draw from the Akeidah.

Here is ArtScroll:

Avraham could have no other justification for taking Isaac's life other than unquestioned obedience to G-d. Whether or not he could bring himself to do that was the test.

And here is Rabbi Sacks:

The trial is not to see whether Avraham has the courage to sacrifice his son. The practice was commonplace in the ancient world, and completely abhorrent to Judaism . . .

G-d does not want Avraham to sacrifice his child. G-d wants Avraham to renounce *ownership* of his child.

Rabbi Sacks is compatible with Ibn Caspi, while ArtScroll is not.

The divergence here may reflect a tendency of Modern Orthodoxy to write for intellectuals while Charedism captures the masses. But it would be shallow and unfair to make that the whole explanation of the difference.

Ibn Caspi understands that he is opposing a position with enormous human appeal that can be resisted only through constant and extraordinary intellectual and religious dedication. He acknowledges that his own view of the Akeidah will be accepted only by a tiny minority, whom he considers an elite. Modern Orthodoxy can break its arms patting itself on the back if it wants, but we are not all temperamentally philosophic.

Moreover, Ibn Caspi may simply be wrong.

The harshest test of Ibn Caspi's theology is how it relates to the deaths of soldiers *al kiddush Hashem* in a war of defense. To many of us, it is clear and natural to view their heroism as an expression of the ideals of the Akeidah seen through to its end, with the soldiers as Yitzchak and the parents as Avraham. In fact, my own essay for VaYera last year included the statement that "Jews in the Diaspora with no children in the IDF owe impossibly large debts of gratitude to the incredible Yitzchaks fighting our battles against the worst of causes, and to their families."

But Ibn Caspi objects, and I take his objection to heart. "Sacrifice" is the wrong metaphor. Our soldiers are heroes of the highest order because they choose to live in accordance with their duties and responsibilities. Their parents are heroes because they raised their children to make that choice, and in general to make their own choices, rather than treating them as possessions. G-d does not want or need sacrifices, and parents have no right to sacrifice their children. The Akeidah must never be completed.

Shabbat shalom!

¹ Ibn Caspi argues IMHO unconvincingly, that the ram was not caught in the thicket when Avraham first saw it; rather, he waited until it got caught; if it had not gotten caught, Avraham would have waited for another.

² Ibn Caspi, following Avraham ben HaRambam's report of his father's position, seems to prefer seeing Yitzchak as unaware of what was happening despite his age, and therefore not as heroic. However, the end of his commentary on the Akeidah in his *Matzref HaKesef* suggests an ambivalence about this that I hope to write about no later than the next Torah cycle.