

Abraham's Greatest Challenge

Torah Portion November 4, 2017



Parashat Vayera

Shabbat Shalom,

Parashat Vayera is a difficult passage that raises many questions, for example:

When the angels visited Abraham, they ate food, in other places in the Bible and in Jewish tradition angels cannot eat. What made the angels who visited Abraham different? Why could they eat?

Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt.

Lot's daughters rape their father and bear him children.

Abraham claims before the king of Gerar that Sarah is his sister and not his wife, after making the same mistake in Egypt.

Hagar is sent by Abraham to die in the desert.

These are all very challenging stories. If we stop and think about them for a moment, we can see that they're not simple at all. We must find an

explanation for them, for without an explanation these stories are unacceptable.

And the most challenging of all the stories from this weekly Torah portion is the binding of Isaac. No matter which angle we take on this story, we are met with difficulty:

A father who travels with his son for three days just to die, and that father's handling of his son's question: "...but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" - Genesis 22:7b [NIV]

And God's demand for human sacrifice.

This Shabbat I want to touch on the subject of faith. Abraham has become the symbol of faith, and today we stand as people of faith. What can we learn from Abraham's faith today?

Abraham had Doubts

Abraham's passing of the test of the binding of Isaac is considered to be a divine expression of Abraham's strong and genuine faith. This is shown in Jewish tradition and in the New Testament. It is referred to extensively in the New Testament, for example:

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham... So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. - Galatians 3:7,9 [NIV]

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. - Hebrews 11:17-19 [NIV]

James also presents Abraham as an example of true and ideal faith, in which is found works and good deeds.

Faith has many advantages, such as better coping with pain and loss. Faith helps us in maintaining and strengthening the family unit, and faith encourages us to mutually support one another. To care for one another is indeed one of the foundations of the community. Furthermore, it is statistically proven that people of faith are less dependent on medicinal treatment.

Today I want to examine Abraham's faith from another angle.

The meaning of the name "Isaac" is "laughter" - Sarah's laughter, the laughter of embarrassment. Sarah fears what her neighbor will say. And Abraham's laughter. Yes, Abraham laughed as well. We read in this portion that Abraham speaks to God, and he does not really believe that a child will be born to him from Sarah.

Our father Abraham was a normal person, and like any normal person, even Abraham had moments of doubt and lack of faith. This is important for me to note, because we all tend to attribute the heroes of the Bible with superhero status. And I'd like to point out that our father Abraham was made from the same material as you and I.

It is written of Abraham:

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" - Genesis 17:17 [NIV]

And about Sarah it is written:

So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" - Genesis 18:12 [NIV]

Further evidence of Abraham's skepticism can be found in the continuation of the conversation between him and God:

And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son..." - Genesis 17:18,19a [NIV]

According to these verses, Abraham has already accepted the fact that he will never have a son from Sarah, and only Ishmael will be his successor. ("If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!") In response, God persuades Abraham not to despair by saying, "...but your wife Sarah will bear you a son."

My point is that sometimes all of us, including the heroes of the Bible, have doubts and questions of faith. We are all in a journey of faith. The idea that from the moment we come to faith we've finished the journey is simply not true.

It is precisely as believers that we bury the old man and rise up as a new creation. As believers, we are headed in a certain direction, upwards. A direction that honors our Father in heaven. Sometimes we deviate from the path, to the right or to the left. But we can always correct the course of our lives and get back on the path.

Abraham was Quick to Obey

If I return to Abraham, my understanding is that the question isn't about blind, constant, unquestioning faith. For Scripture tells us that Abraham had given up hope that a son would come to him from Sarah his wife.

The question is what action we take in regards to God's commandment. What you think in your heart is one thing. You can ponder in your heart, you can question in your heart, you can doubt in your heart. But what matters is our actions, as Yeshua tells us in the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-30).

What is the purpose of the commandment of the binding of Isaac? The answer is explicitly written in the Torah:

Some time later God tested Abraham... - Genesis 22:1a [NIV]

In other words, it was a test to see if Abraham would obey the commandment. Why did God specifically choose this test?

I do not think that this test comes down to the simple question of whether Abraham was willing to sacrifice to God his firstborn son. For all those people who sacrificed their sons to Molech were prepared to do such things.

Another example we have in the Bible is the story of Jephthah the Gileadite. He, before going out to battle, made a vow to God. He vowed that if he would win the battle, he would sacrifice to God whatever came to out greet him. Jephthah ended up sacrificing his daughter, who came out to meet him with tambourines and dancing (Judges 11). Yet he is not considered a symbol of faith for that action.

Many people throughout history have sacrificed their loved ones, for the sake of faith, ideology, or their country. I believe that Abraham's testing was much deeper and more complex than merely to see whether Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son to God.

In almost all the conversations between God and Abraham, there is one central recurring theme. It is God's promise of the continuation and transformation of Abraham into a great nation, like the sand of the seashore and the stars of the heavens.

And after years of waiting and patience on the part of Abraham, the miracle takes place - a son is born to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac's birth foretells the continuation of the family, the birth heralds God's promises to make Abraham into a great nation. The faith and expectation of Abraham throughout these years was not in vain.

And now comes the most terrible commandment - to sacrifice Isaac, the promised son, to God. This means that God's promises will not be fulfilled. All these years God has given promise after promise, and now it turns out it was all false.

Isaac's death will reveal that God does not keep His promises - and this is Abraham's real test: What will Abraham's reaction be? Will he cry out about the personal wrongdoing? The promises that will not be fulfilled? The long years of waiting?

In addition, the unique wording of the commandment enhances the test:

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." - Genesis 22:2 [NIV]

Doubt gnaws at his heart: Did Abraham correctly understand the Word of God? Or was he about to lose his son, the thing most dear to him, due to a misunderstanding? Abraham has three days to consider this matter, to back out, to disobey.

Today the answer is known to all. Our father Abraham was willing to fulfill God's commandment without hesitation, without crying out to heaven in protest, and without resenting the immorality of this terrible commandment.

This may be the true meaning of faith in God. When we do not understand the commandments, and yet hurry to obey them. And therefore, in a number of books and epistles in the New Testament, Abraham is considered to be the ideal believer.

In conclusion

In the believing world today, the emphasis is on coming to faith. And the main question I will raise is this: what are our goals? Is coming to faith the end of the story? Is it the supreme goal for everyone to come to faith, and thus be saved?

I think we have a higher goal than "the salvation of all Israel", in which coming to faith is only the first step. Our coming to faith is not the end of the journey, but rather the beginning. From this important step onward, we must turn our faith in the word of God into a way of life. Into actions that are life-changing, life-improving, and life-giving.

The concept behind Netivyah is to show that you can believe in Yeshua as the Messiah and remain faithful to God, to the Bible, to the people of Israel, and to the Jewish traditions.

Our work is particularly important because we are the example, we are a representative sample.

The question is, how we will fare on the test?

The outcome must be success. We are committed to preserving our Jewish identity, as an authentic identity. We must be the proof that one can believe in Yeshua as the Messiah and at the same time remain faithful to Israel.

We are promised that all Israel will be saved (Romans 11). We believe that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Yeshua is the Messiah, the son of the living God.

This week's Torah portion teaches me that I must trust and believe that this is indeed what will happen. And I must work towards this goal without any question or doubt, without asking, "will this happen?" But rather, "how can I help?"

The answer is to translate faith into reality, into everyday life. To rise up and grasp that we are the representative sample, and people are looking at us. Our neighbors are examining us, they want to know what the meaning of our faith is, and where it leads us.

This test is in every aspect of our lives, from the way we behave towards each other, to our relationship to the Word of God and the Jewish tradition.

May we have a peaceful Shabbat, and may we grow stronger in our faith and in the righteousness of our path.

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