

There is so much in Parshat Vayera: the promise, the laughter, the destruction of Sodom, the abduction of Sarah by a foreign king (again). The birth of Yitzhak and the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael. So many directions to drash that after 6 years here, I have only touched on a few of them.

And all of those events occur before Genesis 22, the most mysterious and frightening of the patriarchal narratives: *akeidat Yitzhak*: the binding of Isaac.

In Genesis 22, God tells Avraham, “Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzhak and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

Avraham does not argue with God, as he did regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. He does not even feel misgivings, as he did when sending away Yitzhak. The text says he awoke in the morning (presumably this instruction came in a dream), and began packing for the journey. The text unfolds with father and son walking together, to sacrifice and be sacrificed. To slaughter and be slaughtered.

In verse 10, Avraham has Isaac bound on the altar, his own knife outstretched above him. And then angel calls out, interrupting him, commanding him not to go through with the sacrifice. Avraham looks up and sees a ram, and offers it in Isaac’s place. Hashem offers Avraham a blessing, and Avraham returns to his servants and goes home.

So many things are broken in these few verses. Avraham and Yitzhak never speak again. Avraham and Hashem never speak again. Sarah dies, according to Midrash Aggadah, when Satan tells her of Avraham raising the knife over Yitzhak.

Commentators and midrash try to make sense of this narrative. Rashi teaches that Yitzhak knew he was the sacrifice, and went with a willing heart. Bereshit Rabbah 56 says Avraham bound Yitzhak at Yitzhak’s own request, as Yitzhak was afraid that he would involuntarily kick and squirm and invalidate the offering.

If Torah is teaching us that our God does *not* demand human sacrifice, as some commentators posit, it is in the context of not being quite confident. Certainly, Avraham and Yitzhak were both willing to believe it possible. And imagining Yitzhak's willingness is small comfort to me, in the face of the heartbreak of this moment. What does it mean that a father would be ready to sacrifice his child? What does it mean that a child would be ready to be sacrificed?

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Ayelet Amittay shared this poem with our community:

Offering: Abraham, to Isaac

At the end of a long dark  
waiting, the sudden sunlight  
of laughter you were born through.  
My child but also  
a promise that the future  
would hold us. And God  
asked me—could I give up  
the singular love of my life,  
and that was you.  
Yes I would give what would otherwise  
be easily taken. But not give it  
easily. The book does not say  
that I wove you a bed from the boughs  
of the altar, that the binding  
was branch to branch to form a great  
nest to hold you. And the knife  
was my waiting made manifest—  
the sharp bite, fast, knowing  
the hesitation was the greatest harm.

God will ask the same  
of you. You name your son  
*held by the heel*. He names his son  
*one who adds*. We accrue  
our sacrifices, and the world  
is heated by the need until  
the mountains begin melting.

Waiting for willingness.  
What will you offer  
in the woven nest that will hatch  
instead of bleed, that will hold  
instead of burning?

Since hearing Ayelet's poem, I have been troubled by the thought:

What if the most frightening question about the *Akeidah* is *not* "How could Avraham have been ready to sacrifice his child?" What if it is, "To what do each of us sacrifice our children? How do we decide?"

I think about being my parents' child –the large trust I felt throughout my childhood that they cared for my safety and my future. That they would keep me safe.

And I think about my own children, how gloriously strange they are as they grow and differentiate from me, how large their imaginations and their personalities, the words they make up. The songs they make up. The way that any time I tell them to shush, any time I cut-off a round of questioning because it's really bedtime now, no more stalling, I am sacrificing part of the bond between us and the uniqueness of who they are. The impossibility of keeping them safe.

The ways we sacrifice our children's futures by our actions in the present: not only burning fossil fuels, say; or allowing democratic institutions to decay – usually because we are so focused on taking care of their needs in the present to focus on the hazy catastrophes of the future – but also the ways we must decide which of their present needs to sacrifice in a given moment.

In March of 2020, I pulled my daughter out of daycare. She spent months with very little socialization. Like many other children, her social and motor development stalled. I sacrificed her present for the hope of her future. Now, she is back in daycare, and truly thriving. But, as she is unvaccinated and with a bunch of unvaccinated children, I am quite possibly sacrificing her health and safety.

I don't share any of this to ask for reassurance about the choices I have made, and I am certainly not asking for anyone's opinion of those choices. The point is that circumstance have demanded and surely will continue to demand that, no matter what I choose, I sacrifice or risk sacrificing something of my child. I have to believe in something that makes the sacrifice make sense.

So, this year I am no less heartbroken by the *akeidah*, but I am more ready to understand Avraham and his sacrifice as an extreme manifestation of the impossibility of being the perfect parent that I would wish to be. You make your child do the thing that causes pain, in the hope that they will be stronger and more resilient in the future. You take a leap of faith.

I suspect these sentiments are familiar, not only to parents, but anyone who has ever been a caregiver, who has held the well-being of another in their keeping. The task is a sacred charge, and a constant heartbreak.

Rabbi Levi Ben Gerson, one of the medieval sages, wrote that Avraham's uniqueness was not that he was willing to sacrifice Yitzhak, but that even having decided to be willing, he was open-minded enough to hear the call of the angel to lower the knife. That he was able to walk towards the mountain, with his son, *not sure* of what was being asked, fearful that it might be the sacrifice, but hoping that another option would be revealed.

My prayer for all of us as we read the *akeidah* is that we, too, might have the profound capacity to be *not sure* about what we think we know about the future for ourselves and those we love. That like Avraham, we might be open to hope for all of the possibilities, and to see them as they unfold.

Shabbat shalom.