

## Vayera: The Akeida and the Evolution of Faith Elisheva Cohen, Class of '28

---

The *parsha* of Vayikra opens with the phrase, “And the Lord called (*vayikra*) to Moses, and spoke (*vayidaber*) to him out of the Tent of Meeting ...”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asks about the usage of both the words “called” (*vayikra*) and “spoke” (*vayidaber*). Wouldn’t just one of those suffice? The answer offered by Rashi is that the word *vayikra* signifies a call made from love. God called on Moses and asked him, with love, to teach the laws governing the sacrifices to the people of Israel. The remainder of the chapter goes into the details of the sacrifices (*korbanot*) that the Jews were instructed to perform.

The wording of this phrase came to me while reviewing this week’s Torah portion, Vayera. In this *parsha*, one of the events that we read about is the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, known as the *Akeida*. This story is one of primary importance in our religion, so much so that it is mentioned repeatedly during the High Holiday prayers.

The text begins: “And it was after these events that the Lord, Elohim, tested Abraham... and He said, take your son, your only son whom you love, Yitzchak, and go with him to Har HaMoriah and bring him there as an offering...” (Bereishit 22:1-2).

Abraham listens to this voice of God. He rises in the morning and takes Isaac to the place where he is asked to go, binds him, and lifts his knife to slaughter him. Ultimately, the voice of the angel of God rings out and tells him not to harm his son.

This story, which is foundational to our religion, is obviously troublesome. Why would a religion which purports to be ethical and moral, center around this narrative? More significantly, how could this sort of behavior be used as an ideal expression of faith? Finally, why is this what we are meant to remember on the High Holidays, the time when we are reviewing our actions and asking God for the blessings of a new year?

I propose that the power of this story lies not in its beginning but in its end. Despite his yearning for a connection with one personal divine being, Abraham was still a product of his time, a time in which human sacrifice was ubiquitous. Despite his yearning for a deeper, more evolved relationship with God, he was, at the time that he bound Isaac, still struggling with the ideas that he grew up with, wherein the sacrifice of a human being to a cruel and capricious God was normative. Abraham heard God’s call, but failed to see that the call he heard was not a genuine one. It was, rather, the voice of the outside world which he had internalized that drove him to bind his son. Until this moment, Abraham—while devoted—was still more a product of his past than his future.

But then, just as he is about to slaughter his son, Abraham hears another voice. This voice, in contrast to the previous one, is preceded by the word “*Vayikra*,” and God called. In addition, this voice is not the voice of Elohim, but rather the voice of the angel of YKVK.

Dr. Richard Middleton, a Mennonite theologian, notes that the book of Bereishit has two main themes. We are accustomed to learning about the theme that involves God’s promise to Abraham that he will spawn a great nation and his trajectory in that regard. But there is another theme here. It is the theme of Abraham’s journey

and his inner fight with his faith. According to our Sages, the Tetragrammaton (YKVK) is used to signify mercy while God's name of Elohim signifies judgment. Abraham comes from a place of Elohim. The God he believes in is harsh and cruel. (It is also interesting that a phrase used to describe idol worshippers is, "Vayaavdu elohim acherim," they worshiped other *elohim*-gods.) Maybe this last test of Abraham is not so much a test of his ability to heed God's call, but is rather a test of Abraham's ability to connect with a merciful God.

Abraham begins this process when bargaining for the city of Sodom. Dr. Middleton notes that although Abraham does this well, his task is left unfinished. He intercedes for the people of Sodom but only until the number ten. Why not ask for the city to be saved just for the benefit of Lot, his nephew? Why stop at ten? His answer is that while Abraham has begun the process of finding a merciful God, he still cannot conceive of a Being who would be that merciful. The test with Isaac is thus not a test of Abraham's commitment to God. It is rather a chance for him to fully redeem himself, shed his past, and embrace the One true compassionate God.

The story of the *Akeida* was Abraham's final test. Often, people feel that it was the final one because it was the most difficult. What, in the end, could be more heartbreaking, more trying, than the sacrifice of one's own child? But I think that it was the hardest for another reason. Perhaps in the end, the hardest thing is forcing ourselves to become who we can be. It is setting aside our preconceived notions and lack of confidence. It is disregarding the part of ourselves that tells us that we are only the product of our environments and that does not allow us to overcome our challenges—mental, physical, emotional, or psychological. For Abraham this was the test that showed that he had finally broken free of the spiritual bondage of his past and that he merited a place as the forefather of a people who would always persevere and overcome. I propose that it is this second voice that Abraham hears that we herald, and with this voice that Abraham passes his final and most trying test.

Each year we are offered a chance to rectify our own relationship with the Almighty, to improve ourselves and our relationships. It is for this reason, I believe, that this is the story that forms the cornerstone of our faith and our Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur liturgy. It is because those are the days in which we review our deeds and our past. And while our past will always be a part of who we are, it is also the season that we are given to wipe that slate clean and move into our future selves. It is a statement of our human ability to overcome ourselves—our fears, our troubles, our trauma, and move into a place of self-discovery and fulfillment.

May we be blessed with the ability to listen, to hear, and to fulfill our own true destinies.

---

*Elisheva Berman Cohen grew up in Brooklyn where she was initiated into Charedi culture at a young age. Although she always dreamed of being involved in Jewish education at a high level, the opportunity to do so was not available to her. Instead, she completed medical school and went on to have a career in forensic psychiatry. Since the COVID pandemic, Elisheva has had the opportunity to engage in Jewish learning while continuing to work as a doctor. She attends multiple classes in her community including the daily Daf Yomi. In addition, she has begun studying languages in an effort to build bridges among others and get a better appreciation for flow and prose of the Gemara. It is her hope that in becoming part of the Maharat community she will be able to integrate aspects of psychiatry with Torah learning to better serve the Jewish community and help to build peace amongst our neighbors.*