
Human Logic, God's Logic, and the *Akedah*

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A testimony to its unapproachability: after Chapter 22 of Genesis, the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac, is not mentioned again in the Five Books of Moses. Yet this event is not only one of the root causes of the disfunctionality of the families of Genesis throughout the time of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs,¹ but also is a nightmare that throws its shadow across all of Jewish history.² We try to approach this black hole in the collective Jewish soul via a new perspective: the clash between human logic and God's logic.

Human logic: $1+1=2$; cause precedes effect; a statement is either true or false. Syllogistic thinking:

1. All human beings are mortal.
2. I am a human being.
3. Therefore I am mortal.

Excise contradiction, which is reduced to a mere tool of proof. If I were not mortal, then I would not be a human being. Human logic:

Now they said: Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth! (Genesis 11:4)³

Contrast this with God's non-syllogistic logic:

¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), p. 238.

² Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: Behrman House, 1979).

³ All translations of the Torah are taken from *The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Everett Fox (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

1. God said, “Nevertheless, Sara your wife is to bear you a son, you shall call his name: Yitzhak / He Laughs. I will establish my covenant with him as a covenant for the ages, for his seed after him. (Genesis 17:19)
2. Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the set-time of which God had spoken to him. (Genesis 21:2)
3. He said: Pray take your son, your only-one, whom you love, Yitzhak, and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya / Seeing, and offer him up there as an offering-up upon one of the mountains that I will tell you of. (Genesis 22:2)

The *akedah* is the confrontation of these two modes of logic. The paradox inherent in this confrontation begins with the birth of Isaac. Sarah becomes angered at Ishmael, Abraham’s first son through the slave Hagar, and orders Abraham to drive away both Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is troubled by this demand but he is reassured by God.

Do not let it be bad in your eyes concerning the lad and concerning your slave-woman; in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice, for it is through Yitzhak that seed will be called by your (name). But also the son of the slave-woman—a nation will I make of him, for he too is your seed. (Genesis 21:12–13)

In his disputation with God concerning the fate of Sodom in Chapter 18, Abraham showed his mastery of human logic. Yet in the face of Sarah’s demand and God’s reassurance concerning the fate of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham is silent. He does not understand in human logic how a banished slave’s son could ever be elevated into a nation. But he does not judge God’s words. Abraham sends away the slave-mother and their son. He seems to trust that in God’s logic there is no contradiction between Ishmael’s expulsion and his eventual elevation into a nation. The point of view now shifts to Hagar, who has not heard God’s prophesy that her son will be the progenitor of another nation. Wandering aimlessly in the Beersheba desert, she watches her son dying of thirst. But God hears Ishmael’s cries, and God’s angel tells Hagar not to be afraid:

Arise, lift up the lad and grasp him with your hand, for a great nation will I make of him! (Genesis 21:18)

One meaning of the expulsion becomes apparent. Ishmael needs space to grow, and he can only find it away from Sarah and Abraham and Isaac. In the desert, God teaches Hagar that the expulsion is a small journey in the larger journey of Ishmael to future greatness. The human contradiction between expulsion and eventual elevation is resolved in God’s logic in the desert journey.

This contradiction foreshadows the paradox inherent in the *akedah*.

Now after these events it was that God tested Avraham and said to him: Avraham! He said: Here I am. He said: Pray take your son, your only-one, whom you love, Yitzhak, and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya / Seeing, and offer him up there as an offering-up upon one of the mountains that I will tell you of. (Genesis 22:1–2)

Abraham, in silence, hastens to carry out God's command. *Va'yashkem Avraham baboker*, we read in Genesis 22:3; "Avraham started-early in the morning." These same words used to describe the beginning of Abraham's journey to the place of offering-up with his second son are also used in Genesis 21:14 when Abraham sends away the slave-mother and his first son, thus setting up another link between the two stories.

As Rashi points out, the Hebrew word *ha'alehu* in Genesis 22:2, translated here as "offer him up," generally indicates complete sacrifice but also allows for the alternate interpretation: bring him up to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt offering but do not actually sacrifice him.⁴ Abraham interprets God's command as a command of sacrifice. He does not hesitate to carry it out even though it seems to contradict God's promise, made in the previous chapter, that through Isaac Abraham's offspring shall be continued (Genesis 21:12). As in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham does not judge God's words.

The place of sacrifice is the "land of Moriyya," Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, a three day's journey from Abraham's home in Beersheba. The text now becomes silent, like a dream. We may imagine that during this journey Abraham struggles with the apparent contradiction between God's promise of offspring through this son and the command to sacrifice this son. Perhaps Abraham acts in the faith that it is a contradiction only when it is viewed from a human perspective. And perhaps Abraham begins to suspend human logic, trusting that God's logic is different from his own. A hint of this trust comes on the third day of the journey to Mount Moriah when Abraham addresses his two servants, one of whom, according to a midrash, is the banished son Ishmael.⁵ (How could the banished son accompany the father on such a journey? Is this human logic, God's logic, or nightmare logic?)

On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Avraham said to his lads: You stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, we will bow down and then return to you. (Genesis 22:4–5)

At the same moment that Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his son, he can also say, "We will return . . . to you." Abraham, about to ascend Mount Moriah, is suspended between human logic and God's logic, where all contradictions are resolved. Father and son climb the mountain and prepare for the sacrifice. Just as Abraham is ready to slaughter his son with the knife, God's angel stops him.

Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, do not do anything to him! For now I know that you are in awe of God—you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me. (Genesis 22:12)

⁴ *Chumash with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary: Bereshith*, trans. A. M. Silbermann (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family by arrangement with Routledge and Kegan Paul, 5745 [1985]), p. 93.

⁵ L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1975), pp. 129–130.

Thus God resolves the contradiction inherent in the *akedah*. Abraham is extricated from the tangle of human logic, symbolized by the ram caught in the thicket by its horns. He sacrifices the ram and is told by the angel of the magnification of God's earlier promise:

By myself I swear—YHWH's utterance—indeed, because you have done this thing, have not withheld your son, your only-one, indeed, I will bless you, bless you, I will make your seed many, yes, many . . . ; . . . all the nations of the earth shall enjoy blessing through your seed, in consequence of your hearkening to my voice. (Genesis 22:16–18)

As the journey from Beersheba to Mount Moriah in Jerusalem is a physical ascent, so Abraham through his faith seems to be raised above the level of human logic to the level of God's logic, where all contradictions are resolved. But Abraham needs the three-day journey in order to reach this level, in order to cultivate the mindset that could accept God's resolution of the contradiction. The journey gives Abraham the space in which the breakthrough to the higher level may happen.

Is this analysis faithful to the text? Or have we been misled somehow to view it only from God's perspective? For surely God is satisfied, and as we read in a midrash, God tells Abraham that his act will be an eternal benefit to the Jewish people.

Thy children will sin before me in time to come, and I will sit in judgment upon them on the New Year's Day. If they desire that I should grant them pardon, they shall blow the ram's horn on that day, and I, mindful of the ram that was substituted for Isaac as a sacrifice, will forgive them for their sins.⁶

But what does Abraham think? What happens to Abraham that enables him to achieve his breakthrough? We feel like taking him by the shoulders and shaking him. Tell us, father Abraham, what really happened. But the text offers no clue. Language, linear human language, the language in which the *akedah* is described is incapable of conveying Abraham's internal transformation, if in fact it did occur. So it presents us with . . . silence.

In commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only one, Isaac, whom he loves, God also commands Abraham to sacrifice himself. He asks Abraham to confront and to discard the basic illusion of human existence, that Abraham, and we ourselves, can control the show. This illusion is fostered by human logic, which follows the model of Euclid's *Elements* to construct the grand edifice of human reasoning out of a few self-evident axioms: $1+1=2$; cause precedes effect; a statement is either true or false. This illusion is fostered by everyday experience until tragedy strikes, until God commands, until we confront the reality of our own powerlessness and our own death. In mathematics the first approximation to a curve is a straight line. The approximation is useful in the small but is doomed to fail in the large. As in mathe-

⁶ Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, p. 135.

matics, so in life: the first approximations to the truth—human logic, controllability—are crude and ultimately inadequate.

And after the *akedah*? Abraham seems to find enlightenment on the mountaintop. But exercising such faith does not happen without paying the price. Abraham leaves the mountaintop alone. He learns of the twelve children born effortlessly and without incident to his brother Nahor. He buries Sarah, who, as Rashi points out, died from the shock of the *akedah*.⁷ Perhaps most poignantly, after the *akedah* neither Ishmael, the banished son, nor Isaac, the almost sacrificed son, speaks with the father again. The next time the text mentions father and sons together is after the father has died.

Yitzhak and Yishmael his sons buried him, in the cave of Makhpela, in the field of Efron son of Tzohar the Hittite, that faces Mamre, the field that Avraham had acquired from the Sons of Het. There were buried Avraham and Sara his wife. (Genesis 25:9)

Although Abraham did not succeed in consummating the sacrifice of his son Isaac, the sacrifice of his immediate family in the aftermath of the *akedah* was complete. Did Abraham find enlightenment? Was the sacrifice of his family too steep a price to pay for this enlightenment, if in fact it did occur? Did Abraham feel regret? The silence of the text engages us, angers us, forces us to confront the reality of our own powerlessness and our own death, forces us to grapple with the key question: When tragedy strikes, as one day it must, will I seek refuge in human logic or will I open myself to God's infinite blinding light?

⁷ *Chumash with Targum Onkelos, Haftarah and Rashi's Commentary: Bereshith*, p. 98.