

# The Akeida and Us

Parashat Vayera, Genesis, Chapters 21-22 | October 21, 2021

In the 1950s, a remarkable exchange took place between two clergymen representing different faiths. A Roman Catholic priest in Boston by the name of Father James Walsh was intrigued by a Jewish redemption ritual called *pidyon ha-ben*, in which the father of a firstborn son, a month following the baby's birth, presents the child to a *kohen*, a priest, a descendant of Aaron. The parent then redeems the child with several silver coins given to the priest, and the child is returned to him. Father Walsh wrote to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik inquiring about the ritual's spiritual significance. Rabbi Soloveitchik could have ignored the inquiry, but instead he wrote in return, suggesting that the key to this parental rite can be found in a terrifying Abrahamic tale, one known to the priest as much as the rabbi. This letter was largely unknown for decades. Now published, (in the collection *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*, edited by Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot), it can enlighten all of us about the Bible's approach to parenthood.

Three angels visit Abraham, and after informing their gracious host that he and his wife would have a child, the Almighty's emissaries, or least two of them, turn now to the city of Sodom, intending to destroy it while also saving Abraham's nephew Lot. The entire tale of Lot is itself a striking study of a man who has been impacted by his uncle, but only partially. He too, like Abraham, eagerly hosts the angels as his guests before he is aware of their identity, illustrating that he has imbibed some of his uncle's graciousness. Yet at the same time, when a mob surrounds Lot's house demanding that the guests be given over to them, Lot offers his daughters to the mob in order to appease them—highlighting how he is clearly unqualified to serve the parental role designated for the first patriarch. It is Abraham's qualifications as a father that are the foundation of the Abrahamic election. The Almighty himself says so when he decides to discuss his decision to destroy Sodom with Abraham:

*And the Lord said: Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing;*

*Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world shall be blessed in him?*

*For I have known him, because he will command his children and household after him, that they keep the ways of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice. (Genesis 18:17-19)*

Abraham's fatherhood then is intended to ensure the perpetuation of God's path, and thereby bless the entire world. What does that tell us about fatherhood? This is a question we are called to consider as the tale continues. Isaac is born and weaned but he has an older brother, and that is a problem for Sarah.

*And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, making sport.*

*Wherefore she said unto Abraham: Cast out this maidservant and her son; for the son of this maidservant shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.*

*And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son.*

*And God said unto Abraham: Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy maidservant; in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall seed be called to thee.*

*And also of the son of the maidservant will  
I make a nation, because he is thy seed.*  
(Genesis 21:9-13)

Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. To truly appreciate this story, we turn to a somewhat unusual biblical commentator, neither a rabbi nor an academic, neither clergy nor intellectual exegete: Rembrandt von Rijn. In Rembrandt's etching of this episode, we see how Abraham regretfully forces Hagar to depart as the latter weeps. Watching from the window, Sarah seems absolutely unperturbed. Yet Rembrandt adds an element. The door to Abraham's home stands slightly ajar. There, in the shadows, the figure of a small boy can be discerned. It is the child Isaac gazing forlornly as his brother departs. Rembrandt places Isaac in the picture, well aware that it is on account of him that Ishmael is banished. Rembrandt is thus asking a question that seems to have occurred to no one else: what was it like for Isaac to see his brother, with whom he had grown up, expelled from home never to return, and to know that Ishmael was being sent away because of him?

Rembrandt thus provokes us to ponder Isaac and Ishmael's relationship. We are informed by the Bible of Ishmael's transgression: he was "*making sport*." The term in Hebrew, *metzabek*, is ambiguous, and the assumption of some rabbinic readings is that it refers to some awful action such as idolatry, and this may indeed be so. Yet the simple meaning of the text may be that "making sport" was a form of mockery, or perhaps some form of lewd behavior on the part of a teen. Read this way, a flaw in Ishmael's character may be manifest, revealing him to be an inappropriate influence on Isaac, but he is not egregiously evil.

God, however, informs the patriarch that "*in Isaac shall be your seed*." This means not only that Isaac will inherit Abraham's estate, but also that he will be the sole medium of spiritual covenantal transmission, and therefore cannot be unduly influenced by his older brother. For the future of the covenant, Ishmael and Isaac have to be separated. But Rembrandt sees in this story not the banishment of an unrepentant reprobate, but the parting between a morally problematic teen and his younger brother.

One can further suggest that it is precisely because Ishmael is *not* thoroughly evil that his banishment seems so wrong to Abraham. But the Almighty insists that the continuity of the covenant overrides Abraham's own parental love. We are, therefore, even before the story of Isaac continues, called to consider at this point the question of to whom, for the Bible, children truly belong. If there is anything of which we are possessive in life, it is our children, and yet ultimately to believe that children are the greatest gift of God is to believe that ultimately, they belong *to* God. We often ignore this in our own lives but it is true all the same: we do not own our children; they are gifts from the Almighty.

Thus, when the Divine command overrides Abraham's possessive love for his older child, this must have impacted the way he saw Isaac as well. Rembrandt hints this to us in another etching, showing an old man sadly clutching a child to himself, an image often identified as the elderly Abraham with his young son Isaac. Though this child is a miracle, nevertheless, as the artist Richard McBee puts it, Abraham's gaze,

Is a curious mixture of tenderness and paradoxical sadness...We know why he looks out at us rather than at his beloved son. We know how God will test him in the years to come. We understand how God had already tested Abraham with the promise of a son who would inherit the holy covenant with God. Abraham had been patient and was finally rewarded with his son in his old age. And yet as the boy grew, Abraham must have known that the testing was not over.

This is exactly right. What is also striking about this image is the way that Abraham, with one hand, tightly clenches Isaac to himself, thereby inspiring us to ponder how we relate to our children. The standard form of showing love to our children is through an embrace. The act is possessive in nature, drawing them close to us. I do it all the time, and the possessiveness of it is what makes it wonderful. But traditional Jews have another mode of interaction with their progeny. Many Jewish parents, on Friday evening before the start of the Sabbath meal, place

their hands on the heads of their sons and daughters and bless them. Those who see this ritual for the first time find it immensely moving, as indeed it is, but it is also the opposite of an embrace. Rather than drawing our children close, we extend our hands to them, thereby them creating distance, indicating that they belong to someone other than ourselves. Rightly understood, the act of blessing stresses first and foremost not the bond between parent and child, but rather between child and God. In the Bible, the one ritual comparable to the Jewish act of blessing is, shockingly, sacrificial in context: the worshipper in the Tabernacle and Temple, according to Leviticus, placed his hands on an animal's head before the ritual occurred, thereby dedicating the animal to God. In a similar sense, to place one's hands on a child is to acknowledge the Almighty's ownership and consecrate him or her to Divine service. The parallel between biblical blessing and sacrifice is rarely considered, but it is exactly what is raised to us in one of the most haunting of Biblical tales, which presents itself to us in Chapter 22:

*And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham, and said to him: Abraham, Abraham, and he said: Here I am.*

*And He said: Take now thy son, thy only son Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*  
(Genesis 22:1-2)

Abraham complies, bearing Isaac to Mount Moriah, binding him to an altar—giving us the traditional Jewish name for this moment: the “*Akeida*,” the “Binding.” But why does God order Abraham to engage in such an action? Here we turn to Rabbi Soloveitchik's letter to Father Walsh. “At the heart of the religious worldview,” Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote to the priest, “is the absolute ownership by the Divine of the world.” Man, as Rabbi Soloveitchik put it, is merely “a guardian in whose care the works of God have been placed as a precious charge.”

“Children,” Rabbi Soloveitchik further wrote, “are the greatest and most precious charge God has entrusted to man's custody.” But, he adds, the fact that they do not belong to us is the “irrevocable though

bitter truth.”

The *Akeida*, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, must be understood in this context. For Abraham to deserve fatherhood, he had to acknowledge that he was merely a custodian of the child for whom he had longed. Thus the Almighty's angel intervenes before the sacrifice can conclude, and God tells Abraham as follows:

*And he said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thy only son from me.*  
(Genesis 22:12)

God's intended result at the *Akeida* was not Isaac's death but rather Abraham's recognition of the true nature of parenthood, and that, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, is precisely what is recognized by Jewish parents throughout the generations in the ritual that so piqued the curiosity of the priest. I quote now only a few parts of this extraordinary letter:

The ceremonial of redemption of the first born son re-enacts the drama of Abraham offering Isaac to the Lord... The father of today, as Abraham of old, acknowledges the absolute ownership of the child by God. He renounces all his illusory rights and urgent claims to the child...When the *kohen* returns the child to the father and accepts the five shekels, he presents him on behalf of God with a new child; something precious is re-entrusted to him. The dialectical drama of Mt. Moriah consisting in losing and finding a son is re-staged in all its magnificence. After receiving the child from the *kohen*, the father must always remain aware that it was only through God's infinite grace that this infant was returned to him in sacred trust.

Abraham is exquisitely aware after the *Akeida* that Isaac lives by God's grace; and we too as parents are called to see all those we love in a similar manner; not as possessions, but as sources of obligation and sanctification. We are all

too apt to avoid the *Akeida's* relevance to us, but these passages are painfully relevant. Leon Kass, commenting on the *Akeida*, puts it this way:

Truth be told, all fathers devote (that is “sacrifice”) their sons to some “god” or other—to Mammon or Molech, to honor or money, pleasure or power, or, worse, to no god at all. True, they do so less visibly and less concentratedly, but they do so willy-nilly, through the things they teach and respect in their own homes; they intend that the entire life of the sons be spent in service to their own ideals or idols, and in this sense they do indeed spend the life of the children. But a true father will devote his son to—and will self-consciously and knowingly initiate him into—only the righteous and godly ways...By showing his willingness to sacrifice what is his for what is right and good, he also puts his son on the proper road for his own adulthood—the true test of the good father...In this sense at least, he is ever willing to part with his son as his son, recognizing him—as was Isaac, and as are indeed all children—as a gift and a blessing from God.

Ours is an age that protectively lavishes love on children. Yet as Senator Ben Sasse has noted, this has produced a generation of perpetual adolescence, a result of the:

creature comforts to which our children are accustomed, our reluctance to expose young people to the demand of real work, and the hostage taking hold that computers and mobile devices have on adolescent attention.

Sasse points to a problem in our culture. As I argued in the September 2018 issue of *Commentary* (“Bound to God”), the story of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s letter, and the traditional Jewish method of placing our hands on our children, teaches us that what we now need, perhaps, less embracing and more blessing; less possession, and more

consecration. We must consider whether our children are extensions of ourselves or given to us in sacred trust.

One of the greatest rabbinical commentaries on the sacrifice of Isaac was penned by a rabbi in a letter to a Roman Catholic priest—the rabbi’s words allowing us to understand that the teaching of the *Akeida* lives today every Sabbath eve in Jewish homes, as parents reveal in reverence and love that the ability to bless our children is itself the greatest blessing of all.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. Rembrandt's rendering of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael highlights how Isaac might have felt as he witnessed his brother cast out of the family home. At a young age, Isaac was thus made acutely aware of the sacrifices and loneliness that come with being dedicated to God. What parallels are there to other biblical figures, and what might this teach us about the nature of faith?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik frames the act of stretching out one's hand to bless one's children as an act of creating distance as opposed to intimacy. Yet, many parents experience the Sabbath blessing of their children as a moment of deep love and closeness. What might this teach us about the nature of intimacy and the partnership between parents and the Almighty in the raising and rearing of children?