



# WEEKLY PARSHA

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## A Thought on the Parsha – Killing in the Name of God?

Is it ever permissible to kill an innocent person in the name of God? Both our religious and ethical intuitions scream “no”! Halakha and Torah values consistently underscore the sanctity of human life and the injustice of allowing harm to come to innocent people, and from an ethical standpoint such an act is nothing short of murder. We only need to look at the evening news or the morning paper to see the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of lives that can be destroyed when people believe that they have a divine warrant, or worse, a divine mandate to kill for a religious cause. For us Americans, the horror of this hit home 12 years ago on September 11th, and for people in certain countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East such horrors are suffered on an almost daily basis.

How then are we to approach the story of the Akeida? This story, as presented in the Torah, is one of a great, perhaps the greatest, religious achievement on the part of Avraham: “By myself have I sworn, says the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, that I will surely bless you... and through your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have listened to my voice.” (Breishit 22:16-18). What is this achievement if not the willingness to obey God’s command even if asked to murder an innocent child in God’s name? Obedience to God trumps ethics, trumps the ethical mandate against murder. Is that the message we are supposed to take away from this story?

To begin to answer this question, we need first to recognize our religious and moral responsibilities as readers of the Torah. There are many possible interpretations of any story in the Torah. “*Shivim panim la’Torah*”, there are 70 faces to every narrative, every verse, in the Torah. As readers of a challenging story such as this, we must ask ourselves not just what it could mean, but also what possible meanings is it our obligation to underscore and emphasize, and what possible meanings is it our obligation to marginalize and even reject.

The reading that absolutely must be rejected is that we must murder innocents if God commands us to do so. That reading of the akeida story, it should be noted, is one that has been the dominant framing since Soren Kierkegaard’s book, *Fear and Trembling*. In that book, Kierkegaard frames the test of the Akeida as whether Avraham would act as a religious person, a “knight of faith” to obey God’s command even to commit an act of murder. This was the test – faith or ethics? Obedience or morality?

But this is not how the test has been understood in our tradition, and particularly not in our liturgy. The refrain in our tefillot is: “Just as Avraham overcame his compassion to do Your will with a full heart, so should Your compassion overcome Your anger against us.” That is – Avraham’s great achievement of obedience was not obedience in the face of an immoral act, it was obedience in the face of fatherly love. Avraham was being called upon to make a great sacrifice, to give up his only son from Sarah: “your one son, your only son, the one whom you love”. To serve God he could act against this all powerful emotion and he could give up what was most dear. The message then for us is that we too, when called upon by God, should be prepared to do what is most difficult, even things that require us to act against our natural inclinations. We must make hard sacrifices to serve God and to do what is right.

How then to deal with the fact that this was not only a dear thing and a difficult task, but also a human life, and hence also an act of murder? The best answer to this is to be aware that at that time such an act would not have been seen as murder, rather as a sacrifice. This idea is hard for us to grasp, but consider the analogy to abortion. Is it murder or is it a women’s right to her own body? What to one person, or in one

place, or at one time in history, may seem evil and horrific may, at another time and place, seem ethically acceptable. In Avraham's time, child sacrifice was not only a religious act, but an ethically acceptable one as well. Thus, he was not asked to perform murder, just to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Does this solve the problem? Well, no. Because if this is how we read the story, then what is our takeaway? Partly, to make sacrifices to serve God. That certainly is a message we need for our times. But also, what? That ethics are situational? If so, then perhaps our understanding that the killing of innocents is always murder is also mistaken, so again we should listen to God even to commit murder. In fact, we know that in the Middle Ages, during the Crusades, some Jews slaughtered their children, and then themselves, as a way of protecting their children and their selves against forced conversion. And they invoked the akeida when they did so. In their minds, they were replicating the test of Avraham: They were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice to serve God. Not only were they ready to do so, but they actually did so! And for them this was not murder, it was a sacrifice.

I would suggest a different reading of the Akeida story. This reading starts from the fact that Avraham's willingness not to hold back his son was not only a willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice, but also an act of faith in the face of its contradiction. Faith in God and God's promise that Yitzchak would be the future of Avraham's family and through whom all of God's promises would be fulfilled: "For in Yitzchak will your progeny be called" (21:12). Avraham was able to have faith in that promise even when God had told him to act in a way that would contravene it.

Similarly, I would suggest, Avraham was both prepared to listen to God regardless of what God would ask of him, even to take his son, even to commit murder, but he was at the same time unshaken in his belief that God would never ask him to commit murder. How did he demonstrate this? By listening to the angel. Consider: it was God who told him to sacrifice his son. So when the angel revoked this command, Avraham could have said: Sorry. I'll need to hear that from God Godself. But Avraham didn't say that. Avraham was able to hear the angel. He was able to hear

the smaller voice. Not the dominant, loud voice that said: offer your son as a sacrifice, but the small, whispering voice that said: God does not want your son. God would never ask you to commit such an act.

When we tell the story of the akeida, it is our moral and religious responsibility to emphasize the end of the story, not the beginning. To learn not that we must be prepared to murder in the name of God, but that God will never ask us to do such an act. And if it seems that God is asking us to do such a horrific deed, then we must find a way to hear the voice of the angel. We must be prepared to hear the softer voices in our tradition, even if they are not the dominant ones. The softer voices that say: "You must have misunderstood. God will never ask this of you. Go back, listen again, you will see that that is not what God meant." Rashi states this nicely. After the angel came, God in effect said to Avraham, "Yes, I said put him up as a sacrifice. You put him up. Now you can take him down."

Our responsibility as readers of the story is the same as that of Avraham at the akeida. It is to know the role that we play in listening, interpreting, and retelling the word of God. It is the partnership that we as humans have with God. It is to submit ourselves to the text, but to know that we interpret the text. It is to be prepared to do anything that God asks of us, and to know that God will never ask for us to murder in God's name. It is the obligation to hear both the voice of God and at the same time the voice of the angel. It is nothing less than Torah she'b'al Peh.

## Shabbat Shalom!

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