

# THE MISSION OF ABRAHAM: GENESIS 18:17-22:19

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Of the various incidents of Abraham's life that are related in the biblical narrative, several are of special import for this theme. One is his vehement dialogue with God regarding the impending destruction of Sodom. Another is his surprisingly silent acquiescence to the command to sacrifice his son Isaac. It will be shown that the issue that bridges these two incidents is God's concern that the ethical complexity introduced by the destruction of Sodom will impede the future mission of Abraham's descendants to teach the world that there is a God of justice. First, Abraham must be taught to come to terms with issues of ethical complexity. The elements in these verses that appear to be lacking thematic cohesion, will be demonstrated to be in fact a lesson plan of God's education of Abraham as a prelude to the solution of the larger problem. Ultimately, the entire portion can be seen as confronting a basic issue: Can a monotheistic belief in a God who desires justice and righteousness be taught in a world of perceived ethical absurdity? Between the alpha and omega of these incidents the drama unfolds to an unfathomable climax.

Our investigation begins at what I suggest is a pivotal section at the beginning of the portion. Mysterious guests, angels, inform Abraham of the impending birth of a son. They then proceed to Sodom, accompanied part of the way by Abraham. Suddenly, we are allowed to "overhear" the musing of God Himself.

וְה' אָמַר הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:  
וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיֶה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְנִצְוָם וְנִבְרָכוּ בּוֹ כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:  
כִּי יִדְעַתִּיר לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בְּיַתּוֹ אֶתְחַרְרוּ וְשָׂמְרוּ  
דְרָכַי ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא ה' עַל אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר  
דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:

*And the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him,*

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*and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him' (Gen. 18:17-19).*

Does God discuss His plans with human beings? On His part, surely no such obligation exists, even where the person is a prophet, who will teach *justice and judgment* – a criterion that has never been mentioned before. Verses 18-19 might provide us with a road map to find the answers to these puzzles.

Reference is made here to Abraham becoming *a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him*. Actually, the theme of Abraham becoming a great and mighty nation has already been pronounced earlier. In the *lech lecha* address (12:1-3), Abraham is told:

*And the Lord said to Abram, 'Get out from your country, and from your family, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you;*

*'And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing;*

*'And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you; and in you shall all families of the earth be blessed.'*

At the Covenant Between the Pieces (15:7-21), Abraham makes a connection between this destiny and the birth of a son.

*And Abram said, 'Behold, to me you have given no seed; and, lo, one born in my house is my heir.'*

*And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'This [i.e., Eliezer] shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir.'*

*And He brought him outside, and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them'; and He said to him, 'So shall your seed be.'*

This linkage is introductory to Abraham being informed of the impending birth of Isaac. All the elements for unfolding Israelite-Jewish history are in place. The stage is now set for God's concern regarding the fulfillment of Abraham's destiny. Therefore, at the climax of His musing before the destruction of Sodom (18:19), God relates Abraham's mission to his progeny in Verse 19.

What does all this mean, that the emerging great nation *shall be a blessing* and the patriarch *a father of many nations*? I suggest that this problematic verse is actually an interpretation of these blessings to the world. When God says that He knows *that Abraham will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment*, God is interpreting the goal, the nature and the process of the blessing. By doing justice and judgment, by teaching ethical monotheism, initially in his own family, Abraham will bring a great blessing to the world. *In you shall all families of the earth be blessed*, for you will actualize the great dream of worldly salvation. Abraham becomes involved in an interplay of the universal and the particular. But a dilemma presents itself, and is the basis of God's musings. The impending destruction of Sodom may be perceived as unethical: *And Abraham drew near, and said, 'Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?'* (v. 23). A paradigm of a general problem is thereby presented in relation to the mission of the children of Abraham. How can ethical monotheism be taught in a world where Divine action can seemingly appear to be not ethical? And, of course, Abraham does not disappoint God. He articulates the problem: *'Be it far from you to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, be it far from you; Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'* (v. 25).

The issue is joined. Abraham refuses to acknowledge Divine action that is (to him) unethical. He then defines his test of ethical behavior in terms of the potential for cessation of evil and the development of eventual good: As long as there are at least 10 righteous individuals in the city it should not be destroyed. Ten represents a community in microcosm. If there is at least a nominal community of righteous left in the city, then the potentiality of the smaller community influencing the larger community exists. The situation is not hopeless. And God agrees: *'I will not destroy it for ten's sake'* (v. 32).

Meanwhile, the angels had continued on to their visit to Lot and the confrontation with the population of Sodom. After accepting Lot's invitation to his home, they find themselves surrounded by the entire population of Sodom: *But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both old and young, all the people from every quarter* (19:4).

The depiction is one of total evil. Evidently, Abraham's perspective has been too naïve. There is no inner community that can influence them to change. Their fate is sealed. Furthermore, when Lot rejects their evil intent, they verbally attack him with a significant phrase: *And they said, 'Stand back. And they said again, This one fellow [Lot] came in to sojourn, and he wants to be a judge . . .'* (v. 9). This presents us with a remarkable echo, for when Lot *wants to be a judge*, he is reflecting the teachings of Abraham to *do justice and judgment*. Ethical behavior, however, is unacceptable to Sodom. To repeat, their fate is sealed.

Abraham's reaction is telling:

*And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord; And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace* (v. 27-28).

In a silent and tragic vision of defeat, Abraham sees the destruction of Sodom. His hopes had been in vain. God's judgment of the ethical issues in this instance needed no correction. Abraham's negotiations had been successful. God agreed to his terms, but his hopes were in vain. The Sodomites did not co-operate. The text then proceeds to describe educating Abraham in the metaphysical, Divine mystery of good and evil.

After the completion of the story of Sodom and Lot, we are told of the visit of Abraham and Sarah to Gerar, and their encounter with its ruler, Abimelech. After Abraham tells Abimelech that Sarah is his sister, hiding that she is his wife, *Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah* (20:2). One can assume that from Abraham's perspective a terrible violation of justice was occurring. The text shifts to Abimelech's inner experience as he dreams at night:

*But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'Behold, you are but a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife.' But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, 'Lord, will you slay also a righteous nation?'* (v. 3-4)

The terminology remarkably recalls Abraham's prayer for the welfare of Sodom, *'Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?'* Abimelech continues, and mounts a passionate defense: *'Said he not to me, She is my*

*sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother; in the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands have I done this.'*

God's response, though nuanced, appears to agree with Abimelech:

*And God said to him in a dream, 'Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; for I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.*

*'Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live; and if you restore her not, know you that you shall surely die, you, and all who are yours' (v. 6-7).*

The necessity that Abimelech have Abraham pray for him requires explanation. There appears to be a shift of burden from Abimelech to Abraham. Probably, this is not what Abraham felt. After that devastating night of possible hopeless concern for Sarah, he was no doubt filled with hate for Abimelech. For all of Abimelech's excuses, from Abraham's perspective he had no right to take Sarah without her permission. And now, God says that he must pray for Abimelech! It therefore seems that God is requiring that Abraham recognize Abimelech's perspective, not merely intellectually understand his position. What is being required of Abraham is not prayer in a perfunctory manner, but an empathic identification with Abimelech's condition so that his prayer involve honest intention that God forgive Abimelech. God is teaching Abraham a lesson in ethical complexity, far more complicated – and personal – than the matter of Sodom.

The next lesson: The biblical narrative continues with what might be called a triumphal song announcing the birth of Isaac to Sarah:

*And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac (21:1-3).*

A tragic ethical dilemma soon confronts Abraham. Before the birth of Isaac, Abraham had fathered another son, Ishmael, by Sarah's servant Hagar (at Sarah's request). With the growth of the children, however, Sarah becomes concerned about the influence of Ishmael on Isaac. To rectify the situation, she requests (demands?) that Abraham evict Hagar and Ishmael from

the household. To send a son of his away, especially without evident wrongdoing, is perceived by Abraham as a great evil: *And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son* (v. 11). God's instructions, however, are contrary to Abraham's ethical considerations: *And God said to Abraham, 'Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad, and because of your slave; in all that Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac shall your seed be called'* (v. 12).

It appears that God is instructing Abraham that this situation of future historical destiny – and the ethical dream embedded therein – takes priority over present ethical reality. Yet, a partial heavenly reversal is soon recorded. After their eviction, Hagar finds herself lost in the desert and cries as Ishmael appears to be dying of thirst: *And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What ails you, Hagar? fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad **where he is**'* (v. 17).

The phrase "where he is" is strange and superfluous, since it is enough that Ishmael's voice was heard. Rashi immediately comments: "WHERE HE IS - According to the actions he is now doing shall he be judged and not according to what he may do in the future." Rashi's note is based upon a comment in the Talmud: "R. Isaac further said: Man is judged only according to his actions up to the time of judgment, as it says, God hath heard the voice of the lad as he is there (Rosh Hashana 16b)."

Present judgment decides, according to Abraham's original ethical contention, that Ishmael can only be judged on the basis of current behavior, not future concerns. We are therefore confronted with a Divinely-wrought contradiction. When God originally instructs Abraham to listen to Sarah's concern for Isaac's future and evict Ishmael, future considerations are paramount. When saving Ishmael's life is concerned, only present considerations are weighed. Both are Divine decrees; therefore, both are correct. One, however, is on a human level, the other is a Divine prerogative. The conflict produces ethical complexity. Abraham continues to learn that ethics are multifaceted. There are levels beyond his ken and that of his descendants.

The next incident recorded in the Bible appears at first glance certainly to be thematically unconnected. The narrative returns to Abimelech, who comes with Pichal, the general of his army, to negotiate a peace treaty with Abraham. After agreeing to the treaty, Abraham rebukes Abimelech *because of a*

*well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away. Abimelech cries: 'I do not know who has done this thing; nor did you tell me, nor have I heard of it, until today' (21:26).*

Spoken like a true bureaucrat. Abimelech responds with a triple evasion: He does not know who is guilty, he is not responsible for what he does not know, and it is Abraham's fault for not informing him. Abraham's implication, though, is obvious: As the head of state, Abimelech is ultimately responsible for all that occurs in his realm. (As Harry Truman said: "The buck stops here.") Nevertheless, Abraham does not respond directly. He has learned that ethical judgments are complex indeed and often multifaceted. He has learned that on the human level, sometimes silence may be the only response.

The stage for the ultimate test is set:

*And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham'; and he said, 'Behold, here I am'. And He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you' (22:1-2).*

The ensuing narrative of the *Akedah* may be considered the pinnacle of this portion of the text. Abraham is confronted by an ultimate contradiction, if not an ultimate absurdity. After having been promised by God '*. . . for in Isaac shall your seed be called*' (21:12), God Himself now commands that Isaac be sacrificed. In addition to that, the command has thundered forth from *the Judge of all the earth*, who does right. In the past, when informed of the imminent destruction of Sodom, Abraham presumed to understand what constitutes ethical behavior, and had vehemently argued with God. Now, Abraham is silent, and obediently proceeds to carry out the Divine command. In fact, he has learned God's lessons well. Abraham now realizes that he cannot judge or even fathom the Divine will, but accepts it as a just act. He therefore acquiesces in silence, like Job generations later. The impending tragedy appears to unfold:

*And they came to the place which God had told him; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son (v. 9-10).*

In the end, Divine will, in a different command more comprehensible as just, instructs Abraham not to kill Isaac but rather to offer a substitute animal sacrifice.

*And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham'; and he said, 'Here am I.' And he said, 'Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from Me.'*

*And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son (v. 11-13).*

The angel appears to explain the purpose of the extraordinary test: '*. . . for now I know that you fear [perhaps "revere" is a better translation] God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from Me.*' The narrative has not yet reached its climax. Suddenly, we hear a second communication of the angel of God to Abraham:

*And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven the second time, And said, 'By Myself have I sworn, said the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son;*

*'That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;*

*'And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice' (v. 15-18).*

What is the need for a second address by the angel? To close the circle of cohesion in this entire portion which has been the focus of the present paper. First, this second message is in effect a repetition of the blessings and covenant at the Covenant Between the Pieces (15:5). Second, the notion that *. . . in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed* (22:18), had been articulated in the *lech lacha* address (12:2-3). Third, and for our purposes most significant, 22:18 is an echo of the theme found in God's musing on the destruction of Sodom and concern about the effect on Abraham's children: *And the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing*

*that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?' (18:17-18).*

At the *Akedah*, all previous blessings are in place, the covenant is in force, the ultimate purpose of the mission is clear. When the Midrash (*Midrash Rabbah*; *Shmot*, Ch. 15/27, etc.) refers to the 10 tests of Abraham, it is probably referring to an educational process by means of challenges. He is now ready to '*. . . command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him'* (18:19).

God permanently added the letter ם "he" to Abraham's name in order to emphasize the everlasting nature of his universal mission, to make him *a father of many nations* (17:5).<sup>1</sup> This charge is reiterated as a preamble, perhaps a condition, to the presentation of the Torah. At the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the nation formed of Abraham's progeny was given the task of becoming *a nation of ministers* [teachers] and *a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6),<sup>2</sup> to carry to the other nations the fact of the ethical justice of the Lord, regardless of our limited interpretation of history.

#### NOTES

1. See: J.B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2000) p. 105.
2. See Sforno on the verse.

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