

ABRAHAM'S MOMENT OF DECISION: ACCORDING TO LEVINAS AND REMBRANDT

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God made a commitment to Abraham: *'I shall maintain My covenant with him [Isaac], a covenant forever, and to his descendants after him'* (Gen. 17:19). Some time later, God commanded Abraham: *'Take your son, your favored son, Isaac whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you'* (22:2). At the critical moment when Abraham was about to slay Isaac, perhaps looking into his eyes, how did he consider these seemingly inconsistent messages?

Abraham knew God had promised him that Isaac would inherit his blessing and the covenant. He must also have been aware of the contradiction between a promise of everlasting life through his descendants and the sentence of death that would annihilate Abraham's future. Did it seem to him that he was faced with a test of having to choose between the two? Could he look into the face of the defenseless Isaac, hold the knife over his throat, slice the throat and see his son's blood flow over the altar?

Did he wonder whether he correctly understood the command of sacrifice? Did he ask himself: "My God is a God of mercy and justice, so can it be that Satan was talking to me?" Or: "In the past God told me to listen to the voice of Sarah. Should I have consulted her on this?" Or: "Should I have awaited further instructions?" Or: "Since God promised me that I will have descendants through Isaac, am I to believe that God will certainly resurrect him after I slaughter him?"

Rashi points to the ambiguity of *ha'alehu l'olah* [bring him up as a sacrifice] addressed to Abraham as a subtle hint of the Lord's true intention. "God did not say to him *shahtehu* [slaughter him], because the Holy One did not desire to *slaughter* him (Isaac), but only to *bring him up* to the mountain in order to prepare him as a burnt offering" (22:2).

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THE JOURNEY TO MOUNT MORIAH

No words are quoted between Abraham and Isaac during the three days on the road to Mount Moriah. On the third day, Isaac musters the courage to ask his father: '. . . *where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*' Abraham responds: '*God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering, my son*' (22:7-8). Abraham could have phrased his answer 'My son, God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering.' When he placed the words "my son" at the end, after the mention of a lamb, did he mean to imply that Isaac is to be the lamb? If so, did Isaac understand this?

When they arrive at Moriah, *Abraham built an altar there, he laid out the wood, he bound his son Isaac, he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood* (22:9). When Rembrandt depicted the Akedah in his painting "The Sacrifice of Abraham," he froze the moment in time when the angel appeared.¹ Three personalities appear in the picture; the angel representing God in the upper register, Abraham in the middle, an adolescent Isaac in the lower register. Isaac is lying on his back with his hands tied behind, his legs bent as though he were wishing he could escape. Abraham with his left hand is covering Isaac's face and with his right hand is holding the knife suspended in mid-air above Isaac's neck. Rembrandt, understanding the power of Abraham looking into his son's eyes, has him covering them. In Rembrandt's view, a loving father simply cannot look into his son's eyes and then sacrifice him or perhaps Abraham cannot have his son look into his eyes. Does this make the commandment an impossible one for Abraham? According to Rembrandt's understanding, can he depersonalise the child as "the other" by covering his face?

Light emanates from the angel who comes to speak for God. With his left hand he grasps Abraham wrist and wrenches the knife from him. Raising his right hand upright, he appears to be admonishing Abraham, perhaps ready to strike him. Abraham seems aghast. Is he relieved?

FACE

The French-Jewish philosopher Immanuel Levinas writes that Abraham looked in the face of Isaac upon the altar and he saw God. By way of Isaac's eyes God proclaimed 'Thou shalt not kill.' Thus, instead of the event being a

suspension of the ethical, it becomes the beginning of the ethical. For Levinas teaches, "The epiphany of the face is ethical."² The face of Isaac can overcome the voice of God. Abraham encountered God in the face of his child.³

According to Levinas, having seen God in Isaac's face, the second voice (that of the angel) overcame the first (that of God) and summoned Abraham back to the ethical. How did Abraham choose between God's voice commanding the sacrifice of Isaac, and an angel, a mere messenger of God, countering God's own direct command?

Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice – that is the essential.⁴

It is the human "face to face" encounter between Abraham and his son lying helpless on his back that allowed him, or perhaps even forced him, to listen to the lesser voice of the angel and overcome God's own voice. The greatness of Abraham is not his obedience but his recognizing the ethical "categorical imperative."

James Mensch writes "In my reading Levinas' assertion that 'in the access to the face there is certainly also an access to God' implies that we need not distinguish between the ethical and God."⁵ Claire Elise Katz suggests this as well; in arguing that Abraham was changed when he looked into the face of Isaac who was bound on the altar: "The staying of the hand was the continuation, or affirmation, of an action that was already set into motion; Abraham had already begun to abort the sacrifice. He has turned from sheer obedience to the ethical." For Katz, "The test Abraham had to pass was an ethical test, not a test of obedience to God. For him, the test Abraham passed was to see the face of Isaac and abort the sacrifice. Abraham had to have seen the face of Isaac before the angel commanded him to stop."⁶

Two midrashim attest to this interpretation. One states that the knife had been dissolved by the tears of the angels in Heaven before the angel stated '*lay not your hand upon the lad*' (22:12)⁷ Thus, by the time the angel appeared and spoke, Abraham no longer had the knife to slaughter Isaac. Does the disappearance of the knife suggest that Abraham could not have slaugh-

tered his son? The second midrash states that as Abraham held the knife "tears streamed from his eyes, and these tears, prompted by a father's compassion, dropped into Isaac's eyes."⁸ Abraham's focus thus shifted from God to Isaac.

NOTES

1. This picture can be seen on the website <http://www.moshereiss.org> under Messengers of God; chapter on Abraham and His Children.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 199.
3. James Mensch, "Abraham and Isaac: A Question of Theodicy," in T. Wright, P. Hughes & A. Ainsley, trans. A. Benjamin and T. Wright "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London, Routledge, 1988) p. 11.
4. Levinas, p. 77.
5. Mensch, p. 27.
6. Claire Elise Katz, "The Voice of God and the Face of the Other: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Abraham," (www.bu.edu/mzank/STR/trarchive/tr10/aar2001/Katz.html).
7. Genesis Rabba 56:7
8. Genesis Rabba 56:8



QUESTIONS FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Why does Pharaoh say *the Lord is righteous* (Ex. 9:27) at the time of the hail?
2. What purpose did the bells along the hem of the robe of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) serve (Ex. 28:33ff.) ?

**RESPONSES ON PAGE
61**