

WHY ISAAC WASN'T PERMITTED TO RESIST AT THE *AKEDAH*: LEGAL REQUIREMENT TO OBEY THE COMMAND OF A PROPHET

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Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on [the shoulders of] his son Isaac. He himself took the fire and the slaughter knife, and the two of them went on together. Isaac said to Abraham, 'Father!' 'Yes, my son.' 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' 'God will see to a lamb for the offering, my son,' Abraham replied. The two of them continued together. When they came to the place designated by God, Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood. He then bound his son Isaac, and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham reached out and took the slaughter knife to slit his son's throat (Gen. 22:6-10).

Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Genesis 22:4, suggests that at the time of this event Isaac was around thirteen years old, an age when Abraham could still force him to be sacrificed against his will. This may well be the simple meaning, the *peshat*, of the verses. However, rabbinic tradition understands that Isaac was an adult. Isaac may have been a passive personality,¹ but according to rabbinic tradition he was a full-grown adult, 37 years old, at the time of the *Akedah*.² How could he be so completely passive in the face of imminent death? Although he realized that his father was about to slaughter him, he offered no resistance. We can perhaps attribute this behavior to Isaac's absolute trust in his father: Abraham must know the correct way to worship the Lord, and so he must be obeyed. Yet in light of later *halakhah*, Isaac's obedience is hard to fathom. While hitting a parent and bruising him is a capital offense,³ if a parent is about to kill a child, the child is permitted – and is in fact obligated – to protect himself under the law of *rodef* (pursuer).⁴ Why, then, didn't Isaac try to resist?⁵ This question may seem anachronistic, as the *Akedah* took place before the Law was given at Sinai; yet, from the rabbinic perspective, Abraham was aware of all the later rules of the Torah

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and even of still later halakhic developments (Mishnah, *Kiddushin* 4:14). How did the rabbis reconcile their view that Isaac was an adult with his counter-halakhic passivity?

While reviewing the commentary of *Minhat Hinnukh* (516:1) on the legal requirement to scrupulously obey the command of a prophet, even if he temporarily suspends a positive or negative commandment (failure to do so being punishable by death at the hand of Heaven), I noticed that the commentator gives two examples: the classic instance of Elijah with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (I Kgs. 18) and "Isaac with Abraham." Indeed, the source is in the Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 89b), which discusses the case of a genuine prophet who calls for the temporary violation of a Torah law. The people are required to obey him, and the Talmud specifically mentions the *Akedah*.

Since, by all accounts, Abraham was one of the prophets,⁶ it seems reasonable that Isaac was required to obey the law of the prophet (his father Abraham). The verse itself suggests a prophecy: '*God will see to a lamb for the offering, my son,*' *Abraham replied*. Now *Minhat Hinnukh* indicates that if a person sees another disregarding the command of a prophet, he can force that person to obey, even at the cost of his own life (*kofin oto ad she-tetzei nishmato*, as per commentaries on TB *Makkot* 13b). In other words, had the two servants of Abraham been present at the *Akedah*, they too would theoretically have been required to force Isaac to acquiesce. Indeed, *Hizkuni* (quoting Bekhor Shor) indicates that the reason why Abraham had those two servants kept away from the site of the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:5) was because he feared that they might prevent him from carrying out the deed. According to this approach, Isaac can be seen as legally mandated to obey the orders of his father, Abraham.

NOTES

1. N. Lachs, "Isaac: A psychological perspective," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30:4 (2002) pp. 266-271. 2. *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8 and *Seder Olam*, chapter 1. See also *Torah Shelema*, Genesis 22:9, note 108, where other traditional approaches to Isaac's age are listed, the youngest being 25.

3. TB *Sanhedrin* 84b.

4. *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 425:10.

5. *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8 states that Isaac even asked his father to tie him up well so that he should not instinctively flinch from the knife and possibly render his own sacrifice invalid. See also Radak to Genesis 22:9.

6. Rashi, TB *Megillah* 14a; *Ba'al Halakhot Gedolot*; *Seder Olam*.