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ולא עלתה על לבי How (not) to teach the Akeidah

The conventional understanding of the Akeidah is that God tested Abraham by seeing how close he would come to slaying Isaac before being ordered to stop. We prefer to view the impending slaughter as Abraham's erroneous interpretation of his ambiguous instructions, arrived at when his prior assumptions about his mission were challenged.

Preface

The conventional approach to the binding of Isaac is inadequate for the purposes of religious education. Transforming a father's willing compliance with an ostensible divine command to take his son's life into a meritorious act is pedagogically problematic (not to mention developmentally inappropriate for the young students to whom it is generally first taught). The many classical and medieval attempts to rescue God from inciting child sacrifice still presume that that is what He wanted Abraham to believe. Concomitantly, whatever attempts were made to free Abraham of the charge of filicide still presume that for the better part of the three-day journey to Mt. Moriah that is precisely what he intended. Both attempts, therefore, beg an alternative.

Early exegetical sources rejected the implication that God desired the slaughter of Isaac. However, in submitting His actual intentions, they remained steadfast to the essence of the conventional understanding, explaining that while God did not actually desire Isaac's death, He did, nonetheless, desire to see him brought as close as possible to that state. This is epitomized, for instance, in the commentary of Abrabanel: **כי היתה הכוונה האלהית שיגיע יצחק עד שערי מות, ויחשב כאלו מת ובטל מן העולם**; i.e., "the divine intention was for Isaac to reach 'the gates of death,' to be regarded as though he were dead and nullified from this world," and in the modern traditional ArtScroll commentary: "God did not say, 'Slaughter him,' because He did not intend for Isaac to be slaughtered, but only that he be brought up to the mountain and be prepared as an offering."

We submit that this interpretation, while ultimately sparing God from the calumny of child sacrifice, does nothing to relieve the tension created by the implication that He was unconcerned by the false impression that He had created with Abraham who had to abide for three days with the erroneous impression that he was going to part company from Isaac permanently. Our alternative, which we will elicit through close textual readings, is that Abraham misinterpreted his instructions and that God acted promptly to correct his misinterpretation and prevent its implementation.

The Problem with Convention

Discomfort with the conventional interpretation of the Akeidah can be said to begin in the Bible itself with the resolute rejection of child sacrifice. The Torah cautioned the Israelites against it as a particularly repugnant practice they would observe among the Canaanites, saying, “They perform for their deities all manner of things the Lord finds detestable; they even put their sons and daughters to the flame for the sake of their deities” (Deut. 12:31).¹ Elsewhere it advises, “Let there not be among you anyone who passes his son or daughter through the flames,” placing it in the company of other such reprehensible deeds as magic and necromancy (Deut. 18:10).² The Book of Kings records as an historical fact that an act of child sacrifice perpetrated by Mesha King of Moab evoked a particularly vehement reaction among the Israelites who observed it (2 Kings 3:27).³

That middle and upper school students who encounter this explanation in a Bible class experience this very discomfort is illustrated by the following excerpt from the lesson transcript of a research project that employed this narrative and its accompanying midrashic interpretation, inter alia.

Teacher: The *akeidah* is a complicated and difficult issue... what’s difficult about the *akeidah*? Problematic?

D.R.: Losing your son.

Teacher: Stronger than that.

S.B.: Killing your son.

Teacher: ... The Problem of...?

1 לא תעשה כן לה' אלהיך כי כל תועבת ה' אשר שגא עשו לאלהיהם כי גם את בנייהם ואת בנותיהם ישרפו באש לאלהיהם.

2 לא ימצא בך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעוונ ומנחש ומכשף.

3 ויקח את בנו הבכור אשר ימלך תחתיו ויעלהו עלה על החמה ויהי קצף גדול על ישראל ויסעו מעליו וישבו לארץ.

G.W.: We don't murder. The whole thing of Hashem is, like, there were people who were sacrificing their babies... was that He was a good God.⁴

Of particular significance for our present inquiry is that on three occasions the Prophet Jeremiah disparaged child sacrifice, referring to it as something that “never crossed God's mind.”

- And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded not, *neither came it into My mind* (Jer. 7:31).⁵
- And have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt offerings unto Baal; which I commanded not, nor spoke it, *neither came it into My mind* (Jer. 19:5).⁶
- And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to set apart their sons and their daughters unto Molekh;⁷ which I commanded them not, *neither came it into My mind*, that they should do this abomination; to cause Judah to sin (Jer. 32:35).⁸

Midrash Tanhuma elaborated on the tripartite form of God's negation in 19:5, associating each iteration with a specific recorded instance in which a human sacrifice appears to have been offered, thereby rejecting the concept and undermining its credibility.

כך שנו רבותינו, "אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי" (ירמיה י"ט ה).
 "לא צויתי" לפתח שיקריב את בתו, "ולא דברתי" למלך מואב שיקריב את בנו,
 "ולא עלתה על לבי" לומר לאברהם שישחט את בנו:

So have our Sages taught...: "I have not commanded"—to Jephthah that he sacrifice his daughter (Judges 11:34 ff); "I have not spoken"—to the King

4 Deena Sigel: "Was Isaac Sacrificed in the End? Reading Midrash in Elementary School," *Journal of Jewish Education* 75 (2009), 62.

5 ובנו במות התפת אשר בגיא בן הנם לשרף את בנייהם ואת בנותיהם באש אשר לא צויתי ולא עלתה על לבי. The association of Topheth with child sacrifice led 20th century archaeologists to adopt the term to describe evidence of the practice even in as faraway places as Carthage.

6 ובנו את במות הבעל לשרף את בנייהם באש עלות לבעל אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי.

7 The service of Molekh is castigated by the Torah in Leviticus (18:21; 20:2-5) but without any accompanying description of what that service entailed. This reference to Molekh, along with that of 2 Kings 23:10, after which it appears to be patterned, are the only sources that indicate that it was a form of child sacrifice.

8 ויבנו את במות הבעל אשר בגיא בן הנם להעביר את בנייהם ואת בנותיהם למלך אשר לא צויתים ולא עלתה על לבי לעשות התועבה הזאת למען החטיא את יהודה.

of Moab to sacrifice his son; “it never crossed My mind”—to tell Abraham to slaughter his son (Vayera 40).⁹

Two later midrashic anthologies, arguably, go even further. According to Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer (31) and Yalkut Shim’oni (Gen. 22):

והקדוש ברוך הוא היה יושב ורואה לאב שעוקד, ולבן שהיה נעקד בכל לב, ושלח ידו לטל את המאכלת. ומלאכי השרת צועקים ובוכים, שנאמר [ישעיה ל"ג, ז] "הן אראלם צעקו חצה מלאכי שלום מר יבכיון". אמרו מלאכי השרת, רבונו של עולם נקראת רחום וחנון שרחמין על כל מעשיך; רחם על יצחק שהוא אדם ובן אדם, ונעקד לפניך כבהמה. "אדם ובהמה תושיע ה'", שנאמר [תהלים ל"ו, ז] "צדקתך כהררי אל משפטיך תהום רבה אדם ובהמה תושיע ה'".

The Holy One, blessed be He, observed the father doing the binding and the son being bound wholeheartedly; [the father] reaching out for the knife as the ministering angels screamed and cried... saying: Master of the Universe, You are known to be compassionate and merciful, extending compassion to all your creatures. Show compassion to Isaac who is a man and a human being, yet he is being bound before You like an animal and You are [expected] to save both man and beast...

The obvious contradiction between the talmudic-midrashic sources and the plain sense of the Torah text elicited the following comment from Don Isaac Abrabanel (Gen. 22), who, nevertheless, remained well within the perimeters of convention. We

9 The Talmud identifies the same three instances with different parts of the same verse:

Regarding the verse...: “I never commanded”—refers to the son of Mesha, King of Moab, of whom it states: “He took his eldest son who would have succeeded him, and raised him as a pyre offering.” “I never mentioned”—refers to Jephthah [who “sacrificed” his daughter]. “It never crossed my mind”—refers to Isaac son of Abraham (Ta’anit 4a).

וכתיב "אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי". אשר לא צויתי - זה בנו של מישע מלך מואב, שנאמר "ויקח את בנו הבכור אשר ימלך תחתיו ויעלהו עלה". ולא דברתי - זה יפתח. ולא עלתה על לבי - זה יצחק בן אברהם.

And yet another tannaitic midrash (Sifrei Devarim, Shof’tim 148) preserves yet a third distribution:

R. Yosi said. My son Elazar spoke of three things. “I never commanded”—in the Torah; “I never spoke”—in the Decalogue; “It never crossed my mind”—that someone would sacrifice his child on the altar. Others maintain: “I never commanded”—Jephthah; “I never spoke”—to Mesha King of Moab; and “it never crossed my mind”—that Abraham would sacrifice his son on the altar.

רבי יוסי אומר אלעזר בני אומר בו שלשה דברים. "אשר לא צויתי" בתורה; (שם) "ולא דברתי" בעשרת הדברות; (שם) "ולא עלתה על לבי" שיקריב אדם את בנו על גב המזבח. אחרים אומרים: "אשר לא צויתי" על יפתח; "ולא דברתי" על מישע מלך מואב; "ולא עלתה על לבי", שיקריב אברהם בנו על גבי המזבח.

have chosen to highlight his commentary because it was composed in light, and in consideration, of his classical and medieval predecessors.

השאלה הו'. אם היה שהשם צוה לאברהם בביאור "קח נא את בנך את יחידך את יצחק והעלהו שם לעולה", איך חז"ל מלאם לבם לדרוש, במסכת תענית, על "אשר לא צויתי ולא עלתה על לבי" אמרו: ולא עלתה על לבי, זה יצחק בן אברהם?

The sixth question is: If God clearly commanded Abraham to "take your son, your only one, Isaac, and raise him up there as a raised offering," how could the Sages, in Tractate *Ta'anit*, have presumed to offer the homily that "I did not command... it never crossed My mind," saying that "it never crossed my mind" refers to Isaac son of Abraham?

... ואמנם מה שדרשו במסכת תעניות "ולא עלתה על לבי" זה יצחק בן אברהם, הוא להגיד שלא היתה הכוונה האלהית להשחט יצחק, ושאחרי כן נתחרט הקב"ה ממנו וצוה שלא ישחטו, כי הנה מתחלת הענין לא כיון ית' על שחיטת יצחק. וכן אמרו במדרש: כשאמר לו הקב"ה (שם פרשה נ"ג) "כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע", "לא איש אל ויזב". כשאמר לו "קח נא את בנך", "ההוא אמר ולא יעשה". רצו בזה שאין המאמרים האלה סותרים, ובשניהם יתקיימו. כי היתה הכוונה האלהית שיגיע יצחק עד שערי מות, ויחשב כאלו מת ובטל מן העולם, כי בזה תשלם הכוונה כמו שביארתי. ואמנם מה היתה מחשבת אברהם בזה? אין ספק שהיתה כוונתו באמת ובתמים להעלותו עולה כליל לה'. [אבל איך נשתנה המאמר האלהי וצווי הנה יבא ביאורו אחר זה והותרה השאלה הה' והו' והז'.]

The homily that they offered... informs us that God did not [initially] intend Isaac's slaughter and that the Holy One regretted it afterwards instructing [Abraham] not to slaughter him, because from the outset God did not intend Isaac's slaughter. So, it is reported in the Midrash: When the Lord told him "your seed shall be called from Isaac," "God is not a mortal who [experiences] regret." When He told him "Take your son," "Is He one who speaks without fulfillment?" By this [the Sages] intended [to say] that the two verses are not contradictory and both would be fulfilled, because the divine intention was for Isaac to reach "the gates of death," be regarded as though he were dead and nullified from this world, whereby the intent I have described would be complete. However, what Abraham's thoughts were in this matter? Undoubtedly, he thought that he was honestly and truly supposed to offer

him completely as a burnt offering to God. [How the divine utterance and command was altered will be explained subsequently. Here we have answered the fifth, sixth, and seventh questions.]

Rereading the Sources

Genesis 22:12 reads: “[God] said, ‘Do not raise your hand against the lad, neither do anything to him. For now, I know that you are God-fearing, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.’” It is precisely at this point that the narrative unravels. We were given no prior explanation for God’s outlandish request of Abraham and now we are given no rationale for its peremptory revocation. Such contradiction calls for explanation and, indeed, one is provided courtesy of the venerable Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah* and even interpolated into some versions—but not all—of Rashi’s Torah commentary.

Here they appear—side by side and line by line—to ease comparison and contrast.

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת וירא פרשה נו	רש"י על התורה (מהדורת ברלינר)
<p>(יב) [ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער] וגו' וסכין איכן היא, נשלו דמעות ממלאכי שרת עליה ושחה, אמר לו אחנקנו, אמר לו אל תשלח ידך אל הנער, אמר לו נוציא ממנו טיפת דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה אל תעש לו מומה,</p> <p>כי עתה ידעתי עתה יידעתני לכל שאת אוהבני, ולא חשכת את בנך וגו' ולא תאמר כל חלאים שחוץ לגוף אינן חלאים אלא מעלה אני עליך כאילו שאמרתי לך שתקריב לי את עצמך ולא עיכבתה.</p>	<p>(יב) אל תשלח - לשחוט, אמר לו אם כן לחנם באתי לכאן,</p> <p>אעשה בו חבלה ואוציא ממנו מעט דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה, אל תעש בו מום.</p>

<p>אמר ר' אחא אף את לפניך שיחות, אתמול אמרת לי כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע וחזרתה ואמרת לי קח את בנך את יחידך ועכשיו את אומר לי אל תשלח ידך אל הנער, אמר לו הקב"ה אברהם לא אחלל בריתי ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק בשעה שאמרתי לך קח נא את בנך וגו' ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה כך אמרתי לך שחטוהו, לא העלהו, אסיקתיניה אחתיה.</p>	<p>[כי עתה ידעתי - אמר רבי אבא אמר לו אברהם אפרש לפניך את שיחתי, אתמול אמרת לי (לעיל כא יב) כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע, וחזרת ואמרת (שם כב ב) קח נא את בנך, עכשיו אתה אומר לי אל תשלח ידך אל הנער. אמר לו הקב"ה (תהלים פט לה) לא אחלל בריתי ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה, כשאמרתי לך קח מוצא שפתי לא אשנה, לא אמרתי לך שחטוהו אלא העלהו, אסקתיה אחתיה].</p>
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Analysis

According to the Midrash, Abraham apprised God of the contradiction inherent in His two sets of instructions. Either he is supposed to sacrifice Isaac, or not. Either his “seed” is intended to continue through Isaac, or not. Isaac’s role as Abraham’s heir, God’s instruction to “raise him up there as an offering,” and, lastly, the cautionary “do not raise your hand against the lad,” cannot all be sustained. Translated into the pedagogy of religious instruction, either we posit a primitive and ferocious God who not only appreciates child sacrifice, but sadistically watches parents agonize as they contemplate the inevitable deaths of their children, or an enlightened and benevolent God who seeks to prevent Abraham from committing an ignominious atrocity. What seems inexplicable—and, hence, inadmissible—is that He is both, simultaneously or alternately, and that we mortals are essentially incapable of distinguishing when He is which.

The objective of the bipartite midrashic comment is to reconcile the dissonant texts (pedagogical translation: the conflicting images of God.) In the first part, Abraham suggests a form of compromise: by strangling Isaac or wounding him,¹⁰ he

10 The latter distinction presumes that some shedding of blood was inherently necessary. On the notion that Abraham actually took Isaac’s life requiring God to resurrect him, see Shalom Spiegel: *The Last Trial* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1967). His thesis, briefly, is that the persecution of Jews during the First Crusade, and the many acts of martyrdom that accompanied it, inspired a reinterpretation of the Akeidah in which Isaac was cast as a willing participant whose life was actually taken by Abraham

would maintain the integrity of the initial set of instructions thereby sparing God, as it were, from self-contradiction. In the latter, God defends His original directives, arguing that Abraham has misunderstood them. “I never told you to slaughter him,” He says, “only to raise him up. Now that you have raised him up—bring him back down.”¹¹

That is precisely the heuristic opportunity we seek. If sacrificing Isaac was not God’s intention but Abraham’s misunderstanding, then we relieve ourselves of the burden of having to account for a near child sacrifice, although we do acquire an alternate challenge, namely what import to assign to a Torah narrative that is based on misinterpretation. We shall attempt to elaborate on both points.

Abraham’s Misapprehension

If we read the text closely enough, we can see the inception of this misunderstanding, something that we may have previously overlooked.

When Isaac asked his father: “Here are the fire and the wood,¹² but where is the sacrificial lamb?” (v. 7), Abraham replied: “God will see to the sacrificial lamb, my son” (v. 8). Rather than parse it cynically (God will see to the sacrificial lamb, i.e. my son), let us take it at its face value: Abraham knew that a sacrifice was implied in his instructions, but he was, at this moment, still uncertain of its identity. He knew that he was to be accompanied by Isaac (קח-נא את-בנך את-יחידך ... את-יצחק) and that,

and then restored, miraculously, by God. This is reflected in the many medieval Ashkenazic liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) that have become a fixture of the high holy days’ penitential prayers (*selihot*). Similar reinterpretations (minus the ingredient of resurrection) were evoked in Israel by some modern crises—including the War of Independence in 1948, the Six-Day War of 1967, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973—as described by Avi Sagi: “The Meaning of the Akedah in Israeli Culture and Jewish Tradition,” *Israel Studies* 3:1 (1998), pp. 45-60.

- 11 Up and down from where? Some medieval exegetes (in line with the declaration of Abrabanel with which we opened this chapter) assumed it was the altar. (Cf., e.g., Bekhor Shor: והוא לא צוה רק להעלותו על-גבי המזבח, ומשהעלהו גמר ועשה מצוותו של הקב"ה [God] commanded him only to raise him upon the altar and, having raised him, he fulfilled God’s instructions.) I am submitting an alternate interpretation: God commanded only that Isaac be brought atop the mountain and could now be brought back down.
- 12 I once heard Professor Uriel Simon explain that the absence of a reference to the carving knife in Isaac’s question supports the assumption that we are dealing with a young Isaac—rather than the 37 year-old man of the Midrash—since a child or youngster would likely be so frightened at the sight of the knife that he would essentially deny its existence.

together, they were to travel to the land of Moriah (ולך-לך אל-ארץ המוריה) where, together,¹³ they were to offer a sacrifice. (והעלהו שם לעלה)

The assumption that God used deliberately ambiguous language in addressing Abraham was anticipated by Gersonides (Ralbag; Provence, 1288-1344), who wrote:

נסה הוא מעניין נסיון, ועניין זה הנסיון לפי דעתי היה שבאתהו הנבואה בלשון מסופק; והוא שאמר אליו ה' ית' על יצחק "והעלהו שם לעולה." וזה המאמ' יתכן שיובן שיזבח אותו ויעשהו עולה, או שיעלה אותו שם להעלות עולה, כדי שיתחנך יצחק בעבודת הש' ית'. ועשה אותו הש' ית' אם יקשה בעינינו לעשות שום דבר שיצוהו ה' עליו, עד שיהיה זה סבה אל שיבין מזה המאמר זולת מה שיובן ממנו בתחלת העיון. ר"ל שיובן ממנו שיעלה שם עולה אחרת לא שיזבח בנו.

Nissah is related [philologically] to *nissayon* [a test]. The subject of this test, in my opinion, was that this prophecy came to [Abraham] in ambiguous terms. God told him, apropos of Isaac: "Take him up there for an offering," which can be understood as [either] to make him the offering, or to bring him up there to make an offering, in order that Isaac should be educated in the Lord's service. God did so [to determine] if he would find it difficult to do anything that God had commanded him to the extent that he would give it an interpretation other than the one [most readily] perceived at the outset; namely, that he was to raise up something else as an offering and not that he was to sacrifice his son.¹⁴

It is, arguably, at this moment that Abraham's mental construct began to unravel. Until now, he understood Isaac's company as the object of the exercise, not as its subject. God wanted him to instruct Isaac, who was nearing his majority (see notes 12 and 18), in the sacrificial order and that, of course, is why he outfitted himself with the wood, the fire, and the knife. When they arrived at the appointed place and, contrary to his expectation, no sacrifice presented itself, Abraham began to rethink his instructions.

God told me to take my son. I replied: I have two sons. He said: The one who is an only child. I replied: Each is an only child to his mother. He said: The one you love. I replied: I love them both. He said—somewhat impatiently—I mean Isaac. So here I am with Isaac. Then he said: Take yourself to the Land

13 The repetition of "together" aims to replicate the Torah's repetition of יחדו, with its concomitant implication that Isaac, along with Abraham, is to perform the sacrifice—not to be it.

14 This is consistent with Gersonides's pronounced inclination towards rational analysis. He consistently maintained that if the literal sense of a verse defies reason, it simply cannot be thus understood..

of Moriah... to one of the mountaintops I shall designate. Here we are on a mountaintop in Moriah-land, equipped with wood and fire to conduct a sacrifice.¹⁵

The only instruction that appeared, at that moment, to be either ambiguous¹⁶ or ambivalent¹⁷ was **לעלה שם והעלהו**. Whereas Abraham had previously understood it to mean “raise him [Isaac] up there *to make* an offering,” implying that one would be provided providentially (as per Gersonides), in its absence, he now entertained the possibility that it was meant to signify “raise him [Isaac] up there *as* an offering.” Whereupon, he bound him, raised him upon the altar (v. 9),¹⁸ and seized the knife to slaughter him (v. 10), only to be constrained by God from carrying out his apparent intent.¹⁹

The Denouement²⁰

God now intervened, cautioning Abraham neither to raise his hand against Isaac nor to do him any harm, “for *now* I know that you are God-fearing.” The telltale *now* has sparked significant commentary, largely of the apologetic variety, as exegetes strove to explain how God’s perception of Abraham could become different from what it had been previously, without negating His omniscient foreknowledge.

Sa`adyah translated the *kal* form **ידעתי** (I knew) as though it were the *hiph`il* **הודעתני** (I made known),²¹ and it was treated similarly by Rashbam: **ונתפרסם לכל** (it has received worldwide publicity) and Bekhor Shor: **להודיע לכל** (to

15 Based upon the Midrash and Rashi, ad loc.

16 I.e., of two uncertain meanings.

17 I.e., of two intentional meanings.

18 According to Professor Simon (n. 11), this, too, is more indicative of a younger, teen-aged Isaac than of a middle-aged man. It is difficult enough to imagine a 113-year-old Abraham lifting up a 13-year-old Isaac, let alone a 137-year-old lifting a 37-year old!

19 Whether Abraham was defaulting here to contemporary convention depends on whether the practice of child sacrifice was normative at that time. Scholars of the ancient Near East and archaeologists are divided in their assessments, as summarized by Heath D. Dewrell in *Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2017), chapter 2: “Archaeological, Iconographic, and Epigraphic Evidence for Child Sacrifice in the Levant and Central Mediterranean,” p. 37 ff.

20 Since it was only at the last moment—and only momentarily—that Abraham mistakenly assumed Isaac to be the sacrificial victim, we can dispense with the various speculations regarding his failure to protest his instructions here as opposed to his vigorous protestations of the fate of Sodom.

21 And he is so cited by Ibn Ezra (vs. 1): **כטעם הודעתני גם מלת ידעתי והגאון אמר שמלת נסה: הראות צדקתו לבני אדם**.

publicize it to all). Ibn Ezra, citing anonymous “rationalists” (אנשי שיקול הדעת), offered the distinction between two types of knowledge: that which has yet to come to pass (דעת העתיד בטרם היותו) and that which is already in existence (דעת היש), a distinction echoed by Ramban, who distinguished between knowledge in the potential (בכח) and the actual (במעשה).²²

From our perspective, however, the use of *now* is transparent; there had been an innovation. Abraham, unable to come to terms with the nonappearance of the implicit sacrificial victim, had erroneously decided that it was to be Isaac and was consequently prepared to slaughter him. It was this decision that prompted God to call a halt to the exercise and to proclaim Abraham “God-fearing.” According to the Midrash, God’s singular affection for and relationship with him had been publicly justified by his singular act of devotion and that, implicitly, is why the Torah narrated the episode in the first place.

From our perspective, again, an alternate moral comes to the fore. The Torah elected to emphasize to us how God prevented Abraham from making his son the victim of his mistaken interpretation of his instructions; he had no right to make Isaac pay the price of his erroneous exegesis. If we are ever in a like situation, uncertain what God wants of us, however laudatory it might be to sacrifice ourselves on His behalf, we earn no encomia by offering to sacrifice others.

The Substitution

There is additional support for our interpretation from the continuation of the story. After God enjoined Abraham—in verse 12, on which we have been focused—from carrying out his intention, “Abraham looked up and saw a ram entangled by its horns

The Gaon [Sa` adya] said that *nissah* means to reveal his righteousness to mankind. Also “I knew” means “I made known.”

This is, essentially, the opinion of *Bereishit Rabbah*, as well: “יידעתני לכל”; you have made me known to all.

22 A singular approach to the challenge of “now” was offered by R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz in the *K’li Yakar* (ad. loc.):

אין כל לשון עתה ממעט הזמן הקודם לו, שהרי מצינו (דברים י', יב) ועתה ישראל מה ה' שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה, וכי קודם זה לא שאל ממנו היראה אלא שהוא כאילו אמר והנה ישראל, כך עתה ידעתי כאילו אמר הנה ידעתי.

Not every use of “now” excludes the past tense, as we have found “Now Israel, what does the Lord expect of you but to fear [Him]” (Dt. 10:12). And was that not His expectation previously? Rather it is as though he had said “Behold, Israel.” So it is with “Now I know;” it is as though he had said “Behold, I know.”

on the far side of a bush. Abraham went and took the ram and raised it up as an *`olah* instead of his son” (v. 13).

Was the ram’s proximate presence fortuitous? No; according to a striking rabbinic tradition, it was Providential. A Mishnah (no less) reports that “Ten things were created on the [original] Sabbath’s eve at eventide” (Avot 5:6), one of which was “the patriarch Abraham’s ram” (ואילו של אברהם אבינו). Overlooking the hyperbole—by the time of the Akeidah, the ram would have had to be over 2,000 years old, not to mention able to breathe underwater if, indeed, Moriah-land was subjected to the flood—the least amount of time it needed to have been stationed there was just before Abraham’s arrival. In other words, when Isaac asked, “Where is the sacrificial lamb?” the answer could have been: “Right over there,” as Abraham had anticipated, according to our reconstruction. His inability to see it, however, was due to its having become entangled by its horns on *the far side* of a bush (אחר נאחז בסבך) rendering it invisible to Abraham. However, his subsequent ability to locate it argues that had he made even a slightly greater initial effort, he would have espied it right away, offered it as a sacrifice,²³ and who knows whether the entire episode would ever have come to our attention.

This yields yet another didactic moral: Do not give up on your intuitive sense of a verse’s plain meaning before examining the problem from the other side as well.

A *Haskamah* from the Brisker Rav

Our stipulation, namely that God’s instructions were ambiguous and Abraham misinterpreted them, finds additional support in a rather unlikely place: a characteristically hairsplitting homily—apropos of our verse and Rashi’s commentary thereupon—by Rabbi Yitzhak Zev Halevi Soloveitchik (1886-1959) of Jerusalem, known as the Brisker Rav.

חידושי הגר"ז סימן לז

וירא (כ"ב, יב) כי עתה ידעתי וגו'. ופירש"י אמר ר"א א"ל אברהם אפרש לפניך את שיחתי, אתמול אמרת לי כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע וחזרת ואמרת קח נא את בנך ועכשיו אתה אומר לי אל תשלח ידך אל הנער, אמר לו הקב"ה לא אחלל

23 Bekhor Shor resolved another—albeit relatively minor—dilemma. He pointed out that, ordinarily, Abraham would have regarded the ram as someone else’s misplaced property and declined to use it. However, אחר שנאחז בסבך בקרניו, ידע כי אות הוא שיקחנו ולצרכו נאחז שם. He took its entanglement as a [divine] sign that it was detained there for his use.

בריתי ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה, לא אמרתי לך שחטוהו אלא העלהו, אסקתיה אחתי' עכ"ל.

"Now I know." Rashi explained: R. [Aba] said, Abraham said to Him, 'Let me set forth my case. Yesterday You said to me that "through Isaac shall your seed be called." Then you said, "Take your son." Now You say, "Do not raise your hand to the lad." God replied: I will not violate My covenant, neither shall I contradict Myself. I never told you to slaughter him, but to raise him up. Now that you have raised him up, take him down.

וצ"ב למה לא פירש שיחתו מיד כשאמר לו "קח נא את בנך"? ואמאי המתין עד שנאמר לו "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער"? ובפשטות צריך לומר דמיד כשנצטווה, הלך מיד לקיים המצוה, דזריזין מקדימים למצוות, ולא שאל וחקר איך זה. ואחרי ככלות הכל, נתפנה ופירש שיחתו. ועוד צ"ב דלפ"ז דלא נאמר לו רק להעלותו ולא לשחטו; וכי אברהם טעה בזה? הרי בנבואה נאמר זה, ונביא יודע ומבין מה שמדברים אליו.

This requires elaboration. Why did he not put his case forward as soon as He told him "Take your son"? Why did he wait until he was told "Do not raise your hand to the lad"? In all simplicity, we must say that the moment he was commanded he went to obey his orders since "the alert perform *mitzvot* expeditiously" without asking and examining it at all. Afterwards, he had the leisure to set forth his argument. Another clarification is needed that he was not told to slaughter him but to raise him up. Could Abraham have misunderstood this? It was told him prophetically and a prophet understands what he is being told.

והנראה דאברהם ידע שלא נצטווה רק להעלותו לעולה בלבד, אלא מכיון שנעשה לעולה ממילא מדין הקרבן להיקרב ע"ג המזבח, והנפ"מ בין אם נצטווה לשחטו ובין אם חיובו לשחטו רק מחמת דין קרבן שעליו הוא, אם אחר"כ מאיזה סיבה לא היה יכול להקריבו דאם היה מצווה לשחטו הרי לא קיים המצוה, דאונס רחמנא פטרא, אבל "קיום" לא הוי, אבל אם נצטווה רק לעשותו עולה בלבד וממילא הוא דמחוייב להקריבו, הרי שפיר קיים המצוה, דהמצוה (הציווי) לא היה רק לעשותו עולה, וזה עשה. וכאן אברהם היה אנוס בהקרבתו דהא נאמר לו: "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער" ושפיר קיים המצוה דהא העלהו. וזהו שהשיב הקב"ה קיימת המצוה "אסקתיה ואחתי'".

It appears, then, that Abraham understood that he was only commanded to raise him up as an *olah* sacrifice; however, [he assumed] since [Isaac] had been designated an *olah*, he was automatically required to be sacrificed on the altar. The consequence of whether he was commanded to slaughter him, or whether the requirement for slaughter derived only from his legal status as a sacrifice, is if afterwards—for whatever reason—he was unable to sacrifice him. If he had been commanded to slaughter him, he would have failed in his observance of what he was commanded; but God overlooks accidents even though there would have been no “fulfillment” [of the command]. However, if he had only been commanded to designate him an *olah*—and the requirement for slaughter would be only automatic—he would clearly have fulfilled his commandment which was only to designate him an *olah*, and that he had accomplished. Here, Abraham was forcibly constrained from slaughtering him because he was told “Do not raise your hand against the lad,” while he had clearly fulfilled his commandment by raising him up. Therefore, God replied, you have fulfilled the mitzvah; “you have raised him up, now take him down.”

ויבואר ג"כ השאלה הראשונה. ונקדים פעם שאל חסיד אחד אותי, מה זה אתם המתנגדים מפלפלים תמיד בקושיות. בתורה כתוב כך יהי כך, ומה לכם להקשות? ובאמת במידה ידועה צדק, אלא שיש בזה גבולים ומבוארים בברייתא דרבי ישמעאל בב' כתובים המכחישים זה את זה. ומשום דכאן אמרה תורה כך, ושם אמרה אחרת. וגזירת הכתוב הוא. אבל כשמצינו כתוב שלישי, אזי אדרבה מצווים אנו מן התורה לחקור ולדרוש על ב' הכתובים ולהכריע. ולפ"ז מבואר שפיר, דכשמע אברהם ב' כתובים המכחישים, "כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע" ו"קח נא את בנך יחידך", לא שאל וחקר על זה, משום דקודם היה הציווי כך. אבל לאחר ששמע כתוב שלישי, מיד נתנה לו הרשות לחקור ולברר את ההכרעה בין ב' כתובים והמכחישים, והוא "אסקתי אחתי". (בשם הגר"ח).

The first question is thereby clarified as well. As a prologue [let me report] that I was once asked by a Hasid why we Mitnagdim constantly split hairs. If the Torah says so, let it be so; why do you keep raising questions? To a certain extent, he was correct, save that this matter has boundaries set out in the *baraita* of Rabbi Yishmael as “Two verses that contradict one another” because the Torah says this, while elsewhere it says that. This is Scripture’s prerogative. However, when we find a third verse, we are obliged by the Torah to examine and investigate those two [contradictory] verses and decide. Thus, it becomes

clear: When Abraham heard the two contradictory verses: “through Isaac shall your seed be called” and “take your only son,” he neither asked nor investigated this because the initial instruction still stood. However, once he heard the third verse, he was immediately entitled to investigate and clarify the determination between the two contradictory verses, which amounted to “you have raised him up, now take him down.”

An Instructional Postscript: The Testing

The question of how this episode constituted a test of Abraham lies at the heart of the philosophical consternation we alluded to in regard of the telltale “*now I know*” of verse 12. Ordinarily, a test is administered to ascertain something not previously known. Given God’s omniscience, however, that definition fails in this instance; hence, the speculation regarding the distinction between potential knowledge and actual knowledge drawn by Ibn Ezra and Ramban, cited above. Similar speculation accompanies the commentaries of these (and other) exegetes to the word *nissah* (נסה) in the opening verse.

Whereas many students (and even their teachers) may find the philosophical approach complicated and unproductive, I have found that the same results can be obtained by substituting a simple philological analysis of the usual English synonyms for “test.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun “test” derives from the Old French for an earthen vessel in which gold or silver was treated. This concrete meaning yielded the more abstract sense of the means or process by which the quality or genuineness of something could be determined. It is in this latter sense that it makes one of its earliest appearances in Hamlet: “Bring me to the test” (III: iv, 133). “Prove,” another borrowing from Old French, is defined, primarily, as producing evidence or argument for determining the truth of anything. “Tempt,” too, has the general meaning of to put to the test, and to “examine” is to judge or appraise according to a standard or criterion.

A cursory examination of several English translations of Genesis 22:1 is illuminating in this regard.

- 1382 Wycliffe Bible: Aftyr that thes thingis weren doon, God *temptide* Abraham
- 1611 King James: And it came to pass after these things, that God did *tempt* Abraham
- 1917 J.P.S.: And it came to pass after these things, that God did *prove* Abraham

- 1962 J.P.S.: some time afterward, God put Abraham to the *test*²⁴
 - 1983 Everett Fox: Now after these events it was that God *tested* Abraham
 - 1996 ArtScroll: And it happened after these things that God *tested* Abraham
 - 2004 Robert Alter: And it happened after these things that God *tested* Abraham
- Clearly, the 1917 JPS translation—“prove”—stands out. I submit that it is also outstanding. A curious lexical property of “prove” is that it can mean both the process and the product, as in “the *proof* of the pudding is in its eating,” “the exception that *proves* the rule,” “*proving* grounds,” where weapons are taken to be tested, or the “*proof*” of arithmetic calculations and alcoholic beverages.

The consequence is that “prove” is the ideal translation of *nissah*, since it conveys both the sense of God testing Abraham, and God displaying the results of that test—corresponding to both Sa’ adyah’s equation (in v. 12) of the *kal* ידעתי with the *hiph`il* הודעתה, as well as with the anonymous interpretation cited by Ibn Ezra (in v. 1) equating *nissah* (נִסָּה), to test, with *nissa`* (נִשָּׂא), to elevate. The ArtScroll translation (cited just above) even takes this duality into account in a note: “The Midrash derives נִסָּה, tested, from נִס, a *banner*, that flies high above an army or a ship. Hence the verse would be rendered: And God *elevated* Abraham...” The reference is to Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah* 55:1 “You have provided those who fear You a banner to unfurl” (Ps. 60:6; נִס לְהַתְנוּסָה לִירֵאִיךָ נָתַתְּ), and constitutes yet another indication that the Sages were uncomfortable with what had already become the normative interpretation and were subtly providing hints at alternative explanations—such as our own.

That middle and upper school students are “able to reflect on its use of symbolism—in the guise of the metaphorical flag—and to consider its message regarding Abraham” is illustrated by the following excerpt from the aforementioned research project:

G.M.: That Avraham could be a higher authority.

B.T.: The flag symbolizes something very important. So does Avraham ...

A.P. We raise the flag.

Teacher: ... raising ... he was put at higher heights.

B.W.: Let’s talk about greatness! [enthusiastic tone]

E.L.: The flag, like, it’s a whole different idea.²⁵

24 In their explanatory notes, the Committee for the Translation of the Torah wrote: “Trad[itional] “prove” in the sense of test was already sufficiently obsolete in 1904 for Driver to explain it... “i.e., put to the test.” Harry Orlinsky (ed.): *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1969), p. 97.

25 Sigel, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

In Conclusion

We began with the stipulation that the conventional understanding of the binding of Isaac; namely, that in order to determine the extent of Abraham's devotion God was intent upon testing how close he would come to taking Isaac's life, is incompatible with biblical law and lore and unsuitable for religious education. In its stead, we offered an interpretation grounded in both classical Midrash and medieval exegesis that, in combination, tell a very different story.

In order to demonstrate Abraham's meritorious character and, hence, his worthiness to be "the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5), God gave him a deliberately ambiguous instruction: "and take him up there for an *'olah*" (22:2). Abraham's preparations and procedure indicated that he initially understood God to mean that he should ascend the mountain along with an adolescent Isaac in order to initiate him in the rite of sacrifice. Indeed, when questioned by Isaac about the arrangements, he replied, in all candor, "God Himself will choose the lamb for the *'olah*" (22:8). However, when they reached the summit and no lamb presented itself, Abraham revisited his instructions and arrived at the erroneous conclusion that Isaac was to be the sacrifice.

God called a halt to the proceedings²⁶ and, lo and behold, a ram appeared—horns entangled on the far side of the thicket—and "Plan A" worked out after all. Indeed, the rabbinic tradition that assigns the ram's creation to the primordial Friday at sunset can be interpreted as an indication that had Abraham but sought it a bit longer or more thoroughly, he might never have had to put Isaac at jeopardy. The didactic moral of our story: Do not make our children the victims of our mistaken exegesis. The insinuation of other, more morbid, motives may have been initiated due to certain historical circumstances (i.e., the First Crusade) and can be set aside without doing any exegetical damage to the narrative itself.

26 The fact that the divine angel had to call out to him twice to get his full attention suggests that Abraham was so intent upon implementing his ad hoc version of the binding that he dismissed the first call as wishful thinking.

Appendix: An Unorthodox View of Maimonides on the Akeidah

In the introduction to the Guide, Maimonides wrote:

This work has also a second object in view. It seeks to explain certain obscure figures [parables] which occur in the Prophets and are not distinctly characterized as being figures. Ignorant and superficial readers take them in a literal, not in a figurative sense. Even well-informed persons are bewildered if they understand these passages in their literal signification, but they are entirely relieved of their perplexity when we explain the figure, or merely suggest that the terms are figurative. For this reason, I have called this book Guide for the Perplexed.²⁷

In his commentary on Genesis 18:1, Nahmanides disputed Maimonides's view of Abraham's encounter with the three angels. While Maimonides, in the Guide (2:42), explained that the entire episode had transpired in a prophetic vision, Nahmanides argued that the amount of particular detail provided in the Torah narrative is indicative of a realistic occurrence more so than of a visionary one.²⁸ In passing, he made the same argument about Jacob's nighttime struggle with "a man" on his return from his Aramean sojourn (Genesis 32:25). Maimonides maintained that it was a vision (op. cit.), while Nahmanides argued that if that were the case, why would Jacob end up limping?

Maimonides's penchant for treating ostensible historical narratives as parables should not be misunderstood as dismissive of their religious significance. As Micah Goodman has observed:

Maimonides determines that although many of the biblical stories did not actually take place in reality, they are all still true—because the lessons that emerge from their parables are true. If an event is historical, then it is something that happened in the past; if it is a parable, then it is a story that also "happens" in the present and the future. Turning story into allegory by placing it in the category of prophetic vision strengthens its meaning and transforms it from an isolated event into a universal truth.²⁹

27 Ed. M. Friedländer, 2.

28 "כי מה תועלת להראות לו כל זה?"

29 Micah Goodman: *Maimonides and the Book that Changed Judaism* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2015), p. 33.

In that same introduction, Maimonides also suggested that there are more stories that are actually parables than those he dealt with explicitly.³⁰ This has led to considerable speculation among medieval interpreters of Maimonides and modern scholars. Most commonly, this speculation has been attached to the stories of Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden. Uncommonly, it has attempted to attach itself to the Akeidah.

Avraham Nuriel, in an essay entitled “Parables that are not identified as such in the Guide for the Perplexed,”³¹ made three arguments for regarding the Akeidah as just such a parable.

1. In his discussion of tests (Guide 3:24, above), Maimonides made it clear that the importance of the Akeidah lies in its appearance in the Torah more so than its historicity, since at the ostensible time of its occurrence it was not witnessed by anyone other than the participants. That being the case, it would not matter whether it transpired in historical time or was only in a prophetic vision.
2. God’s address to Abraham on the mountain, as well as those of the angel, qualify as prophecy according to Maimonides’s definition of the same. Why not include the actions they accompanied?

One individual may be taken as an illustration of the individuals of the whole species. From its properties we learn those of each individual of the species. I mean to say that the form of one account of a prophecy illustrates all accounts of the same class. After this remark you will understand that a person may sometimes dream that he has gone to a certain country, married there, stayed there for some time, and had a son, whom he gave a certain name, and who was in a certain condition [though nothing of all this has really taken place]; so also in prophetic allegories certain objects are seen, acts performed—if the style of the allegory demands it—things are done by the prophet, the intervals between one act and another determined, and journeys undertaken from one place to another; but all these things are only processes of a prophetic vision, and not real things that could be perceived by the senses of the body. Some of the accounts simply relate these incidents [without premising that they are part of a vision], because it is a well-known fact that all these accounts refer to prophetic

30 In 2:42, Maimonides explicitly named the episode involving Balaam’s speaking donkey as a prophetic vision, and several of his interpreters (including Shem Tov Falqera and Ephodi) extended that to Jonah’s whale as well.

31 “משלים ולא נתפרש שהם משל במורה הנבוכים”, Da` at 25 (1990), pp. 85-91.

visions, and it was not necessary to repeat in each case a statement to this effect (Guide 2:46).³²

3. Regarding other strange prophetic activities, Maimonides explicitly rejected the proposition that God could have commanded them to actually commit actions that were either dissolute (Isaiah going about naked) or in violation of Torah Law (Ezekiel shaving his beard). In fact, in his elaboration on this point, Maimonides invoked an episode involving Abraham himself.

It was in a prophetic vision that he saw that he did all these actions which he was commanded to do. God forbid to assume that God would make his prophets appear an object of ridicule and sport in the eyes of the ignorant and order them to perform foolish acts. We must also bear in mind that the command given to Ezekiel implied disobedience to the Law, for he, being a priest, would, in causing the razor to pass over every corner of the beard and of the head, have been guilty of transgressing two prohibitions in each case. But it was only done in a prophetic vision. Again, when it is said, "As my servant Isaiah went naked and barefoot" (Isa. xx, 3), the prophet did so in a prophetic vision. Weak-minded persons believe that the prophet relates here what he was commanded to do, and what he actually did, and that he describes how he was commanded to dig in a wall on the Temple mount although he was in Babylon, and relates how he obeyed the command, for he says, "And I digged (sic) in the wall" But it is distinctly stated that all this took place in a vision.

It is analogous to the description of the vision of Abraham which begins, "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying" (Gen. xv, 1); and contains at the same time the passage, "He brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now to the heaven and count the stars" (ibid. v. 6). It is evident that it was in a vision that Abraham saw himself brought forth from his place looking towards the heavens and being told to count the stars. This is related [without repeating the statement that it was in a vision] (Ibid).³³

If Abraham's execution of the "covenant among the pieces" could be a parable—and it comprises his commission of acts that are, in and of themselves, just unusual—why not his performance of the Akeidah, whose literal understanding would involve express violations of Torah law, as we have indicated in our critique of the conventional interpretation.

32 Ed. Friedlander, p. 245.

33 *Op. cit.*, p. 246.