

## *The Binding of Isaac*

By: MOIS NAVON

The binding of Isaac—*akeidat Yitzhak*—stands as the ultimate sacrifice of man before God, as the pinnacle of man’s quest to reach the divine. Yet, for all that, it is fraught with what might be called the greatest religious conundrum of all time. At the center of the event, and that which grates on our mind as much as it tears at our heart, stands the ultimate violation of natural morality—the killing of an innocent person, a son, a unique son, a beloved son. Why would God command, or even request,<sup>1</sup> such an act? Why would Abraham comply? What are we, the inheritors of this legacy, to learn from all this?

These are questions that man has grappled with since the time of the very act itself. How does this narrative continue to hold our attention, remaining ever unresolved, leaving us ever in awe? R. Soloveitchik explains that, “Man is a dialectical being; an inner schism runs through his personality at every level. . . . Man is a great and creative being because he is torn by conflict and is always in a state of ontological tenseness and perplexity. The fact that the creative gesture is associated with agony is a result of this contradiction, which pervades the whole personality of man.”<sup>2</sup> It is precisely because we are dialectical beings that the knife of the akeida cuts right to our very core, forcing us to confront the meaning of our existence, using all of our creativity to make sense of the act and, ultimately, of our own lives.

I offer this essay as a personal attempt to grapple with the dialectical act of the akeida, the dialectical act that is life itself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The language God employs is solicitous—“*ain na ela lashon bakasha*”—see San. 89b, *Pesikta Zutra* (Gen 22:2), Rashi (ibid.), *Panim Yafot* (ibid.).

<sup>2</sup> R. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” *Tradition*, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge the indispensable discussions I have had with Dr. Steve Bailey, Professor Sam Fleischacker and my son Eitan Navon.

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## Part I

### Natural Morality

There are fundamental mores of human conduct, acts that man qua man simply knows innately to be right or wrong. We refer to this as natural morality. The Talmud makes reference to this notion in discussing the source of the seven Noahide laws.

The children of Noah were commanded seven precepts: to maintain social laws, not to blaspheme, not to worship idols, not to practice sexual immorality, not to murder, not to steal, not to eat the flesh of a live animal. ... And from where do we know this? R. Yohanan said, "From the verse: And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat'" (Gen. 2:16). "Commanded" refers to social laws ..., "Lord" refers to the prohibition of blasphemy ..., "God" refers to the prohibition of idolatry ..., "the man" refers to the prohibition of bloodshed, "saying" refers to the prohibition of sexual immorality, "from all the trees" refers to the prohibition of theft, "you may eat freely" but not of the flesh of a living animal. (*Sanhedrin* 56b).

"Obviously," notes R. Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein (*Torah Temimah*, Gen. 2:16, n. 39), the intent of the Talmud cannot be that the seven laws commanded to the children of Noah are learned from this verse stated to Adam in the Garden of Eden! Rather, the Talmud wishes to articulate the belief that these elementary laws were the accepted norm amongst all the nations of the world. R. Shmuel Keidar (*Torat Obel*, Vol.1, pp. 52-53) writes that these basic laws of morality were imbued in man at the outset of creation, part and parcel of the "image of God" (*tzelem Elokim*) in which man was created.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, argues R. Keidar, if these fundamentals were not part of man's moral makeup, how could Cain be held accountable for killing his brother?<sup>5</sup>

At the bedrock of natural morality lies the prohibition to take another person's life. The story of Cain and Abel, which introduces the violation of this most basic law, teaches that only an explicit command, and not innate moral conscience, can compel man to moral action.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, God commanded Noah (i.e., universal man) in the telling formulation, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the

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<sup>4</sup> See also Ran (Introduction to *Sefer Ha-Mafteah*); *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* (Gen. 7:1; Deut. 30:11).

<sup>5</sup> See also *San.* 56b: "[God] does not punish without first prohibiting."

<sup>6</sup> See R. Berkovits, "God, Man and History" (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2007), ch. 11.

image of God (*tzelem Elokim*) made He man” (Gen. 9:6). Man is told explicitly that he will be held accountable for murder for he is a moral being created in the image of the moral God.

In linking man’s morality to that of God’s, the verse attests to the fact that the morality commanded by God is incumbent upon God no less than it is incumbent upon man.<sup>7</sup> The Midrash Aggada (Gen. 9:6) explains that “one who commits murder diminishes the divine image.” Would not the divine image be diminished all the more if God Himself committed murder?! If there were some doubt in our mind regarding God’s fealty to this most basic prohibition, Abraham took up the issue with God Himself regarding His decision to destroy Sodom: “Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:25). God answers Abraham not as He did Job, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand” (38:4). Rather, God acknowledges the veracity of Abraham’s appeal and affirms that He will not sweep away the righteous with the wicked—He will not commit murder.<sup>8</sup>

The following two quotes from R. Lichtenstein make the point most emphatically:

Benjamin Whichcote, the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonist, pointed out, one cannot ask, ‘Shall, then, the judge of the whole earth not do justice?’ unless one assumes the existence of an unlegislated justice to which, as it were, God Himself is bound. (*Leaves of Faith* [NJ: 2004], Vol. 2, p. 34).

[T]he Jewish position is absolutely unequivocal. We indeed hold that God’s will, His being, is moral and rational; that He does act, and will, in accordance with certain standards. By virtue of His very essence, certain things not only shall not, but cannot, be willed by Him. God and moral evil are simply incompatible. (*By His Light* (Alon Shevut, 2003), p. 108).

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<sup>7</sup> The Midrash (Ex. R. 30:9) states explicitly that God is not like mortal kings who command but do not themselves obey, rather God is the first to be beholden to His commands.

<sup>8</sup> The Midrash (*Sekhel Tov*, Gen. 18:32) makes clear that God did not kill any innocent person in Sodom, explaining that Abraham argued down to 10 innocent people because he figured that Lot and his wife, along with their 4 daughters and sons-in-law, would be ten people, enough to justify saving the whole of Sodom. God, however, informed him that only Lot and his two engaged daughters were righteous and thus, as “individuals,” as opposed to an “*edab*” of ten, they could not justify saving the entire town. Instead, these 3 innocent people were removed from the town (as described in the following chapter [19]) leaving only the wicked to perish.

### The Akeida

Having confirmed that God is beholden to the same moral conduct that He expects of man, we then arrive at the pivotal moment when God, in apparent violation of everything we know to be true about God and morality, asks Abraham, “Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Gen. 22:2).<sup>9</sup> Abraham remains silent. Suing for justice would have been redundant; Abraham had already confirmed that he was dealing with the “Judge of all the earth” Who *will* do justice. And so he gets up in the morning to do the will of his Creator.

Abraham walks—for three days—to Mount Moriah. Rambam (*Guide* 3:24) points out that this was time spent contemplating the act, that it not be said that it was done recklessly.<sup>10</sup> The Midrash (*Yal. Sh. Vayera* 99) has Satan placing numerous physical obstacles in Abraham’s way. Yes, Abraham had the same thoughts of turning back that we have. Yet Abraham continued. On his way he passes through the valley of Ben Hinom where pagans are sacrificing their children to the Molech god. He, certainly no less than we, is struck by the equivalence. The Midrash (*Ber. R.* 56:4) has the Satan asking Abraham, “Are you out of your mind?! Tomorrow they will call you a murderer!” Yes, Abraham had the same pangs of conscience that we have. Yet Abraham continued.<sup>11</sup>

Upon climbing the mountain, Abraham prepares to carry out the will of his Creator. He draws the knife, raising it in determined trepidation. The universe shakes in fear and trembling. And then, at precisely the moment when God and morality are about to be dashed on the altar, a heavenly voice rings out, “Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me” (Gen. 22:12).

We are dumbfounded. We walk down from the mountain numbed in confusion. What are we to make of what just happened?

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<sup>9</sup> R. Wurzbarger, *Covenantal Imperatives* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008), p. 77, calls the akeida “the most blatant illustration of a conflict between what is commanded by God and what man perceives as moral.”

<sup>10</sup> In this vein, Kierkegaard notes that the three and a half day journey was longer for Abraham than the two thousand years separating us from the event, *Fear and Trembling* (NY: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard notes this dilemma as the anxiety of the temptation of the ethical, as will be explained further on in Kierkegaard’s approach.

## **Solutions:**

### **Kant**

Kant (1724–1804) is well known for resolving our quandary by adjudging Abraham’s act as utterly indefensible, indeed, completely immoral.<sup>12</sup> In his “The Conflict of the Faculties” Kant writes unequivocally:

But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God’s; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God’s command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.”

Kant thus upholds the proposition that God is a wholly moral being, incapable of violating so basic a norm as murder; rather, it is Abraham who violated a “categorical imperative.”

As neat a solution as this is, there are two points that force its rejection.

First, the text of the narrative does not bear out such a proposition.<sup>13</sup> The conclusion to the story does not fault Abraham for any wrongdoing. On the contrary, Abraham is blessed by God: “By Myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to My voice” (Gen 22:16–18).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See R. Wurzburger, pp. 22, 77.

<sup>13</sup> This, while of little significance to one like Kant who is not interested in reading out of the text, is of significance to those who are trying to understand the message of the text.

<sup>14</sup> Worthy of note in this context is that Jewish tradition holds Abraham’s act to be the pinnacle of piety, the narrative being read as part of the Rosh Hashanah service, as well as part of the daily liturgy.

Second, this approach reduces religion to a handmaid of ethics.<sup>15</sup> That is, instead of God being the originator of ethics, it is man, who by his reason alone, determines what is ethical. Man is to accept only, according to Kant, divine commands that accord with his rationality. In his words, “the true and only religion contained only such laws ... of whose absolute logical validity we may become aware ourselves ... [and] which we therefore acknowledge as revealed by pure reason.”<sup>16</sup> Now while there is room, even a need, to hold that God’s commands are reasonable, by no means does this mitigate the need for God to be the originator of ethics; for, explains R. Berkovits, “a law instituted by a will of relative authority [i.e., man] admits of compromise for the sake of expediency; the law of absolute authority will not be overruled by such considerations.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Kierkegaard**

Kierkegaard (1813–1855) took, what might be called, a religious approach; indeed, for Kierkegaard it is “the” religious approach.<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard defined three realms within which man chooses to act: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Man in general grapples with the temptation to act according to the aesthetic in opposition to the higher calling of the ethical. Kierkegaard proposes, however, that there is a yet nobler battle, waged over the temptation to act according to the ethical in opposition to the higher calling of the religious. To act according to the religious requires a leap of faith, one that calls for the suspension of the ethical—i.e., to fulfill the will of God even at the expense of the ethical.

Kierkegaard posits that this movement of faith is made on the strength of the absurd.<sup>19</sup> He held that Abraham acted out of a faith in the absurd notion that he would in fact return with his son alive: “All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded.”<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Kierkegaard was preceded by R. Elimelekh Weisblum of Lizhensk (1717–1787) who said precisely this: “In truth, Abraham and Isaac knew that it was not God’s intention to slaughter him. Abraham ...

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<sup>15</sup> R. Berkovits, p. 119. R. Wurzbürger, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> R. Berkovits, p. 106. R. Wurzbürger (p. 79) writes, “Anscombe (“Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Journal of Philosophical Studies* 33, 1958) has pointed out, reverence for the moral law hardly makes sense without a divine lawgiver.”

<sup>18</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (NY: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

was driven by his faith that the two of them would return, as it says, ‘we will pray and return.’ Nevertheless, they both went in complete devotion (*mesirut nefesh*) as if they would in fact perform the slaughter.”<sup>21</sup>

Abraham was both a moral being and a God-fearing individual. Upon being confronted with an unethical divine command he experienced the great temptation to act ethically. Yet, through unshakeable resolve, Abraham placed faith before ethics and carried out the supreme, absurd though it was, will of his Creator. In so doing, explains Kierkegaard, Abraham earned the title “knight of faith” for expressing his willingness to do anything for God.

By vindicating Abraham, Kierkegaard allows for a smooth reading of the text; for as noted earlier, the narrative ends in Abraham’s praise and blessing. However, we are still left wondering how a moral God could command an immoral act. Furthermore, we must ask ourselves: Is it really man’s *telos*, his ultimate goal and purpose, to suspend the ethical? Is the ultimate religious figure a moral person who carries out an immoral command at divine behest?

### Divine Morality

The solution of either Kant or Kierkegaard, while each having elements that Judaism ascribes to, is untenable as a complete response. R. Wurzbarger explains, “To be sure, since God is not merely the supreme power but also a morally perfect being, His commandments must be moral. Hence, obedience to His commands is a moral requirement. . . . Abraham was not merely a ‘knight of faith’ but a knight of morality as well, inasmuch as he was prepared to set aside all considerations of natural sentiments and inclination in order to fulfill his supreme moral duty – i.e., to obey the highest-possible moral authority. As long as he was certain that the command to sacrifice his son truly emanated from God, he was morally, and not merely religiously, obligated to abide by this divine imperative.”<sup>22</sup>

In this approach, Abraham is vindicated not by “suspending the ethical” but by following through to the utmost in ethics. God is a moral

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<sup>21</sup> Noam Elimelekh (*Vayera*).

<sup>22</sup> R. Wurzbarger, p. 24. Similarly R. K. K. Shapira writes, “. . . You are the God of truth; He, may He be blessed, is truth, and there is no truth outside of Him. All the truth in the world is [true] only because so God commanded and willed. . . . And when God commanded our father, Abraham, to bind up his son Yitzchak, then it was the truth to bind him. Had He not said to him afterwards, ‘Do nothing to him,’ it would have been the truth to slaughter him” (*Eish Kodesh*, p. 68).

God, indeed He is the source of all morality and hence any act He commands is by definition moral. This approach resolves the second problem noted in Kant's approach—i.e., that religion is the handmaid of ethics. Religion (i.e., God) is not subservient to the rationality of man, but quite to the contrary, man is utterly subservient to the will of God. Yet herein lies the weakness of this approach, because now man is rendered, as it were, incapable of determining what is ethical. What he thought to be basic morality is now found to have been turned on its head.

R. Wurzbürger understood this and explained, "It is one thing to assert that all divine imperatives are moral and another to claim that *only* what is commanded by a divine imperative can be morally good."<sup>23</sup> That is, we are to believe with perfect faith that everything commanded by God is moral, but that does not preclude us from relying on our own moral conscience in the absence of an explicit divine command.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, R. Wurzbürger explains, "There is nothing to prevent a theist who regards the will of God as the supreme normative criterion from maintaining that, in the absence of conflict with a revealed divine norm, we ought to do ... whatever is perceived to be morally desirable."<sup>25</sup>

As such, the akeida does not come to negate our innate moral sense, nor the morality we learn through the commands of the Torah. Rather, it is to stand as a paradigm of man relinquishing his moral will in deference to the divine moral will; for, be that what it may, it is by definition moral. Abraham understood, notes R. Wurzbürger, that "conflicts between moral duties and divine commandments must be treated as cases of conflict between different types of moral obligation."<sup>26</sup>

This approach resolves one of our difficulties with Kierkegaard; for, whereas Kierkegaard held Abraham's obedience to God to exist outside the ethical, R. Wurzbürger includes it within the ethical. Nevertheless, we are still left with the following problem: the akeida, ethical though it may be, remains at odds with natural morality. In the words of R. Berkovits,

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<sup>23</sup> R. Wurzbürger, p. 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> It should be pointed out that even an "explicit divine command" found in the Torah may provide only a baseline of morality which, in the fulfillment of the imperative to "do what is right and good," might be developed to a higher morality (see Wurzbürger, p. 71). See also R. N. Lamm, "Amalek and the Seven Nations: A Case of Law vs. Morality," in *War and Peace in the Jewish Tradition*, ed. by Schiffman and Wolowelsky (NY: YU Press, 2007); and R. N. Rabinovitch, "The Way of Torah," *Edab* 3:1.

<sup>25</sup> R. Wurzbürger, p. 24; Similarly R. Amital <<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/values/02b-morality.htm>>.

<sup>26</sup> R. Wurzbürger, p. 302.



“It is difficult to accept the idea that God could have elevated what is now called evil to the dignity of the good.”<sup>27</sup>

### Suspension of Judgment

The solution to the various problems mentioned, indeed to our whole inquiry, may be found in what R. Soloveitchik called “the suspension of judgment.”<sup>28</sup> According to Kierkegaard, for the extraordinary to occur, one needs to make a leap of faith, a leap based on entertaining the absurd. I propose that the absurd notion that Abraham entertained was that the command itself would not contradict natural morality.<sup>29</sup> And, whereas Kierkegaard explained that Abraham made the leap of faith by the suspension of the ethical, I propose that Abraham made the leap of faith by the suspension of judgment. That is, since Abraham knew that the command emanated from a moral God he could not argue that it went against natural morality and so he accepted that he simply couldn’t understand it.<sup>30</sup> “Yet Abraham continued.” Abraham suspended judgment.<sup>31</sup>

R. Lichtenstein explains that this is precisely the approach one must take when confronted with a dilemma like the akeida: “I do not judge God. I assume, a priori, that ‘His deeds are perfect, for all His ways are just; a faithful God, without iniquity, righteous and upright is He’ (Deut. 32:4). If He commands, ‘Take your son and offer him as a sacrifice,’ then it must be good (in a sense which perhaps, at the moment, I do not understand).”<sup>32</sup> All of God’s commands partake of “goodness”—moral goodness—not just because God said so, but because they emanate from the God whose “ways are just.” As such, one must recognize that he

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<sup>27</sup> R. Berkovits, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> R. Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey* (NY: Ktav, 2008) p. 190.

<sup>29</sup> This is a refinement of Kierkegaard’s “absurd” that claimed “God would not demand Isaac.”

<sup>30</sup> See R. Ezra Bick, “Between Rambam and Kierkegaard,” *Daf Kesher* 530, *Vaera* <<http://etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/530daf.htm>>.

<sup>31</sup> It is important here to note that I purposely chose not to call this “suspension of reason,” or “suspension of rationality.” There is still reason at work here; Abraham has made a very rational and reasoned decision to suspend judgment. He determined, through prior encounters, that he knows this God to be omnipotent, omniscient and most importantly, wholly moral; as such, his decision is not irrational. He merely defers judgment. Nevertheless this does require a “leap of faith” because Abraham cannot understand the command and must place his faith in God.

<sup>32</sup> R. Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, p. 124.

simply does not understand. One must accept the absurd. One must suspend judgment.

So essential is this ability to suspend judgment that R. Soloveitchik describes it as “the basis of faith”: “I remember that once I was studying Talmud with my father. I asked him why the Talmud did not resolve the problem under discussion in so many cases. Instead the Talmud concludes with the phrase *teiku* [‘stalemate’]. Why was no conclusion reached by the Talmudic sages? My father explained to me that a Jew must apprehend that he cannot understand and comprehend everything. . . . In matters of faith, *teiku* will also be encountered. The greatness of Abraham, our forefather, was that he knew how to say ‘Here I am’ (Gen. 22:1) even though he did not understand the request that God made of him. The basis of faith is *teiku*. If a Jew does not master the concept of *teiku*, then he cannot be a true believer.”<sup>33</sup> It is by virtue of this acceptance, this suspension of judgment, that Abraham made his leap of faith that earned him the title “Knight of Faith.”

This “suspension of judgment” solution, I suggest, resolves the difficulties inherent in the akeida. First of all, God will not command something that goes against natural morality. Rather, He may command something that appears to conflict with natural morality.<sup>34</sup> It is at junctures like these that we must accept that the command is moral—in accord with natural morality—for it emanates from a moral God.<sup>35</sup> Second, as a consequence of this first proposition, we can say that Abraham did not act immorally, nor did he need to suspend the ethical in order to achieve faith. Rather, he had to entertain the absurd notion that what appeared to be a command that violated natural morality would not, in reality, so violate it.

It should be noted that this “suspension of judgment” solution maintains a significant benefit over the “divine morality” solution and the “suspension of the ethical” solution. Admittedly, in practice, all demand of the believer to act against his own morality; nevertheless, theologically we have gained worlds. For in the “divine morality” case, the believer acts knowing that he is violating natural morality, having but the faith that he does so within the dictates of a God who defines a super-morality. This solution maintains little more than a semantic edge over the “suspension of the ethical” solution, as the “divine morality” believer merely calls moral that which Kierkegaard acknowledges is patently immoral. On the

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<sup>33</sup> R. Aaron Rakeffet ed., *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Vol. 1, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Natural morality is by definition that which man understands as moral; nevertheless, there could be times (like at the akeida) that man must accept the absurd, that what he understands to be counter to natural morality will somehow not result in a violation of natural morality (like at the akeida).

<sup>35</sup> See also fn. 24.

other hand, with the “suspension of judgment” solution the believer acts with the faith that the act cannot violate natural morality for he knows that his is a God beholden to natural morality.

## Part II

### Development of Faith

Having examined Abraham’s superlative movement of faith, it should be clear that one does not, cannot, and indeed, should not, arrive at the mountaintop in a single bound. Rather, there is a need for a process of developing faith. It is important to examine this development of faith to appreciate both the veracity and the applicability of the suspension of judgment.

### Ten Tests

According to the Midrash (*Ber. R.* 39:1), Abraham first became convinced of the existence of a Creator by force of the teleological argument—i.e., design must have a Designer.<sup>36</sup> God then came to Abraham with the explicit directive “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee” (*Gen.* 12:1). In leaving his homeland, Abraham took the first step toward entering into a relationship with God, willingly accepting the difficulties inherent in emigration<sup>37</sup> (though the difficulties at this stage were admittedly offset by both the promise of pioneering a new world order and God’s promises for success).<sup>38</sup>

The call to leave hearth and home was the first of ten tests through which Abraham developed his relationship with his Creator (*Avot* 5:3).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See also Rambam (*Hil. Avoda Zara* 1:3).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, R. Behayei (introduction to *Parshat Lekh Lekha*).

<sup>38</sup> *Gen.* (12:2-3); see also Rashi (*Gen.* 12:2).

<sup>39</sup> While there are various listings of the tests, I follow that of Rambam (*Avot* 5:3): (1) God tells Abraham to uproot his family and move to the land of Canaan, (2) but upon doing so he is faced with a famine. Forced to leave Canaan he arrives in Egypt, (3) whereupon his wife is taken from him. Upon Abraham’s return to Canaan, his nephew is taken captive and (4) Abraham is forced to go war to retrieve him. (5) His beloved wife does not bear children and he is forced to take an Egyptian concubine. (6) Upon reaching the elderly age of ninety-nine, he is told to circumcise himself. (7) In the land of Canaan his wife is abducted. (8) Later he is forced to banish the concubine with whom he had developed a relationship, (9) as well as his son through her—whom he held to be his inheritor. (10) And ultimately he is asked to offer the son of his dreams on the altar.

These experiences provided Abraham the grist to grind out his faith—learning to accept the absurd—step by step. He was told to go to a new land but then forced to leave it; he was told he would have children but then found his wife to be barren. Despite this and more, he persevered in his mission, both out of a sense of purposive commitment to an invaluable lifework and out of an unshakeable belief in the God who chose him. Then, at the age of ninety-nine, Abraham was brought into a formal covenant that required, in the words of the Radak, “the irrational” operation of circumcision as a physical symbol of his faith.<sup>40</sup> To accept circumcision at age ninety-nine in anticipation of siring a child is to accept the absurd.<sup>41</sup> And the tests of absurd allegiance continued—the wife who was to facilitate the blessing of being exceedingly fruitful was taken captive; later, Abraham was forced to expel the child he thought to make his heir.<sup>42</sup> And finally, the akeida, in which he was to kill the very son promised to carry on his legacy.

The Mishna (*Avot* 5:3) teaches that through these experiences Abraham evidenced his great love for God; a love demonstrated by accepting the absurd without questioning God’s ways.<sup>43</sup> In test after test, Abraham experienced God<sup>44</sup> and so developed his relationship with God. With each test of increasing difficulty, Abraham’s devotion was deepened through unquestioning submission.<sup>45</sup> And while clearly there is no great value in thoughtless veneration, the point is that as one develops his relationship with God, one develops love and one develops faith. The greatest

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<sup>40</sup> Radak (Gen. 17:1, s.v. *hithalekh*).

<sup>41</sup> Radak (Gen. 17:1) explains that Abraham is old and weak and the circumcision will only weaken him further, yet thus the “wonder” of siring a son will be all the greater. Similarly *Toldot Yitzhak* (ibid.). R. Hirsch (Gen. 17:1, p. 295) writes that Yitzhak is “an absurd impossibility.”

<sup>42</sup> “Would that Ishmael live before You” (Gen. 17:18); see commentaries ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See Rabbeinu Yonah, Rashbatz, *Tos. Yom Tov* (on *Avot* 5:3). Similarly *Midrash Aggada* (Ex. 6:3).

<sup>44</sup> The term test (*nisayon*) also means “experience” and is taken as such—“The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe ... it is but an example for our instruction and guidance” (Rambam, *Guide* 3:24). See also Ramban (Ex. 20:17); R. Beḥaye (Ex. 13:17); R. Y. al-Ashkar (*Avot* 5:3).

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, though God opened the first test with the “incentive” of various benefits, each of the following tests seemingly undid the promises, as will be explained.

demonstration of love—to do the will of another without question—is here the greatest demonstration of faith.<sup>46</sup>

### Three Directives

Of the ten tests, three come in the form of an explicit divine directive: emigration, circumcision, and akeida.<sup>47</sup> These three events are turning points on the pathway of the ten tests to developing faith. The directive to emigrate, as mentioned, was the beginning of faith, a relatively small personal sacrifice carrying with it great promise.<sup>48</sup> But as difficult as emigration was, the two directives that followed asked far more from our knight of faith.

God approaches Abraham to enter into a covenant, symbolized by circumcision, with the words: “I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be thou wholehearted (*tamim*). And I will make My covenant between Me and thee” (Gen. 17:1-2). The Beit ha-Levi writes that, “wholeheartedness (*temimut*) implies that one must fulfill the will of the Creator without investigating why the command is such.”<sup>49</sup> In accepting circumcision, Abraham entered into an eternal covenant with God wherein he agreed to perform God’s will without question. Appropriately, the symbolic enactment of the covenant, sealed as it was in the blood of his foreskin, was a *hok*, an act done solely because God commanded it. That is, the cutting of the

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<sup>46</sup> This is particularly true for Abraham whose primary trait and connection to God was “love”—“Abraham my Love” (Isaiah 41:8). That is, his faith was expressed in his love. Heschel writes, “Reverence for the authority of the law is an expression of our love for God,” (*The Wisdom of Heschel* (Farrar, 1986), p. 250). R. Berkovits: “by *doing* the will of God, [man] is enabled to enter a relationship with the divine” (p. 122). Also S. Bailey, *Kashrut, Tefillin, Tzitzit* (Aronson, 2000), pp. 110-111, who notes that love of God is expressed in performing His will.

<sup>47</sup> I purposely avoid the term “command” here in order to avoid the “master-slave” connotation; for these divine communications were rooted in a desire to develop a relationship of love and awe.

<sup>48</sup> Though I refer to the move as a small sacrifice, the *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* (Gen. 12:7) notes that the *tikun* of the sin of Adam was effected already in Abraham’s emigration.

<sup>49</sup> Gen. 17:1, s.v., second entry “*ve-hithalekh*.” See also Alshich (Gen. 17:1, s.v., *hithalekh*), Ramban (Gen. 17:1, s.v. *hithalekh*), R. Hirsch (Gen. 17:3), Ibn Ezra (*ibid.*). So too the Midrash (*Ber. R. 46:2-3*) depicts the command as one simply demanded by God.

foreskin does not bear, in any direct rational sense, on the covenant itself.<sup>50</sup>

Appropriately, R. Hirsch (Gen. 17:10, p.301) explains that the circumcision itself symbolizes unquestioning allegiance: “With the cutting away of the foreskin the whole body receives the stamp of submission to the spirit carrying out the Divine Law of morality.” It is this act of submission, of deferring to God’s will against one’s own rationality, that characterizes the true movement of faith. Indeed, it is this act of circumcision that is seen to counter, or “repair,” the faithless act of Adam in the Garden of Eden.<sup>51</sup> There, Adam chose to reject God’s will because it went against his own rationality; here, Abraham chose to accept God’s will despite the fact that it went against his own rationality.<sup>52</sup> There, Adam demonstrated that he would be governed by his own subjective will; here, Abraham demonstrated that he would be loyal to the objective demands of the Creator.

But Abraham had even further to go: “And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: ‘Abraham’; and he said: ‘Here am I.’ And He said: ‘Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.’” The akeida demanded more than anything that preceded it. Whereas previously Abraham was asked to endure the upheaval of emigration and the pain of circumcision, now the akeida demanded that Abraham give up everything, his entire lifework, his entire life—with no promises.<sup>53</sup>

Not only would he have to give up his son, the beloved son he prayed would carry on his legacy, but he would have to give up his own moral sense—**not** because he was willing to commit the immoral by suspending the ethical, and **not** because he was willing to commit the immoral because God made it moral, but because he was willing to suspend judgment and accept the absurd possibility that the command would not conflict

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<sup>50</sup> R. Keidar (p. 142) explains that the commandment of circumcision is unique in that it is the decree of the King that counters Abraham’s rational sense. See also fn. 40.

<sup>51</sup> Abarbanel, Gen. 17, s.v., *u-nemaltem*; *Sefat Emet*, *Vayera* 657; R. Keidar, p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> The Midrash illustrates the difficulty Abraham had in accepting the command due to its incomprehensibility through the imagery of Abraham seeking advice if he should perform the act, ultimately being told by Mamre that he must submit since God had proven Himself to Abraham, *Mid. Tanhuma* (Warsaw), *Vayera* 3.

<sup>53</sup> Rambam (*Guide*, 3:24); R. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” *Tradition*, p. 36.

with natural morality.<sup>54</sup> R. Soloveitchik explains: “The man of faith, animated by his great experience, is able to reach a point at which not only his logic of the mind but even his logic of the heart and of the will, everything—even his own “I” awareness—has to give in to an ‘absurd’ commitment.”<sup>55</sup> This is Abraham at the akeida.

In the akeida Abraham found the ultimate movement of faith and, as such, Abraham truly found God.<sup>56</sup> He had started at the bottom of the mountain with his move away from home, away from comfort, toward an absurd unknown at the behest of God. He moved slowly up the mountain until he was able to make the commitment to God on his very body. This act of faith was significant for in it Abraham demonstrated his willingness to perform the absurd simply because God asked it. With the commitment in his heart now sealed in his flesh he was well on his way to the top of the mountain. At its peak he found that he must forgo everything he held dear—even his own “I” awareness—in absurd commitment to the God he knows to be the Creator of, not only the physical but, more importantly, the moral.

The development of faith is the process of accepting God. The development of faith starts in small steps of commitment and ends in a great leap moved by the suspension of judgment. The leap is made not blindly but with eyes closed in love, in awe, in faith.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> To be clear, there is a fundamental difference between accepting God’s command, which appears to conflict with natural morality, as “good” because God said so, versus accepting God’s command because one has faith that the command in fact does not contradict natural morality. In the former instance, one abdicates judgment and simply accepts that what God is commanding is moral (e.g., murdering Isaac is moral); in the latter instance, one suspends judgment, effectively saying that, though this command appears to run against natural morality, I have faith that God would never command against natural morality, so I will not presume to judge God, I will carry out His command with the faith that ultimately it will become clear that God does not command against natural morality (e.g., murdering Isaac was somehow not the intent).

<sup>55</sup> R. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 60-61.

<sup>56</sup> This finding of God is also the finding of oneself as R. Soloveitchik writes: “The religious act begins with the sacrifice of one’s self, and ends with the finding of that self. But man cannot find himself without sacrificing himself prior to the finding” (*Divrei Hashkafa*, ed. Moshe Krone (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1992), pp. 254-255).

<sup>57</sup> God does not demand blind faith or absurd acceptance in the sense that it “outrages reason” (to use the term of a well-known atheist). Rather, God asks for faith, even if one cannot, momentarily, make sense of the command other than being certain it is divine. This will be developed in the next section.

### Modern Man's Akeida

Abraham's path of faith is enshrined in the Torah not for mere observation, nor even for admiration, but for emulation. The path of faith—for everyone—follows the ten tests of Abraham. It is a path that leads the individual to gradually accept the will of the Creator, in absolute terms, until he realizes that he belongs to God. R. Soloveitchik explains:

... man belongs, not to himself, but that God claims man, and that His claim to man is not partial but total. God the Almighty, sometimes wills man to place himself, like Isaac of old, on the altar, to light the fire and to be consumed as a burnt offering. Does not the story of the akeida tell us about the great, awesome drama of man giving himself away to God? Of course Judaism is vehemently opposed to human sacrifice. The Bible speaks with indignation and disdain of child sacrifice; physical human sacrifice was declared abominable. Yet the idea that man belongs to God without qualification, and that God from time to time makes a demand upon man to return what is God's to God, is an important principle in Judaism... God claimed Isaac and Abraham gave Isaac away... God's ownership rights are absolute over everything He owns. The call: "Take thy son, thy only son, whom you love so much ... and bring him as a burnt offering" is addressed to all men. ("Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," *Tradition*, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 71.)

But God does not make the akeida-like request at the outset of one's journey, for God is not interested in this kind of absurd acceptance. To give oneself over to such an extent—without first developing faith—would demonstrate not love but reckless abandon, not suspension of judgment but abdication of reason.<sup>58</sup> As such, the first request by the Creator is a call, a humble petition, for man to move away from the cradle of idol worship—to leave the subjective worship of the self—and follow God to a place that He will show.

Man then follows God to a new "place" where He, and not man, is the exemplar of ethical conduct. Indeed, it is only by emulating His ethical ways that man can follow God, as the Talmud explains: "as He clothes the naked, so too you clothe the naked; as He visits the sick, so too you

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<sup>58</sup> Though there is identity between suspension of judgment and abdication of reason, nevertheless, when suspension of judgment comes as the result of a relationship developed it is grounded in reason—the reason of relationship, of love and awe. Indeed, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that, "Obviously, only an absolute faith in G-d as the Legislator of the *hok* would motivate such [irrational] acceptance" (*Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. 1, p.101). Acceptance of the *hok* is possible only when one has achieved faith.



visit the sick ...” (*Sotab* 14a). Before all else, man develops his relationship with God by developing his moral sense. R. Hirsch notes that the call to Abraham to enter the covenant of circumcision came after a full life of righteousness: “The demand now made on him, ‘be thou wholehearted (*tamim*),’ evidently presupposes the full accomplishment of the purely humane virtues.”<sup>59</sup> It is only then, upon man’s having achieved moral rectitude, that God considers asking man to enter the covenant of the circumcision, the covenant of the *hok*—to do His will without reason.

Now, while this is indeed the process of the development of faith, in practice the Jew is initiated into the covenant of circumcision upon birth, and is required to perform all the commandments—both the laws one understands (*mishpatim*) and the decrees one does not understand (*hukkim*)—*in toto*. The reason for this is that each individual, while in need of his own personal spiritual development, is also part of a faith community “wholeheartedly” committed to the will of the Creator. As such, he too must perform the acts of faith, if only by rote, to maintain his identity with the community. This is what is referred to as observance “*lo lishma*”—perfunctory performance of the commandments through which the individual is merely trained in the motions of faith until that time when he will have the consciousness to be able to make a true movement of faith—to act *lishma*.<sup>60</sup>

The individual’s journey of faith begins when he, like Abraham before him, cognizes the imperative of a Creator. He then follows God by developing his sense of morality through conscientious observance of the *mishpatim*. Following this he begins to appreciate the value of deferring to God’s will through the performance of the *hukkim*. This process is iterative and ongoing, whereby one’s moral sense continues to develop as does one’s unquestioning allegiance.<sup>61</sup> The point here is that one starts developing a relationship with God, an appreciation for God, through keeping His moral laws of reason (*mishpatim*) which then germinates in the individual the possibility of giving himself to God in unquestioning commitment to that which has no reason (*hukkim*).

Now, while the commandments, both *mishpatim* and *hukkim*, provide a path to developing faith, Abraham demonstrated that there are actually

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<sup>59</sup> R. Hirsch (Gen. 17:1, p.291). Similarly R. Keidar (p. 141).

<sup>60</sup> The Talmud (*Pesahim* 50b) explains the two-stage *lo-lishma/lishma* process of development.

<sup>61</sup> “Performance of the Mitzvot is man’s path to God, an infinite path, ...” (Prof. Y. Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. E. Goldman, (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1995) p. 15.)

two degrees of *hok*-commitment, two levels of deferring to God unquestioningly. The first-level *hok*-commitment is exemplified by circumcision wherein one does not understand the logic behind the act, however it does not grate against one's fundamental beliefs. The second-level *hok*-commitment is exemplified by the akeida wherein one does not understand the logic behind the act and it does grate against one's fundamental beliefs. These two types of commitment express two ways of relating to God.<sup>62</sup> In accepting circumcision Abraham demonstrated his love of God; in accepting the akeida Abraham demonstrated a higher level of love of God, what R. Meir (*Sotah* 31a) called: awe from love—*yirah m-abavah*.<sup>63</sup>

These two degrees of commitment, I propose, are to be achieved through an altruistic observance of the *hukkim* and *mishpatim* of the Torah. The first level *hok*-commitment is demonstrated through the acceptance of the *hukkim* in the Torah. When one performs these decrees for no reason other than that they are divine, one effects the same movement of faith that Abraham did through circumcision. One enters into a “love” relationship with God, performing His will with unquestioning affection. R. Keidar explains, “Only acceptance of the command of God which comes from nullifying oneself before Heaven so expresses the true relationship between man and his God.”<sup>64</sup>

This relationship, effected through “nullifying oneself before Heaven” and consummated by the performance of divine decrees (*hukkim*), has yet to reach its full potential. In order for the relationship to seek completion it is of paramount importance that submission to God permeate one's entire being, one's every action. And while the individual has given himself over to God's will in the area of *hukkim*, nevertheless, in the realm of the rational commandments (*mishpatim*) he is still carrying out his own will. That is, the *mishpatim*, defined by the Talmud (*Yoma* 67b) as “commandments that should have been written down even if they had

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<sup>62</sup> R. Keidar, p. 156.

<sup>63</sup> While there is some argument over whether love is higher than awe, or vice versa (commentaries to Rambam (*Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:1)), it is clear from the Talmud (*Yoma* 86b) that awe is higher; for whereas willful sins are converted to mistaken transgressions through repentance motivated by love, Reish Lakish teaches that repentance motivated by awe converts willful sins to merits! Apparently, those who hold *yirah* as lower than *ahavah* refer to *yirah* as “fear” as opposed to “awe” (see *Ma'aseh Rokeach*, *ibid.*). Indeed, R. Meir's “*yirah m-abavah*” makes this distinction clear. Many commentators note that the *yirah* that Abraham demonstrated at the akeida was indeed *ahavah* (see Radak, Recanati, R. Behaye, Abarbanel, et al., on Gen. 22:12).

<sup>64</sup> R. Keidar, p. 141.

not be transcribed in the Torah” due to their harmony with natural morality, are carried out because they accord with man’s rationality. As such, though one may be said to be moral, he is moved by his own subjective reason; and in developing a relationship with God, purity in motivation is of the essence.<sup>65</sup>

Prof. Y. Leibowitz emphasizes that, “So long as a person’s religiosity expresses only his personal awareness, his conscience, his morality, or his values, the religious act is merely for himself and, as such, is an act of rebellion against the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>66</sup> To wholly commit to God, to truly nullify oneself before Heaven, the individual must accept God’s absolute authority specifically in the realm of the rational laws. R. Moshe Feinstein explains that R. Hanina’s principle “Greater is the One Commanded,” which lauds as preeminent the ethic of obedience, applies only to acts for which there is a rational reason (i.e., *mishpatim*), since only then does one struggle over whether to do the act based on its rationality versus to do it in fulfillment of the will of God.<sup>67</sup>

In summary, by accepting the *hukkim*, one may achieve a “love” relationship with God; however, without committing oneself in every aspect of conduct, the relationship will be lacking in “awe”—and it is in this aspect that one makes the movement toward completion.<sup>68</sup> To this end comes the second-level *hok*-commitment, whereby one expresses awe of God through the acceptance of the *mishpatim* without question. This, as odd as it may sound, is modern man’s akeida, his leap of faith through the suspension of judgment in the realm man believes he knows best.<sup>69</sup> In-

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, *Maor va-Shemesh (Mishpatim)*, as well as the sources at the end of fn. 69.

<sup>66</sup> Y. Leibowitz, p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deab*, Part I, 6. (For further discussion, see my article “The Psychology of Being Commanded,” *B’Or HaTorah*, 5769 - <<http://divrei-navon.com/pdf/NavonBHT18.pdf>>.)

<sup>68</sup> Prof. Leibowitz notes that the process is infinite and, as such, unattainable (see fn. 61).

<sup>69</sup> Though it is difficult to imagine a *mishpat* grating against one’s beliefs like that of the akeida, our generation has been witness to the akeida carried to a bitter conclusion in the form of the holocaust. A story is told of a father who had the opportunity to pay for his child to be pulled out of a line to the gas chambers with the proviso that another boy would replace him. The *mishpat* of the Torah says one may not make such an arrangement. To accept this *mishpat* is nothing short of scaling the mountain of the akeida (See Zvi Hirsch Meisels, *Me-Kadeshei ha-Shem* (Chicago: 1955) — online: <<http://blog.thefoundationstone.org/2011>

deed, Prof. Y. Leibowitz explains that the ideal motivation of performance of the commandments is precisely that which Abraham demonstrated at the akeida:

The highest symbol of Jewish faith is the stance of Abraham on Mount Moriah, where all human values were annulled and overridden by fear and love of God. ... It was Abraham who first burst the bounds of the universal human bondage—the bondage of man to the forces of his own nature. Not everyone is Abraham, not everyone is put to so terrible a test as that of the Aqedah. Nonetheless the daily performance of the Mitzvoth, which is not directed by man's inclinations or drives but by his intention of serving God, represents the motivation animating the Aqedah.<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion

The consummate relationship with God, that of “awe from love,” is effected through submission to God's will in the realm of the rational laws (*mishpatim*). It is for this reason that God's ultimate test for Abraham centered on the most fundamental law of natural morality. And in order that his commitment be made manifest, the command had to seemingly contradict natural morality, lest the question of motivation always remain. That is, if the command aligned with natural morality, we would never

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But we need not use such extreme examples. R. Soloveitchik explains: “We have assumed that *mishpatim* are prompted by reason. Yet, in our modern world, there is hardly a *mishpat* which has not been repudiated. Stealing and corruption are the accepted norms in many spheres of life; adultery and general promiscuity find support in respectable circles; and even murder, medical and germ experiments have been conducted with governmental complicity. The *logos* has shown itself in our time to be incapable of supporting the most basic of moral inhibitions” (*Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. 1, p. 105).

For explanations of why *mishpatim* must be accepted *hok*-like see: R. Soloveitchik (*Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. 1, p. 110); R. Berkovits (p.106); R. Keidar (p.141).

<sup>70</sup> Y. Leibowitz, p. 14. Similarly, R. Shlomo Aviner writes: “Avraham had to give up on everything that he felt and understood as a human being—as a most superior human being; he had to erase all his thoughts and ideas, all the feeling of goodness in him, in order to fulfill God's command. This teaches us, in a most drastic manner, that we do not fulfill God's commandments because it is good for us to do so, or because we understand them, or because we experience pleasantness in their performance, but rather because they are God's commandments,” *Tal Hermon*, pp. 49-50.

know if the act was done out of personal motivation or divine commitment. In submitting to the akeida, Abraham expressed his unreserved commitment to God as supreme moral authority by relinquishing any and all subjective reason in the realm of *mishpatim*. Abraham thus achieved the quintessential relationship with his Creator—awe (*yirah*)—as indeed God declares: “for now I know that thou art God-fearing (*yirei Elokim*).”<sup>71</sup>

As explained, Abraham developed this ardent relationship of “awe from love,” progressively, through the ten tests of the absurd, ultimately reaching the akeida in which he was ready to suspend all judgment of God and entertain the absurd notion that the command to sacrifice his son would not go against natural morality. His leap of faith was based on the recognition that God, as supreme moral authority, would never command man to violate the very morality He expects man to uphold. And indeed, the concluding divine words—“Stretch not your hand toward the boy, nor do even the slightest thing to him”—support this assumption.

Furthermore, Jewish tradition emphasizes that God never intended for the act to be carried out. To begin with, the Midrash (*Sifrei, Devarim* 148) states: “Nor did it come into My heart’ (Jeremiah 7:31)—that Avraham should sacrifice his son on the altar.” Another Midrash illustrates the point more vividly:

Said Rabbi Aha: Abraham said to Him, “I will explain my complaint before You. Yesterday, You said to me: ‘for in Isaac will be called your seed,’ and You retracted and said: ‘Take now your son.’ Now You say to me, ‘Stretch not you hand toward the boy.’” The Holy

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<sup>71</sup> It may be asked: didn’t God already know that Abraham was *yirei Elokim*? Some explain that now Abraham actualized this potential (Ramban, R. Beḥaye’i on Gen. 22:12); others explain that now Abraham’s *yirah* has been made known to all (*Sekbel Tor*, Rashi, Rashbam, Hizkuni, et.al. on Gen. 22:12). Rambam (*Guide* 3:24) brings both explanations. *Kli Yakar* and *Bekhor Shor* [on Gen. 22:12] explain it is simply a figure of speech to express that the act was the ultimate display of awe.

In an alternative, but most telling, reading of the climactic verse, R. Leibtag (<http://tanach.org/breishit/vayera2.txt>) explains that *yirei Elokim* can mean a person who upholds natural morality; thus he renders the verse as: “Stretch not your hand toward the boy, nor do even the slightest thing to him, for now I know—*ki y’rei Elokim ata*—‘**even though**’ you are moral person, you have not withheld your only son from me” (Gen. 22:12). I believe we can understand R. Leibtag’s reading to mean that God is saying, as it were: Even though you observe the *mishpatim* out of your own moral sense, you did not withhold your son, you deferred to my command; not because you were willing to perform an immoral act at my command, but because you were willing to suspend judgment—*bok*-like—on this most fundamental of *mishpatim*.

One, blessed be He, said to him: “I shall not profane My covenant, neither shall I alter the utterance of My lips’ (Ps. 89:35). When I said to you, ‘Take,’ I was not altering the utterance of My lips. I did not say to you, ‘Slaughter him,’ but, ‘Bring him up.’ You have brought him up; [now] take him down.” (*Ber. R.* 56:8).

Tellingly, Rashi (Gen. 22:12) brings this Midrash<sup>72</sup> as the plain meaning of God’s statement, “now I know.”<sup>73</sup> The Netziv (*ibid.*) echoes the import of Rashi’s commentary writing that “[God] only wanted to know” that Abraham was ready to do anything, but not that He would want Abraham to actually kill his son.

In addition, on God’s initial command to Abraham, “Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Gen. 22:2), a veritable legion of classic commentators note that slaughter was never God’s intent: Pesikta Zutra (R. Tuvia b. R. Eliezer, 11<sup>th</sup> c., Greece), Ibn Ezra (1089, Spain), Sechel Tov (R. Menachem b. R. Shlomo, 12<sup>th</sup> c., Italy), Bekhor Shor (12<sup>th</sup> c., France),<sup>74</sup> R. Behayei (1255, Spain), Malbim (1809, Ukraine).<sup>75</sup> So while one could argue whether or not this is the plain meaning of the text, clearly the spirit of traditional Jewish thought is that God would not command against natural morality.

As such, the narrative of the akeida forces us to assume not an immoral God but rather a God who challenges man to transcend himself in complete and utter devotion. In realizing that God is moral—by all standards—and would never ask of man anything less, man can make the ultimate movement of faith and suspend judgment through acceptance of

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<sup>72</sup> In the name of Rabbi Abba.

<sup>73</sup> That this is *pshat* according to Rashi is supported by the fact that on Gen. 22:2, at the very outset of the story, he notes that sacrifice was never God’s intention. As an important aside, the question as to whether Rashi’s midrashic citations are *pshat* or *drash* is a point of great contention. It is my opinion that Rashi (see Gen. 13:5) maintains his openly stated goal “to bring the straightforward meaning,” unless he states explicitly that he is bringing a Midrash—as noted by Burkat (*Sefer ha-Zikaron*), Pardo (*Maskil le-David*) and Heidenheim (*Havanat ha-mikra*) cited in Nehama Leibowitz, “Rashi’s Criteria for Citing Midrashim,” *Torah Insights* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 108.

<sup>74</sup> On Gen. 22:12.

<sup>75</sup> See also R. Yona Ibn Janach (11 c., Spain *Sefer ha-Rikma*, pp. 58-59); R. Elimelech Weisblum (1717, Poland; see fn. 21); R. M. J. Leiner, *Mei Shiloakh* (Poland, 1801) Vol. 1, 8a-9b).

the absurd. R. Soloveitchik writes how his grandfather, R. Hayyim of Brisk, expounded the above Midrash (*Ber. R.* 56:8):

It seemed to [Abraham] as though the words of God were contradictory, heaven forbid; nevertheless he overcame the pangs and torments of contradiction, rose up early in the morning and saddled his ass. When the angel appeared to him and revealed the third verse which harmonized the two contradictory verses, then Abraham rose up and questioned... [As] long as the third harmonizing verse had not yet been revealed, Abraham had no right to question God's word, and for this reason he contained himself until the end of the epic. The pangs of consciousness of the man of God and the towering and awesome strength of his self-restraint shine forth here in a clear and pure light.<sup>76</sup>

The dialectic enshrined in the akeida is the ultimate dialectic enshrined within the heart of man—to do the will of God versus to do the will of the self. The resolution to the conflict holds the key to man's highest aspiration, to be worthy of creation, to be “God-fearing”—*yirei Elokim*.<sup>77</sup> To attain this wondrous level, one must learn to suspend judgment, not because he is incapable of reason, but because he realizes that, “There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord” (Proverbs 21:30). Suspension of judgment is nothing more and nothing less than the realization of King Solomon's sapient advice to “Trust in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not upon thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

Abraham proved himself through the *hok*-like acceptance of God's will at the akeida; we do so through the *hok*-like acceptance of God's Torah, particularly His *mishpatim*. Indeed it was on the commandments of natural morality that the Jews accepted the Torah, proclaiming in a suspension of judgment, *na'aseh ve-nishma*, we will do and then we will understand.<sup>78</sup> The Midrash, in its deliberately eccentric style, explains that Mount Moriah was actually plucked up and moved to Sinai to serve as the

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<sup>76</sup> R. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, (Jerusalem, 2005) p. 143, n. 5. Similarly, R. Keidar (p. 156) notes that this midrash expresses Abraham's confrontation with the absurd, which, he writes, is perhaps the main point of the test.

<sup>77</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13.

<sup>78</sup> Rashi (Ex. 24:3,4,7). See also *Maor ve-Shemesh, Mishpatim*. And while others like Ibn Ezra (Ex. 24:7), who reads the text in chronological order, explain *na'aseh ve-nishma* to relate to the laws given following the Sinai revelation, he too understands the proclamation to be altruistic acceptance on *mishpatim*! See also *Panim Yafot* (Ex. 24:7) who links *na'aseh ve-nishma* to Abraham's acceptance of the akeida.

place of the giving of the Torah, thus intimately linking the akeida to the acceptance of the Torah.<sup>79</sup>

Through the akeida Abraham demonstrated, for all time, that within the recesses of man's heart resides the exalted ability to conquer the self in favor of the divine.<sup>80</sup> This ability was called into question with the fall of man in the Garden of Eden,<sup>81</sup> and it was Abraham who provided the response.<sup>82</sup> The Midrash explains that it is *only* in the merit of Abraham, an individual who could self-transcend in awe of his Creator, that the world was created.<sup>83</sup> The Midrash (*Ber. R.* 55:1) notes that the word "test" (*nisa*) is linguistically related to the word "banner" (*nes*), thus hinting at Abraham's test as a banner—a demonstration to the world that Man is worthy of creation.<sup>84</sup>

The knight of faith redeemed man; it is now up to man to redeem creation. ❧

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<sup>79</sup> *Midrash Tehillim* (68:9). See also *Pirke de-Rebbi Eliezer* (31) which alludes to the fact that submission to the Torah provides the vehicle for transcendence akin to the akeida, explaining that the very ram's horn from the akeida was used at Sinai for the sounding of the shofar at the giving of the Torah. Furthermore, the Mishna (*Avot* 5:4) teaches that the Jews also experienced ten miracles in Egypt and ten at the sea. These "tens" are recorded in the same Mishna, immediately after the ten tests of Abraham, thus making an explicit link between the paths of Abraham and Israel.

<sup>80</sup> Rambam, *Guide* 3:24.

<sup>81</sup> See *Zohar* (*Balak* 207b); *Ber. R.* 5:3–5.

<sup>82</sup> *Zohar* (*Hayei Sarah* 128a). See also *Sekbel Tov*, Rashi, Rashbam, Hizkuni, et. al. on *Gen.* 22:12.

<sup>83</sup> *Ber. R.* (Theodore-Albeck) ch. 12, *s.v. be-hibaram*. Similarly Rashbatz (*Avot* 5:3) quotes a legend that Abraham's 10 tests remind us of the 10 sayings with which the world was created—and this, in order to teach that in the merit of Abraham the world stands; see also Rashi (*ibid.*), *Mishnat Reuven*, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 2009), n. 12.

<sup>84</sup> See especially R. David Shapiro, "The Book of Job and the Trial of Abraham," *Tradition*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 1962. Rambam explains that now "all men will know what are the limits of the fear of the Lord" (*Guide* 3:24). Appropriately, just as the akeida is seen to make Abraham into a banner to the world, so too does the *Mekbilta* (see Rashi, *Ex.* 20:17) explain that God gave the Torah to Israel to elevate—"nasot"—them in the world.