

ULTIMATE SACRIFICE by Rabbi David Algaze

“And He said, ‘Please take your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up as an offering...’”(Beresheet 22:2)

This was the last and most challenging of the ten tests with which G-d tested Abraham. It was the most difficult because Abraham could not rationalize why the loving G-d would issue such an order, especially one that contradicted the concept that Abraham had of Him? Many commentators and philosophers throughout the ages have struggled to understand the reason behind this terrifying request. Some have seen in Abraham's choice the epitome of man of faith who chooses to believe in G-d as, in the words of the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard, a “leap of faith.” Abraham represents the man of faith who believes in G-d as a decision transcending rationality. Others, such as Abarbanel, regard this heroic act of sacrifice as the major storehouse of merit for the Jewish people. But what is the lesson of this act for us?

R. Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966) in his commentary “Oznaim Latorah” has a very frightening insight. He writes that the test of the Akeda, the tenth in the list of Abraham's trials, is an atonement—in reverse order of time-- for the later sin of the Spies about whom G-d says, “They have tested me ten times.” (Bamidbar 14) The Spies were guilty of rejecting the land of Israel with their pessimistic report and as result of this, the people of Israel was condemned to spend an additional 40 years in the desert. Since they refused to “go” to the Land, G-d commands Abraham “Go to the land of Moriah” as a way of anticipatory atonement for the later sin of the Spies. By Abraham's willing acceptance of this command and his journey there almost joyfully to sacrifice his son, he was actually bringing atonement for the children who would reject the promise to go to the land in the future.

This explanation connects the refusal to enter the land of Israel with the sacrifice of Isaac and hence with all the sacrifices and suffering that Israel would endure in its long and tragic history. Here R. Sorotzkin may be very subtly suggesting that the refusal to accept the land has had tragic consequences for the Jewish people. In a similar vein, Rabbi Teichtal in his monumental work, “Em Habanim Smecha”, argues that the afflictions suffered by European Jewry in the last generation may be connected with the negative attitude towards acceptance of the Land, especially among religious circles. In a way we can see the diametric opposition of Abraham's journey to the land with the indifferent and lethargic attitude of many people regarding the settlement of the land of Israel.

Many have seen in the sacrifice of Isaac the epitome of the Jews' determination to serve G-d even at the risk of their lives. Abraham represents the source of this trait of “sacrifice” found in the Jewish people, a feature that runs counter to the human desire for self-protection. This quality finds its way not only among the scholars and the leaders of the people, but also among the simple and the unlearned, who were always ready to give up their lives “al Kiddush Hashem” (sanctification of G-d's Name). This powerful attribute has its origin in the “deeds of the fathers.” The Natziv (R. Berlin, 1817-1893) writes that a human being has the capacity for lofty actions but so long as these abilities are not brought from their potential to the actual condition they cannot take root in him. For this reason, G-d subjects a person to a “test” and through it the attribute goes from the potential to the actual and thus it becomes ingrained in him. By the Akeda, G-d elevated Abraham's spiritual gift, and what was embedded in Abraham's character became the characteristic of his children forever.

The Hatam Sofer (R. Moshe Sofer, 1762-1839) says that through the Akeda, G-d was testing the entire nation to see if they would be able to serve G-d under all circumstances. By challenging the lives of the early Fathers, G-d was providing their children with the tools to withstand the anguish of Exile and many other torments, including bloody persecutions and plans for extermination. When G-d saw the determination of Abraham and even of his son Isaac, the intended victim, to go to their destiny without hesitation, G-d became convinced that from this seed many great and holy people like them would emerge.

But not only through their deaths has the Jewish people served G-d. The sacrifice of Abraham in accepting the order “to go” is the source of the idealism and self abnegation of many who in the last hundred years and especially in this generation have accepted willingly the order to “go up to the land.” The early pioneers gave up many comforts and placed their lives in danger for the purpose of settling in the land of Israel. Not less impressing, the pioneers of today who defy convention and logic by insisting in setting up residence close to Arab enemies just for the sake of reclaiming the land of Israel for the Jewish people, are undoubtedly the children of this Abraham and this Isaac.

The Akeda represents not merely a historical event limited to its place in time, but it is actually a recurring gesture that informs the Jewish people of all times. If we are capable of such sacrifice and self denial, nothing will be beyond our capacity to achieve. That is the meaning of the blessing with which G-d blesses Abraham at the end: that his offspring would be like “the stars of the heaven” —that we would be capable of majestic actions in times of glory, like heavenly stars and that through us “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”