

ABRAHAM'S EVIL INCLINATION

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher

God had given Isaac to Sarah and Abraham in their old age (Genesis 21:1-3). When Isaac was weaned Abraham made a great feast (21:8).

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) says that after the feast, Satan (described below) spoke evil of Abraham to God, saying that although God had given a child to him and Sarah in their old age, Abraham had failed to sacrifice to God even one turtle dove or pigeon at the feast. He accused Abraham of honoring his son but not the God who gave him the son. God answers Satan, saying that Abraham would sacrifice his son, Isaac, for God's sake, if God asked him to do so.

Then God "tempted" Abraham, telling him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. R' Simeon ben Abba taught that God entreated Abraham to make the sacrifice of Isaac, as a king would entreat a great warrior to uphold his name and crown in battle. But God made the request indirectly, using circumlocution, so that Abraham would not be overwhelmed by the shocking nature of what he was being asked to do.

While Abraham is on his way to Moriah, following God's instructions, he is approached by Satan (i.e., his "adversary" and "accuser," which has no independent power but derives from God—that is, he encounters his own yetzer hara [Baba Batra 16a]). Satan wants to know if Abraham will be "grieved" by talking with him. Satan reminds Abraham that while he (Abraham) has taught and strengthened many other people, he himself is now feeling faint from the trial of sacrificing Isaac.

Abraham answers, "I am ready to be tested—heart and mind" (Psalm 26:2)—in my trust of God. (Emphasis added.)

Satan retorts, "Shouldn't your awe of God [i.e., your ability to hold the idea of God in your mind--S.R. Hirsch] give you confidence [in your trust]?—but instead you're about to sacrifice your son."

Abraham answers, "When did God ever take an innocent life?"

Seeing that Satan is not listening, Abraham adds that he has secret knowledge from God that Isaac is not to be sacrificed.

COMMENTARY

Rashi (on Genesis 22:2) teaches that when God says Abraham would sacrifice Isaac if God asked him to, we should read this as Abraham would offer to sacrifice Isaac—because God knows that Abraham trusts completely that his God reviles human sacrifice.

God asks rather than commands Abraham to offer up Isaac: God makes the request using the expression na, “I pray thee,” and God asks that the sacrifice be made in the future. The request was to offer Isaac up after Abraham reached the mountain; it was not a demand to sacrifice him at that moment.

How do we understand why and how God is “tempting” Abraham? It would seem that, in telling Abraham a “lie,” that is, implying that He will yet ask for the sacrifice of Isaac, God is testing Abraham to see whether he can discriminate between offering Isaac and actually sacrificing him—the first is pleasing to God, the second is abhorrent. Abraham was being tempted to believe the evil thought that his God would desire actual human sacrifice.

On the way to Moriah, Abraham’s evil inclination clamors for attention. He is taunting himself with the question of whether he can face his own fear about the ultimate outcome of his journey, that is, whether God will eventually require him to sacrifice Isaac. When his evil inclination says that he should be confident and that he is not, Abraham affirms his faith by stating that his God does not demand the sacrifice of innocents. Having quieted his evil inclination, he reminds himself further that his intimate knowledge of God—his deepest connection with the focal point of his worship—assures him that Isaac is not to be a “burnt offering.” He answers himself with the brave declaration that he is ready to be “tested.”

How far would Abraham have gone if the angel of God had not intervened? Some say he would have slain his son. But that hardly seems a plausible surmise, considering the confidence he had that his God would never demand human sacrifice.

So he was confronted with a crucial question: Was the voice of this god the same as his One God—and how could he be sure one way or the other?

The simple answer, of course, would be “no”—this could not be the voice of the One God, since his God abhorred human sacrifice.

But suppose Abraham decided to consider the question “as if” the voice was that of his One God: What would he—or any one of us—be likely to imagine it would mean that this God, who abhorred sacrifice, would ask that he offer to sacrifice his son?—not command, but ask. One conclusion would be that it was a test; God was tempting Abraham to do what was forbidden, to test his faith.

Now what might Abraham imagine that God would require of him to pass or fail the test? If, on the one hand, he was in fear and reluctant to offer up his son, that would seemingly indicate a failure of his faith in the One God, because it would indicate a fear that his son was actually going to be taken. If, on the other hand, he had absolute faith in his God, and a conviction that no other god or gods had any power over him, might he not go to the very moment of taking his son’s life, confident that his God would not require the ultimate act? And wouldn’t he also be confident that if such an abomination were asked of him, it would not be his God who would be making the request—and thus he could refuse the request?

Rashi says that Abraham prophesied to the youths with him that both he and Yitzhak would return from the mountain. The Hebrew word he used was n'shuvah, "we will come back" to you (Genesis 22:5). Because of Abraham's faith in God, his implicit trust that the seal of God is truth, Abraham would not listen to God when God told him a lie—in the voice of Satan, his own yetzer hara—even for a good purpose. Despite momentary doubts, he refused steadfastly, from beginning to end, to believe that God would ever require the actual sacrifice of Isaac.

It may have been a lesson to him about his own evil inclination, which no longer had to be listened to, even if it occasionally told the "truth" (for an evil purpose). As it says in Genesis Rabbah (22:6), "When Abraham arose and saw how really feeble he [i.e., the evil inclination] was, he began to crush him, as it is written, 'And I will beat to pieces his adversaries before him' (Psalm 89:24)."

We too are tested with the capacity to stifle the voice of our conscience, our good inclination, so that we can carry on a conversation with our evil inclination, which is what Abraham was doing until he beat it to pieces—which we may also do.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When and how do we experience our own evil inclination?
2. Are we listening to our evil inclination when we place our careers and material success ahead of our commitment to our children's and our own spiritual and religious well-being?
3. Do we ever lie to ourselves, saying "things aren't so bad" or "nothing is really wrong," and then fail to act with a kehilla to deal with the conditions that threaten our families and communities?
4. Does our evil inclination sound like Abraham's, telling ourselves a bit of truth to further an evil course?
5. How, practically, can we avoid listening to our evil inclination?