YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

For easy printing, see

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha74/04-74vayera.htm>

**PARASHAT VAYERA**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated by Mr. Joseph Eisenman

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Remembering the *Akeda***

**By Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

**Absence of any mention of the *akeda* in later biblical narratives**

The story of the *akeda*, the binding of Yitzchak, is one of the core narratives in the history of *Am Yisrael*, but surprisingly, there is no mention of it at any later stage in *Tanakh*. God's selection of Avraham is mentioned in the historic speeches of Yehoshua and Nechemia (*Yehoshua* 24; *Nechemia* 9), and Avraham's love for God is invoked in Yeshayahu's prophecy, "Avraham, who loved Me" (*Yishayahu* 41) – but with not a word about the *akeda* that proved his unbounded love. Yirmiyahu, in his prophecies of rebuke, contrasts the nation's betrayal of God with the loyalty of the nations to their own gods, and also contrasts the abandonment of God in the present with the innocence and love of God in the past:

Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: So says the Lord: I remember in your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel is holy unto God, the first-fruits of His increase… Has a nation changed its gods, even though they were not gods? But My nation has exchanged its glory for that which brings no profit. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid; be greatly appalled, says the Lord. For My nation has committed two evils: they have abandoned Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns – broken cisterns that can hold no water. (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2-3; 11-13)

Doesn't Avraham's devotion in his response, "Here I am," and his prompt departure on the journey to offer up his one beloved son represent a far more absolute and convincing contrast to the betrayal of the nation in the present (Yirmiyahu's time)? Why does the prophet choose to glamorize the period of wandering in the wilderness, the biblical account of which is marred with repeated incidents of rebellion? Why do the prophets skip over this one-time demonstration of absolute submission, with its complete nullification of human emotion to the divine will and command?[[1]](#footnote-1)

While there is no explicit later mention of the *akeda* in the *Tanakh*, we do find several narratives that allude to it. Some specific expressions and motifs that are used in the text to describe Avraham's test are interwoven in other units whose connection to the story of the *akeda* is not immediately apparent.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our question, then, is actually a dual one. First, why does the text ignore the seminal event of the *akeda* even when it would seem appropriate that it be mentioned (for instance, as part of the historical review by a speaker or when its significance could amplify prophetic messages of rebuke)? And second, why do later units in the *Tanakh* recall the *akeda* and create parallels with it by means of linguistic associations and motifs interwoven in them?

The story of the *akeda*, like other narratives involving the early generations and the forefathers, is a story of newness and formation. It is a story which, had it not taken place at this particular stage and within this unique set of circumstances, would convey very dangerous messages that go against the entire orientation of Jewish thought and the proper expression of fear of God as molded in the books of the Torah and through the moral lessons of the prophets. The Danish existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard examines the paradox of the *akeda* in his work, *Fear and Trembling*:

It is now my intention to draw out from the story of Abraham the dialectical consequences inherent in it, expressing them in the form of problemata, in order to see what a tremendous paradox faith is, a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can master, because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The story of the *akeda* is part of the formative narratives describing the history of the world and the establishment of the principles of morality and faith, concerning which *Chazal* taught, "One does not expound on the Creation [*ma'aseh bereishit*]…" (*Chagiga* 2:41). This is usually understood as referring to the secret of God's creation of the world, which the human intellect cannot comprehend. But what of the rest of the Creation story? Can we really understand the nature of the Garden of Eden, with its rivers and its special trees, the speech of the serpent, or the "knowledge of good and evil" that man acquired in the wake of his sin? Can we comprehend the coupling of the "*benei ha-elo-him*" with the "daughters of man,” and its results? Can we conceive of the tower reaching into the heavens? Do these narratives not constitute a continuation of the *ma'aseh bereishit*, concerning which "one does not expound"?

The inculcation of the concept of morality in the world came about through the destruction and annihilation of everything in the world, bringing an end to humanity as it had been, and the beginning of a new world founded on moral values which are the precondition for its development. The one-time nature of this formative event is stated explicitly in God's promise:

"I will not again curse the earth because of man, because the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth, nor will I strike again all living things, as I have done. So long as the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heart, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." (*Bereishit* 8:21-22)

"And I will establish My covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off again by the waters of the Flood, neither shall there be another Flood to destroy the earth." (*Bereishit* 9:11)

In our previous *shiurim*, we saw that alongside the moral sins which became increasingly depraved over the course of the generations from Adam until Avraham, there developed a growing denial of the existence of a divine ruling entity and its ability to subjugate man to its wishes.[[4]](#footnote-4) The climax of this heresy was the building of the tower that reached to the heavens, as the *midrash* explains:

The word *"rosh"* alludes to the tower built by the generation of the dispersion, with its head reaching into the heavens, as it is written, "Let us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens" (*Bereishit* 11:4). At that time, the generation of the dispersion said: The people of the generation of the Flood not foolish in saying to their Creator, "Go away from us," such that He rained down the Flood upon them for forty days and forty nights, erasing them from the world, as it is written, "He was swift upon the waters" (*Iyov* 24). We instead will build a tower from the ground to the heavens, and we shall dwell in it like the ministering angels, and take up spades and split the heavens so the upper waters will flow down to the lower waters, in order that what happened to the generation of the Flood will not happen to us.

The generation of the dispersion was then divided into three groups. One group said: We shall build a tower from the ground to the sky, and we shall dwell in it like the ministering angels, so that we will have a dwelling in [both] the upper world and the lower world. The second group said: We shall build a tower from the ground to the sky, and make for ourselves a name. "A name" refers to idolatry, as it is written, "Make no mention of the names of other gods" (*Shemot* 23:13). The third group said: Let us build a tower from the ground to the sky, and we shall cut the heavens and the heavenly heavens into pieces, and wage war against the Holy One, blessed be He; we shall not allow Him to remain in His place. (*Otzar Ha-Midrashim* [Eistenstein], p. 423).

The story of the *akeda* is a universal lesson in the concept of faith in God and the recognition of man's absolute subservience to His commands – even when he is required to sacrifice that which is most precious to him.

Avraham's actions testify to his thorough assimilation of the principles of morality bequeathed to humanity in the generations preceding him. He is the first to obey the Divine command, "Go forth…," with no explanation or purpose offered. Avraham also waited a hundred years for the birth of his son, and his powerful love for his son required no proof. For all these reasons and others, it is Avraham who is chosen as most worthy to demonstrate the lesson of faith. In the *akeda*, his second test of "Go forth…,” in which he expresses his willingness to subjugate all of his own desires and to suppress his own feelings for the sake of God's command, the universal process of man's acceptance of God's supremacy and the obligation of obeying Him is completed.

The words of the angel, "For now I know that you fear God, for you did not spare your only son from Me" (22:12), describe the attainment of this universal goal, which expresses the proper connection between man and his Creator. Once this has been achieved, God has no desire for this act to be repeated or imitated, just as there is no need for another Flood to inculcate the principles of morality. In the future, the internalization of the acknowledgment of and faith in God will be expressed through a reenactment of the act that Avraham ultimately performs instead of the sacrifice of his son – the sacrifice of the ram, at the place "of which it is said [to] this day, 'In the mountain the Lord will appear'" (22:14).

**Allusions to the *akeda* story and their significance**

The story of the *akeda* in its complete form is, as noted, a formative narrative whose messages are suited to the period and the circumstances in which it took place. Nevertheless, a deconstruction of the story into its constituent parts offers a range of messages that sit well with Jewish theology and its principles.

There are some ten stories in *Tanakh* that interweave allusions to the *akeda* narrative, and it would seem that by means of this sophisticated device, the text manages to highlight the important messages of parts of the story without becoming entangled in the theological paradox of the *akeda* narrative in its entirety.

We will present some of this "mirror stories" here and try to discern the messages that the text extracts from the paralleling of a given situation with that of Avraham and Yitzchak in the *akeda* story.

1. **The *Akeda* story as an expression of a renewed bond between the nation and God**

The binding of Yitzchak heralds a special connection between man and his Creator. In this story, Avraham indicates the pinnacle of man's closeness to God, as well as its boundary. It would appear that employing the literary devices and special expressions belonging to the story of the *akeda* in describing later events is meant to imbue the latter with something of the atmosphere of upliftment and holiness of the former and to present it as a new way of the nation drawing closer to God.

1. **The burning bush**

The story of Moshe's induction into the position of leadership of *Am Yisrael* maintains strong allusions to the story of the *akeda*, as we see in the corresponding verses as presented below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Burning bush (*Shemot* 3)** | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (1)Now Moshe shepherded the **sheep** of Yitro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian, and he led the flock far into the desert,  **And he came to the mountain of God**, to Chorev.  (2) **And an angel of God appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush, and he saw, and behold – the bush was burning with fire,**  **But the bush was not consumed (*ukal*)**.  (3) And Moshe said, "Let me turn aside **and see (*er'eh*) this great sight (*mar'eh*)**, why the bush is not burning."  (4) And God saw that he had turned aside to see, **and God called to him from amidst the bush, and He said, "Moshe, Moshe," and he said, "Here I am**."  (5) And He said, "Do not come near; remove your shoes from upon your feet, **for the place upon which you stand is holy ground."**  (6) And He said, **"I am the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham**, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov." And Moshe hid his face, for he feared to look at God. | (8) And Avraham said, "God will provide Himself with a **lamb** for a burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked together.  (9) **And they came to the place which God had told him.**  (13) **And Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw, and behold, a ram behind [him], caught by its horns in the thicket.**  (10) And Avraham stretched out his hand and he took the **knife (*ma'akhelet*)**  (14) And Avraham called the name of that place ***Hashem* *yir'eh*, of which it is said [to] this day, "In the mount shall the Lord appear (*yera'eh*)."**  (11) **And an angel of God called to him from the heavens, and he said, "Avraham, Avraham," and he said, "Here I am."** |

The revelation at the burning bush reinforces the idea of the covenant between the nation and God and God's commitment to save the nation from the "knife" that threatens to destroy them. The location of the burning bush, the smell of fire, and the voice of the angel are all meant to arouse recollections in Moshe's mind of Avraham's obedience and readiness to bind his son, as well as the angel's command, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy,” and thereby to hint to Moshe, by a sort of "*kal va-chomer,*" that he must obey this Divine mission to save the nation from its *"akeda*."

1. **The Covenant of the Basins[[5]](#footnote-5)**

The Covenant of the Basins is a seminal event in the process of the choosing of *Am Yisrael* and its preparation to receive the *luchot*. This covenant is molded in such a way as to draw its strength from the *akeda*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Covenant of the Basins**  (*Shemot* 24) | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (1) And to He said, "Come up to the Lord – you and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, **and bow down from afar**.  (2) And Moshe alone shall come near to God, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people go up with him."  (14) And to the elders he said, "**Wait here for us until we come back to you**, and behold, Aharon and Chur are with you: if any man has any matter, let him come to them." (3) And Moshe came and told the people all the words of God, and all the judgments, and all the people answered with one voice, **and they said: "All the words which God has said – we will do and obey."**  (5) And he sent the young men of the children of Israel, who **offered burnt offerings**, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to God. (6) **And Moshe took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.**  (17) And the sight of God's glory was **like a devouring fire** **(*ke'esh okhelet*)** on the top of the mountain in the eyes of *Bnei Yisrael*.  (11) **But upon the nobles of *Bnei Yisrael* He did not lay His hand,** and they beheld God and ate and drank.  (13) And Moshe rose up, and Yehoshua, his attendant, **and Moshe went up into the mountain of God.** | (4) On the third day, Avraham lifted his eyes and **he saw the place from afar.**  (5) And Avraham said to his young men, **"Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go on further and prostrate ourselves and return to you.**"  (11) And an angel of God called to him from the heaven and said, "Avraham, Avraham;" **and he said, "Here I am**."  (9) And they came to the place which God had told him, **and Avraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and he bound Yitzchak, his son, and placed him upon the altar, upon the wood.**  (10) And Avraham stretched forth his hand and he **took the knife (*ma'akhelet*)**, to slay his son.  (12) And he said, **"Do not lay your hand upon the boy, and do nothing to him,** for now I know that you fear God, for you did not spare your son, your only son, from Me."  (14) **And Avraham called that place *Hashem yir'eh*, of which it is said [to] this day, "In the mount shall the Lord appear (*yera'eh*)."** |

The nation's commitment, "We will do and obey,” proclaimed at the foot of the mountain, echoes Avraham's "Here I am,” awarding validity to the original choice of Avraham and expanding and extending it to include the entire congregation. The phrases recalling the *akeda* that echo from the mountain of God remind the nation's most senior leadership of the pinnacle of closeness to God and its boundaries, thereby intensifying their aspiration towards holiness, on the one hand, while emphasizing the importance of obedience to the rules of holiness that accompany this occasion.

1. **Coronation of Shaul**

The appointing of a king is one of the three commandments given to *Am Yisrael* upon their entry into *Eretz Yisrael*. The occasion of the fulfillment of this command, which establishes a new leadership representing God's sovereignty in the world, uses expressions borrowed from the *akeda*, apparently with a view to amplifying the ceremonial nature of the event:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Coronation of Shaul**  (*Shmuel* I 9) | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (3) And **the donkeys** of Kish, Shaul's father, **were lost.**  And Kish said to Shaul, his son: **"Take, I pray you, one of the young men with you, and arise, go** and seek the donkeys."  (5) And when they came to the land of Tzuf, **Shaul said to the young man who was with him, "Come, let us return,** lest my father leave off [his concern for] the donkeys and become anxious about us."  (10) … **So they went to the city where the man of God was.**  (18) And Shaul drew near to Shmuel inside the gate, and he said, "**Tell me, I pray you, where the house of the seer (*ha-ro'eh*) house is."**  (19) And Shmuel answered Shaul, and he said, **"I am the seer (*anokhi ha-roeh*)..."**  (20) And as for your donkeys that were lost **three days ago** – do not pay heed to them, for they have been found. And to whom is all the hope of Israel? Is it not to you, and to all of your father's house?  (26) **And they arose early, and it was, at about daybreak…** | (7) And Yitzchak said to Avraham his father, and he said, "My father;" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here is the fire, and the wood, but **where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"**  (2) And he said, "**Take now** your son, your only one, whom you love – Yitzchak, and **go forth** to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering upon **one of the mountains** which I shall tell you." (3) … And **he took his two young men** with him, and Yitzchak, his son, and he broke up the wood for the burnt offering.  (5) And Avraham said to his young men,"Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will **go on further and prostrate ourselves and return to you.**"  (3) … and he arose and he **went to the place which God had told him.**  (14) And Avrahamcalled that place ***Hashem yir'eh*, of which it is said [to] this day, "In the mount shall the Lord appear (*yera'eh*)."**  (4) **On the third day**, Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw the place from afar.  (3) And Avraham **arose early**, and he saddled his donkey… |

The use of language recalling the *akeda* amplifies the chasm that separates the lofty aim of the monarchy and its expression in the reign of Shaul, thereby providing an ironic premonition of his failure. The Divine approbation for Avraham's successful undergoing of his test and the reward of having himself and his progeny chosen – "And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your seed, **because you have obeyed My voice**" – is echoed, inversely, in Shmuel's reproaching of Shaul, informing him that his chosenness, and that of his progeny, for the monarchy has been withdrawn:

(19) "Why then **did you not obey God's voice**, but did fly to the spoil and do that which is evil in God's eyes…" (22) And Shmuel said, "Does God desire burnt offerings and sacrifices **as He desires obeying God's voice**? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen – better than the fat of rams. (23) For rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is like idolatry and *terafim*. Since you have rejected the word of God, He has rejected you as king." (*Shmuel* I 15:19-23)

1. **The purchase of the threshing-floor of Aravna**

Another of the commandments given to *Am Yisrael* upon their entry into the Land is to build the Temple. In the description of the purchase of Aravna's threshing-floor – the future site of the Temple – we again find allusions to the story of the *akeda*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Purchase of the threshing-floor** (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 21) | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (16) **And David lifted his eyes and saw**  **An angel of God standing between the earth and heaven, with a sword drawn in his hand, stretched over Jerusalem**, and David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.  (26) And David built an altar there to God, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and he called upon God, and He answered him from heaven with fire upon the altar of burnt offering.  (22:1) And David said, "This is the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel." | (4) On the third day, **Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw the place from afar.**  (10) And Avraham stretched forth his hand his hand and he took the **knife**, to slay his son. (11) **And an angel of God called to him from heaven**, and said, "Avraham, Avraham," and he said, "Here I am."  (12) And he said, "**Do not lay your hand upon the boy, nor do anything to him**, for now I know that you fear God; you did not spare your only son from Me."  (13) And Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw **and behold, a ram behind (him), caught by its horns in the thicket.**  (14) And Avraham called the name of that place ***Hashem* *yir'eh*, of which it is said [to] this day, "In the mount shall the Lord appear (*yera'eh*)."** |

In addition to the linguistic connections here, there is also an allusion conveyed by the situation of an angel of God obstructing a deadly threat and imbuing the site with sanctity. The author of *Divrei Ha-yamim* succeeds in blunting the terror of the description of the plague that befalls the nation as a result of the census, instead painting the scene of the angel standing with the sword drawn in his hand with an aura of holiness and validating the Divine choice of Jerusalem, comparing it with the renewed choice of Avraham as reward for his devotion in carrying out the Divine command.

1. **A contrast to perverted family connections**

Four separate biblical narratives describing problematic family relations contain allusions to the story of the *akeda*. Here, instead of amplifying the religious messages of the units in question, as in the first group of "mirror narratives" discussed above, the point of the association in the narratives we will now address is to highlight the distorted family relations prevailing between the characters. These characters themselves "carry out an *akeda*,” as it were, motivated by personal revenge, pride, or ignorance. These narratives bemoan the characters' ignoring of the angel's cry, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy, nor do anything to him,” and distort Avraham's words, "A lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

1. **The sale of Yosef**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The sale of Yosef** (*Bereishit* 37) | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (3) **And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children**, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a striped coat.  (13) And Yisrael said to Yosef, "Are your brothers not tending the flocks in Shekhem? Come now, I will send you to them;" **and he said to him, "Here I am."**  (18) **And they saw him from afar**, and before he came close to them, they conspired against him to kill him.  (20) "Come now, therefore; let us kill him and cast him into one of the pits, and we shall say, '**A wild animal devoured him (*akhalat'hu***)' – and we shall see what will become of his dreams."  (22) And Reuven said to them, "Do not shed blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but **lay no hand upon him**" – [intending] that he might save him from their hand, to bring him back to his father.  (25) And they sat to eat bread, and **they lifted their eyes and saw**, and behold, a caravan of Yishme'elim was coming from the Gil'ad  (29) And **Reuven returned to the pit**, but behold – Yosef was not in the pit; and he tore his garments. | (2) **He said, "Take, I pray you, your son, your only son, whom you love – Yitzchak…"**  (1) And it came to pass after these things that God tested Avraham; and **He said to him, "Avraham, Avraham," and he said, "Here I am."**  (4) On the third day, Avraham lifted his eyes **and he saw the place from afar**.  (10) And Avraham stretched forth his hand and he took the **knife** (***ma'akhelet)***, to slay his son.  (12) And he said, **"Do not lay your hand upon the boy**, nor do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God; you have not spared your only son from Me."  (13) And **Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw**, and behold,a ram behind [him], caught by its horns in the thicket.  (19) And **Avraham returned to his young men**, and the arose and they went together to Be'er Sheva, and Avraham dwelled in Be'er Sheva. |

The fatherly love for a son which elevated Avraham in the story of the *akeda* to the ultimate level of loving God and to merit receiving his son back again, leads – in the story of Yosef – to the brothers' hatred and to the casting of the most profound grief upon Yaakov, owing to the news that his son is lost to him forever.

1. **Yiftach's daughter**

*Chazal* note the contrasting connection between the two narratives in a *midrash* that mourns Yiftach's ignorance in presenting Avraham as a model of child-sacrifice. He failed to learn the critical conclusion of the story, when God's angel calls out, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy":

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Yiftach's daughter** (*Shoftim* 11) | ***Akedat Yitzchak*** |
| (30-31) And Yiftach made a vow to God… "Whatever comes out of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, **shall surely be [given] to God, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."**  (34) And Yiftach came to Mitzpeh, to his house, and behold – his daughter came out to meet him, with timbrels and with dances, **and she was his only child**; he had no son or daughter but her.  (37) And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Leave me for two months, that I might go and **wander down the mountain** and bewail my virginity, I and my friends."  (38) And he said, "Go," and he sent her for two months, and **she and her friends went**, and she bewailed her virginity upon the mountains.  (39) And it was, after two months, that **she returned to her father**, and he did with her according to his vow… | (2) He said, "Take, I pray you, your son, **your only one**, whom you love – Yitzchak… **and offer him up there as a burnt offering."**  **Your only son**  **Upon one of the mountains** which I shall tell you.  (3) … and **he took his two young men** with him  (19) **And Avraham returned to his young men** |

"A pauper [who oppresses the weak]…" – this refers to Yiftach, who was a pauper in his Torah [knowledge], like the stump of a sycamore tree… He went up and slaughtered her before God, and the Divine Spirit screamed out: Do I then wish you to offer lives before Me, "Which I had not commanded, nor spoken, nor had entered My mind" (*Yirmiyahu* 19:5) – "Which I had not commanded" – to Avraham, to slaughter his son; rather, I told him, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy…" (*Bereishit* 22:12)… Thus, "which I had not commanded" to Avraham, to slay his son – this is certain. "Nor spoken" – to Yiftach, to sacrifice his daughter to Me. "Nor had entered My mind" – that the king of Moav would fall by the hand of the king of Israel, and that he would sacrifice his firstborn son to Me… Who was it that caused Yiftach to be bereaved of his daughter? It was because he did not study the Torah, for had he studied the Torah, he would not have lost his daughter. (*Tanchuma, Bechukotai* 7)[[6]](#footnote-6)

**\***

The story of the *akeda* and the theological paradox that it contains forms part of the complex messages of the formative narratives that describe the beginning of the separation of contrasting elements: light and darkness, goodness and evil, life and death, the *"benei ha-elohim"* and the children of man. *Sefer Bereishit* thus contains the complex message of love of God and man's absolute submission to His will even at the cost of child-sacrifice, along with a nullification of human sacrifice as an expression of that love. The consolidation of the foundations for the world's existence and the legal formulation of religious values over the course of the Books of Torah, the Prophets, and the *Ketuvim*, necessarily entailed a "censoring" of the holistic message of the story of the *akeda*, substituting it instead with an artistic collage that integrates elements of the story and echoes of its messages in many other narratives, thereby amplifying their lessons. First-time occasions of investiture of the leadership that mediates between God and the nation, as well as eternal covenant ceremonies, draw their power from the *akeda* narrative, which imbues them with a profound dimension of religious meaning. At the same time, the allusions to it serve as a means of covert rebuke for family crimes which distort its lessons.

The story of the *akeda* in its later incarnations has served as an archetype of devotion to God and sanctification of His Name. Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son upon the altar of his values has served as a model for generations of parents who have been required to sacrifice their children upon the altar of the Jewish nation and of the Land of Israel and who answered with their own cry of "Here I am.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. It is interesting to note that in the post-biblical, midrashic, and liturgical literature, the story of the *akeda* is addressed by liturgists, poets, writers, and artists who use it to express messages about devotion, love of God, and the sanctification of God's Name, and invoke this "merit of the forefathers" to justify supplications for divine mercy. Of particular note is the selection of this narrative as the central Torah reading on Rosh Hashana. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Various articles have addressed the parallels between the story of the *akeda* and other biblical narratives. *Chazal* note a parallel in their comparison of Avraham's love for God, which transcended logic, and Bilam's hatred, which likewise transcended any reasonable thought (*Bereishit Rabba* 55:8). See also Y. Zakowitz, *Mikraot Be-Eretz Ha-Mar'ot* (Tel Aviv, 1995), pp. 72-77; Y. Grossman, "*Akedat Yitzchak Ke-Sippur Reka Le-Brit Ha-Aganot U-Le-Sippurim Nosafim*,” *Megadim* 25 (5756), pp. 79-90, and others. We will present additional parallels and consider their messages. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See especially the *shiur* on *Parashat Bereishit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For further discussion of this comparison, see Y. Grossman's article, above n. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This group of narratives, in which the *akeda* is alluded to in order to provide a contrast to distorted family relationships, also includes some elements of the story of the concubine in Giv'a and the rebellion of Avshalom. See Zakowitz, p. 75, and Grossman, pp. 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)