**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

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By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #02:**

***Zikhronot*, The Remembrance Blessing:**

**The Covenant of the *Akeida* and the Repair of Adam’s Sin**

**The Day of Remembrance**

Remembrance is part of the definition of Rosh Hashana in the Torah: “a remembrance of blowing” (*Vayikra* 23:24). *Chazal* choose this term to serve as the name of the day in the liturgy: "the Day of Remembrance (*Yom Ha-zikaron*)."

On the simple level, we might assume that this remembrance is connected to the fact that we are dealing with the day of judgment, when God remembers and reviews all of a person's actions; but upon further examination, it becomes clear that the name comes precisely to add to the day of judgment the dimension of mercy. As the Gemara states: "*Zikhronot*, that the remembrance of you may come before Me **for** **good**" (*Rosh Hashana* 34b).[[1]](#footnote-1) Still, who can guarantee us that when we will be remembered by God on the day of judgment, it will be for good?

What in the *Zikhronot* blessing, the second special blessing unique to the *Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana, ensures that we will be remembered favorably?

***Akeidat Yitzchak*, The Binding of Yitzchak**

The *Zikhronot* blessing reaches its climax with its mention of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Yitzchak, at the end of the blessing.[[2]](#footnote-2)Does the mention of the *Akeida* serve as an argument in our favor during every emergency, or is there an essential connection between the *Akeida* and Rosh Hashana? In order to answer this question, let us go back to the fundamental question at the heart of the judgment that takes place on Rosh Hashana: the question of the connection or disconnection between man and God, which appears to stand also at the core of the story of the *Akeida.*

Like the act of blowing the shofar, so too the story of the *Akeida* is described in the Midrash as having the power to turn the attribute of justice into the attribute of mercy:

Rav Bivi bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: The patriarch Avraham rose in prayer and supplication before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: Master of the Universe! It is revealed and known before You that when You said to me: "Take your son, your only one" (*Bereishit* 22:2), I had what to reply to You and I had what to say: Earlier, you said to me: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called yours" (*Bereishit* 21:12), and now you say to me: "And offer him there for a burnt-offering" (*Bereishit* 22:2)? Just as I could have replied to You, but I suppressed my desire and did not argue with You, "But I am as a deaf man, I hear not; and I am as a dumb man that opens not his mouth" (*Tehillim* 38:14); so too when the descendants of Yitzchak come to sins and evil deeds, remember for them the Binding of Yitzchak their forefather, and rise from the seat of justice to the seat of mercy, and be filled with mercy for them, and be merciful to them, and turn the attribute of justice to the attribute of mercy. When? "In the seventh month" (*Vayikra* 23:24). (*Vayikra Rabba* 29, 9)

What is there in the *Akeida* story that gives it this role? The story of the *Akeida* puts the issue of the connection between man and God to the deepest test. If we examine the command regarding the *Akeida* with respect to its contents, we reach a dead end; there are no logical grounds to fulfill it. It clashes with a father's paternal love for his son, with the principles of morality, with the war against idolatry, and with the belief in God's promise that "in Yitzchak shall seed be called yours." About this Avraham says in the Midrash: "When You said to me: 'Take your son, your only son,' I had what to reply to You and I had what to say." With respect to the content of the command, Avraham could have put forward many arguments in his favor, arguments that ostensibly could not be refuted.

This notwithstanding, Avraham complies with the command to offer Yitzchak to God. This obedience has no justification based on the content of the commandment as understood by Avraham. Avraham’s conduct is based exclusively upon his connection and dedication to God and upon the full trust that he places in Him. Avraham proceeds toward the *Akeida* based on his devotion to the Divine command per se, not due to logic or identification with the content of the command as he understands it.

After the trial ends, and the extent of his connection becomes fully clear, the true dimensions of the relationship are revealed, and we can reconsider the substance of the command. We can see with clarity that God has no desire for such an act that contradicts morality and belief, and that He never wanted to take Yitzchak's life. All he wanted was Avraham’s willingness to offer his son’s life, expressing the depth of Avraham's connection to God.

The Midrash formulates this idea sharply:

When I said: "Take now your son" (*Bereishit* 22:2), I did not say: Slaughter him, but rather, "And bring him up." For the sake of love did I say [it] to you: I said to you: "And bring him up," and you have fulfilled My words. And now, bring him down… This is [the meaning of] what is written: “‘It did not come up in My heart’ (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5) — that is Yitzchak.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:8)

The story of the *Akeida* reveals the absolute connection of Avraham and Yitzchak to God. By virtue of the *Akeida*, Avraham and his descendants ask that God, too, return to His absolute connection to his sons, and reveal His full mercy to them. Therefore, when we mention the *Akeida* story in the *Zikhronot* blessing, we bring ourselves back to the absolute connection to God, and as a result, justice's gaze, which has been focused on the plane of actions, expands to include the plane of the original connection which has now been renewed, in light of which we merit exoneration. It is precisely the plane of the connection which stirs up within us the deep commitment to the fulfillment of the commandments, in light of the absolute devotion exhibited by the patriarch Avraham.

The *Zikhronot* blessing concludes with the words: "Who remembers the covenant." The covenant made for all generations teaches us that what is discovered at the *Akeida* is not something accidental or fleeting. The *Akeida* reveals and shapes a permanent connection between God and the people of Israel, to which we return every Rosh Hashana.

The return to the *Akeida* in the *Zikhronot* blessing reveals the absolute dedication that is found within us by virtue of Avraham, and God too contemplates our affiliation to this devotion:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Sound before Me a ram's horn so that I may remember on your behalf the binding of Yitzchak the son of Avraham, and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me. (*Rosh Hashana* 16a)

**The *Akeida* and the Garden of Eden**

Let us delve a little deeper into the story of the *Akeida*, and we will see a connection between it and the story of the Garden of Eden. *Chazal* see the patriarch Avraham as the one charged with repairing the sin of the first man, Adam:

Rabbi Levi said: "The greatest man among the giants" (*Yehoshua* 14:15) — this is Avraham. Why is he called "greatest"? For he should have been created before Adam, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Perhaps he will sin and there will be nobody to make repair. Therefore I will create Adam first, so that if he sins Avraham will come and make repair. (*Bereishit Rabba* 14, 6)

Avraham's greatness is connected to his fitness to repair the sin of Adam and Chava. The *Akeida*, which is the most difficult trial that Avraham endures, plays a major role in the repair of that sin and illuminates the character of Rosh Hashana.[[3]](#footnote-3)

When we examine the story of the *Akeida*, the threads that connect it to the story of the Garden of Eden are quite evident. The Torah alludes to a connection between the two stories in the accounts of the events themselves and of their consequences.

For example, the sin of Adam and Chava begins with taking: "And she took of the fruit" (*Bereishit* 3:6*)*; "and take also of the tree of life" (verse 22). Similarly, Avraham is asked at the beginning of his trial to take something: "Take now your son, your only son" (*Bereishit* 22:2). From this point on, the act of taking serves as the primary expression of Avraham's efforts to fulfill the command: "and he took two of his young men with him" (verse 3); "and Avraham took the wood of the burnt-offering" (verse 6); "and he took in his hand the fire and the knife" (verse 6); "and he took the knife to slay his son" (verse 10). The happy ending of the trial also takes place by way of an act of taking: "Avraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son" (verse 13).

The many instances of the term "taking" allude to the fact that Avraham's dedication to do the will of his Creator is greater than the tendency of Adam and Chava to follow their passions, indicating the depth of the repair accomplished by Avraham.

There is another significant parallel between the description of the sin itself and the climax of the *Akeida*, through the expression of "sending out a hand."[[4]](#footnote-4) In the story of Adam and Chava, the term is used in connection with the attempt to steal eternal life: "and now, lest he send out his hand, and take also of the tree of life" (*Bereishit* 3:22), whereas in the story of the *Akeida*, it is used to express Avraham's full readiness to waive his connection to eternal life in order to do the will of God, for his only son, whom he is about to sacrifice, is meant to be Avraham's successor: "And Avraham sent out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son" (*Bereishit* 22:10).

The parallel is found also in the consequences of each action. The account of Chava's punishment states: "I will greatly multiply your pain and your travail" (*Bereishit* 3:16); but in the blessing given to Avraham, this becomes: "And I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven" (*Bereishit* 22:17). In addition, flame and sword appear in the aftermath of Adam's sin to protect the garden: "So he drove out the man, and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life" (*Bereishit* 3:24); these very elements serve as instruments to fulfill God's command in the hands of Avraham. The fire parallels the flame, and the knife parallels the sword; with their help, Avraham carries out God's will in the story of the *Akeida.* The “flaming sword which turned every way” turns into an instrument of *mitzva* and devotion in the hands of Avraham.

Apart from the many linguistic connections, there is a deep connection between the commands given to Adam and those given to Avraham. Adam is ordered: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (*Bereishit* 2:16-17). God gives Adam all the good in the garden, forbidding only one thing to him: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In contrast, the command of the *Akeida* demands of Avraham that which to him is everything: the death of his son, who is his flesh and blood, and together with Yitzchak, all of Avraham’s present and future. Adam fails to withstand the test regarding the one item forbidden to him; whereas Avraham, who is meant to repair Adam's sin, withstands the test which is supposed to take from him everything.

**Where Are You? Here I Am.**

We have discussed many allusions that connect the two stories and suggest that Avraham's action is a sort of return to the level of the Garden of Eden; but what is the essential connection between the two stories, and how does the *Akeida* repair the sin of Adam?

Both in the story of the sin of Eden and in the story of the *Akeida*, the issue that stands at the heart of the story is man's connection to God. Adam detaches himself from God with his sin, whereas Avraham connects and cleaves to Him, by obeying his commands. In a broader sense, Adam shifts humanity from a state of connection to God to detachment from Him, whereas Avraham carries out the opposite transition to absolute devotion to the will of God.

Eden and the *Akeida* are inextricable linked when we consider God's conversation with Adam alongside His conversation with Avraham; the contrast is sharp and striking. When God turns to Adam, He asks him: "Where are you (*Ayeka*)?" (*Bereishit* 3:9). *“Ayeka”* characterizes the disconnection and the barrier between Adam and God, expressing the fact that the link between them has been broken. In contrast, the words, "Here I am (*Hineini*)" (*Bereishit* 22:1), which are used first by Avraham,express the deep connection between him and God, and Avraham's full readiness to comply with anything that God says, irrespective of the content.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Sages already note the connection between the two stories:

"And he looked, and behold (*ve*-*hinei*) a ram" (*Bereishit* 22:13).

Rabbi Eliezer says: It came from the mountains, for he grazed his animals there.

Rabbi Yehoshua says: An angel brought it from the Garden of Eden, and it grazed below the Tree of Life, and drank from the waters that passed beneath it, and the scent of the ram went forth throughout the world.

When was it put in the garden? At twilight of the sixth day of creation. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 101)

Abraham actualizes with the offering of the ram all that he intended to express through the sacrifice of Yitzchak. According to Rabbi Eliezer's explanation, this ram is an ordinary ram. Rabbi Yehoshua, on the other hand, reveals a deeper dimension, arguing that it is a special ram brought from the Garden of Eden and nurtured on the waters of the Tree of Life. The level reached by Avraham during the *Akeida* brings humanity back to the spiritual level which had been inaccessible ever since the banishment of Adam and Chava from the Garden of Eden on account of their sin, when the way to the Tree of Life was blocked. The Tree of Life expresses the essential bond between us and God.[[6]](#footnote-6) This connection is the formative dimension in the *Akeida* story, one which Adam and Chava lose when they detach themselves from God for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This connection is returned to the world by Avraham.

**The Place of Happiness**

The question that stands at the root of the comparison between Adam and Avraham is the following: Where is full and complete life found? Adam follows the illusion of the serpent who claimed that happiness is found in detachment from God. In contrast, Avraham is prepared to sacrifice life and happiness in order to cleave to God, thereby revealing that it is precisely total dedication that is the true source of life and blessing:

And he said: By myself have I sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" (*Bereishit* 22:16-17).[[7]](#footnote-7)

As we have mentioned, Avraham's blessing, "I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed," stands in contrast to the curse bestowed upon Chava, "I will greatly multiply your pain and your travail" (*Bereishit* 3:16). This correspondence is part of the broader picture of the relationship between the punishment of Adam and Avraham's life work. Chava's punishment, which turns childbirth into a difficult process, applies in a unique manner to Avraham and Sara over the course of many years at the beginning of their marriage, during Sara's years of barrenness. At the climax of his life, however, during the tenth trial which fully reveals his devotion to God, Avraham receives a blessing that repairs the curse pronounced upon Adam: "I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore. "Just as Adam's sin brings a curse upon all of mankind, Avraham's repair of that sin brings blessing to all who pass like sheep before God on Rosh Hashana: "And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have hearkened to My voice" (*Bereishit* 22:18).

**Remember Us Favorably**

We began with a question: How do we know that we will be remembered favorably on Rosh Hashana, the Day of Remembrance? The answer to this question is found in the last part of the *Zikhronot* blessing, which opens with the petition: "Remember us favorably before You."

In contrast to ordinary remembrance, which focuses exclusively on manifest events, the blessing relates to deeper memory, which takes us to the *Akeida* and to the depth of the connection that it created: ”Remember on our behalf, O Lord, our God, the covenant, the kindness, and the oath which You swore to our father Avraham on Mount Moriya" (*Musaf,* Rosh Hashana). The covenant, which is the strongest expression of a mutual connection between two parties, and the oath, which contains God's absolute commitment, emerge from the eternal and irrevocable connection founded upon the devotion exhibited in the story of the *Akeida.*

As we stand for judgment, we do not try to blur the memory and deny what happened over the course of the year, "For He who remembers all forgotten things are You, and there is no forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory" (ibid.). On the contrary, we try to enhance the memory to include the absolute connection between us and God, which does not expire and which cannot be forgotten: "And may You remember the Binding of Yitzchak on behalf of his descendants with compassion" (ibid.).

In contrast to the story of Adam and Chava, in which the serpent shapes their conception that the Divine will and human will contradict and compete with each other, the end of the blessing presents the opposite understanding, which is reflected in the reparative action of Avraham. This understanding teaches us that the desires of man and the desire of God can not only meet, but also merge with each other. Avraham can become filled with the readiness to do the will of God rather than his own will: "and how he suppressed his compassion to do Your will with a whole heart," and God can suppress His anger and desire His people Israel: "so may Your compassion suppress Your anger against us" (ibid.). Suppression of the desire of each party in favor of the desire of the other party can lead to a new place of deeper meeting between the two desires.

The *Zikhronot* blessing seeks to reunite us with our ancestors' deep devotion. When we stand for judgment on Rosh Hashana concerning our connection to God over the course of the past year, and we reconnect ourselves to the dedication of Avraham at the *Akeida*, the covenant stands in our favor and reveals the never-ending connection between us and God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See what the Maharal writes: "For this reason it is not written about Rosh Hashana that it is the day of judgment: because judgment in itself is not accepted and comfortable for man. Therefore it says only 'a remembrance of blowing,' in the hope that our remembrance before God by way of blowing the shofar will be favorable" (*Tiferet Yisrael*, Chap. 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. " May You remember today the Binding of Yitzchak on behalf of his descendants with compassion. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who remembers the covenant" (*Musaf,* Rosh Hashana). See *Pesachim* 104a regarding the requirement that the theme appearing immediately before the concluding formula must deal with the matter mentioned in the concluding formula. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The role of the *Akeida* in repairing Adam's sin is already noted by Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz (*Ye'arot Devash* I,I), and by others after him. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Sefat Emet* notes: "It is written: 'And now, lest he send out his hand, and take also of the tree of life' (*Bereishit* 3:22). For humanity's root is in the Garden of Eden, as it is written: 'And there He put the man' (*Bereishit* 2:8), but because of the sin he was expelled from there… And regarding Avraham it is written: 'And Avraham sent forth his hand' (*Bereishit* 22:10). He was ready to give up his life during this trial, and rose above nature, and took hold of the tree of life" (*Sefat Emet*, *Rosh Hashana* 5664, s.v. *Ketiv*). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This statement parallels the statement, "We shall do and we shall hear," proclaimed at Mount Sinai, with which the *Shofarot* blessing begins, immediately after the *Zikhronot* blessing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the connection between cleaving to God and the Tree of Life, see, for example, Maharal, *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv Ha-avoda*, Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is a connection between absolute dedication and receiving blessing. Absolute dedication begins with the idea that God is the source of life. When this idea turns into concrete consciousness, it becomes a source of absolute dedication and readiness to return life to its source; it also becomes a source of blessing, which receives additional life from its source. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)