YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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In memory of Batya Furst z"l
Niftera 28 Elul 5765.
Dedicated by her family.

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These Rosh Hashanah Shiurim are written in memory of Zina Gontownik, on the occasion of her 14th Yahrzeit, occurring on the 28th of Elul.

Dedicated by her children, Anne and Jerry, and her grandchildren, Shira and Ari, Daniela and Zev, Bellene and Yoni, Jordana and Ranan, Hillel, and Lilly and Ezra.

May Bubby’s soul be bound up in the bond of Eternal Life.

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In commemoration of the yahrzeit of Elke bat Binyamin Tzvi z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on 28 Elul, 16/17 September.

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**Certainty and Doubt Regarding the *Akeida***

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

### I. The poignant questions

Who among us can evaluate the depth of the faith of the father of believers, Avraham Avinu?

Based on our human judgment, Avraham should have experienced great confusion when he heard God's command to offer his son for a burnt-offering. First of all, God's command seems to contradict that which God Himself had promised Avraham when he sent Yishmael away: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you" (*Bereishit* 21:12). Second, God's command appears to contradict the prohibition of bloodshed that is binding upon all of the descendants of Noach, as well as the severe prohibition of human sacrifices. Third, the command contradicts "the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19), for what righteousness and justice is there in the slaughter of Yitzchak, who did nothing wrong?

These serious difficulties might have raised doubts in Avraham with regard to the command itself. We refer to two key doubts: The first doubt is whether he could be sure that, in fact, it was the Lord, his God, who spoke to him. Perhaps the voice he heard calling him to slaughter his son might have come from somewhere else (the voice of the *satan* or his wild imagination). The second doubt is whether he could be sure that he properly understood God's command, even if was convinced that it was God who spoke to him. Perhaps God's intention when he said "and offer him as a burnt-offering" was not that he slaughter and sacrifice him, but simply that he bring him up on the altar.

These two uncertainties raise a more fundamental question: To what extent can a person be certain that he has heard the voice of his Maker and that he has properly understood what He said?

The answers to these questions are exceedingly lengthy, and we will run out of ink before we exhaust the issues. These matters have been discussed by the greatest of minds, Jewish and non-Jewish, from the masters of Midrash, biblical exegesis, and *Chassidut* to the philosophers of recent generations. We will briefly address certain aspects of these questions.

### II. the certainty of prophecy

R. Yehuda Aryeh Alter of Gur, author of the *Sefat Emet*, noted that at first Avraham felt that it was possible that the command to slaughter his son was not God's command. This command seemed very strange, and he did not have the same feeling about it that he usually had about the word of God:

For certainly one who serves God out of love, his heart and gut are drawn to do the will of his Maker, to the point that all of his organs are drawn by their nature to do the will of their Maker… Indeed, it is true that it was not the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, that he slaughter Yitzchak, and Avraham's heart did not feel closeness or love in this service, since in fact this was not the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He. This was the test. And therefore it says: "And he saw the place [*ha-Makom*, which can be understood as a reference to God]" – the Holy One, blessed be He; "from afar" – without inner closeness. (*Sefat Emet*, *Vayera* 5641, s.v. *be-pasuk ata* *yadati*)

Already in the *midrash* we find the view that the *satan* tried to raise the doubt in Avraham that perhaps it was not God who spoke to him, but rather "the Seducer" [*mastin*]. Avraham, of course, did not surrender to this doubt of the *satan*:

The old man [the *satan*] said to him [Avraham]: That is not so; I was present when the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered you to take your son. Why should an old man, who begets a son at the age of a hundred, destroy him? Have you not heard the parable of the man who destroyed his own possessions and then was forced to beg from others? If you believe that you will have another son, you are listening to the words of the Seducer. And furthermore, if you destroy a soul, you will he held legally accountable for it. He [Avraham] answered: It was not the Seducer, but the Holy One, blessed be He, who told me what I must do, and I shall not listen to you. (*Tanchuma*, *Vayera* 22)

The doubts that Avraham harbored in his heart regarding whether it was the *satan* or God himself who had spoken are reflected in the words of the Jewish philosopher and great humanist of recent generations, Martin Buber:

When the issue is the suspension of the moral, the question of questions that takes precedence over every other is this: Are you really addressed by the Absolute or by one of his apes? (Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*)

Buber himself decides in favor of Avraham, but he sees his as an exceptional case, which could never provide an answer to another person were he placed in the same situation:

Avraham could never mistake another voice for that voice that had said to him: "Go you forth out of your country and from your kindred and from your father's house," which he recognized then as the voice of God without the speaker having identified himself.

In contrast to Avraham, the fitting guidelines for any other person are:

God himself demands of a person, not of Avraham His chosen one, but certainly of you and me, only "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." That is to say, not much more than fundamental morality.

Martin Buber argues in Avraham's favor that he could be certain of the truth of the harsh decree, but in his opinion, there was only one Avraham, and this is not the proper path for the rest of the world.

In contrast to Buber, Immanuel Kant, the greatest philosopher in modern times, asserts that even the actions of Avraham himself had no justification:

That I am forbidden to kill my good son – that is absolutely certain. But that you who appear to me are God I am not certain, and I cannot be certain about that even if the voice echoes from heaven. (*The* *Conflict of the Faculties*)

Kant's remarks indicate that he concedes that were it possible to reach the word of God with certainty, obedience to it would be more important than the principle of justice and morality. But such certainty is almost impossible to achieve, whereas certainty regarding justice and morality and the negation of Yitzchak's bloodshed is unequivocal.

Other philosophers went even further than Kant in rejecting the act of the *Akeida*, arguing that Avraham would have had no justification to violate what is just and moral, even had God commanded him to do so. In this forum we will not take the matter in that direction.

The Rambam in his *Guide for the Perplexed* proposed that the whole idea of the *Akeida* was to answer the argument regarding doubt concerning the truth of prophecy. The Rambam endorses the view that prophecy imposes its full certainty on man, and there is no room for uncertainty regarding the word of God that was told to him, as stated by the prophet:

And if I say: I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name, **then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones,** and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot. (*Yirmeyahu* 20:9)

Is not My word like as fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (*Yirmeyahu* 23:29)

 The Rambam explains as follows:

As for the story of Avraham at the Akeida, it contains two great notions that are fundamental principles of the Law… The second notion consists in making known to us the fact that the prophets consider as true that which comes to them from God in a prophetic revelation. For it should not be thought that what they hear or what appears to them in a parable is not certain or is commingled with illusion just because it comes about in a dream and in a vision, as we made clear… Accordingly, Scripture wished to make known to us that all that is seen by a prophet in a vision of prophecy is, in the opinion of the prophet, a certain truth, that the prophet has no doubts in any way concerning anything in it, and that in his opinion its status is the same as that of all existent things that are apprehended through the senses or through the intellect. A proof for this is the fact that Avraham hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved, even though this command came to him in a dream or in a vision. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and Avraham's soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III:24)

We find a similar view in *Midrash Ha-Gadol*:

"And Avraham rose up early in the morning." Scripture teaches the power of prophecy, for even though this was told [to Avraham] in a nocturnal dream or during the day in slumber, whatever a prophet sees is absolute certainty, with no doubt or question. Since the matter was true, and there was no doubt about it, Avraham hurried to slaughter his son, his only son, without hesitating or thinking that this prophecy wasn't true or that it was just the nonsense of dreams. (*Midrash Ha-Gadol Vayera*, p. 320)

### III. understanding the command

Even if we accept Avraham's certainty that what he heard was the voice of God speaking to him, there is room to ask whether Avraham could be certain that he properly understood the word of God, which might transcend human understanding. As stated above, this is a fundamental question, but it has a special element in the context of the *Akeida*, because God's wording was, in fact, not entirely clear: "And offer him there for a burnt-offering" (*Bereishit* 22:2) – what is the meaning of this "offering up"?

The *midrash* (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 24:12) struggled with this issue and attributed to Avraham a question in which he points out the contradiction in God's words. God had already promised him: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you" (*Bereishit* 21:12), while on the other hand, He is now asking that he offer him up as a burnt-offering. It is, however, important to emphasize that Avraham went to Mount Moriya unhesitatingly and without question. Only after he was commanded to take his son down from the altar did he try to understand God's way and raise questions. When he went to Mount Moriya, any question could have been interpreted as his conditioning his observance of God's commandment on his understanding it. Avraham's willingness to fulfill the word of God was absolute, and therefore in real time he asked no questions.

In any case, after Avraham spelled out his questions, God answers him as follows:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Avraham, I will not profane My covenant or change the utterances of My lips. When I said to you: "Take now your son," I did not say "slaughter him," but rather "and offer [literally, bring] him up as a burnt-offering.” Bring him up, and now take him down. (*Bereisht Rabba* 56:8)

This possibility is expressed in even sharper fashion in one version of another *midrash*:

And it is further written: "Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it to my mind" (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5): "Which I commanded not" – this refers to the sacrifice of the son of Mesha, the king of Moav… "Nor spoke it" – this refers to the daughter of Yiftach. "Neither came it to my mind" – this refers to the sacrifice of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham. (*Ta'anit* 4a)

Is this understanding, to bring Yitzchak up to the altar as a burnt-offering and then bring him down without giving of his blood to the altar, a reasonable understanding of God's command? Perhaps yes. In the case of an animal sacrifice, there is no point in bringing it up to the altar without actually sacrificing it:

Only be steadfast in not eating the blood; **for the blood is the soul** (*nefesh*)… And you shall offer your burnt-offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the altar of the Lord your God; **and the blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out against the altar of the Lord your God,** and you shall eat the flesh. (*Devarim* 12:23, 27)

Animal sacrifice means offering the blood, which is the soul of the animal. But in relation to man we find in the words of the prophet:

And Chana answered and said:… B**ut I poured out my soul** before the Lord. (I *Shemuel* 1:15)

The blood of an animal is poured upon the altar, because the blood is the soul, and the soul belongs to God. But a person can pour his soul before God in prayer before His altar; he does not have to pour on it the blood of his soul. In fact, prayer always corresponds to an offering. Offering Yitzchak up as a burnt-offering can thus refer to his crying before God while the knife was being held over his throat when he was on the altar. This was the pouring of his soul on the altar.

In fact, Chana's words before the altar in Shilo suggest another possible way to offer a beloved son to God:

And she vowed a vow, and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget Your handmaid, but will give to Your handmaid a man-child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.” (I *Shemuel* 1:11)

Similarly, in relation to the story of Yiftach, many have explained that his commitment to offer up as a burnt-offering whatever comes forth out of the doors of his house did not mean actual sacrifice, but setting aside for the service of God (see, for example, Radak, *Shofetim* 11:31).

However, if we accept this approach, the objection raised against Avraham's conduct becomes even stronger: It would have been possible to understand that God wanted to bring Yitzchak up to the altar, and nothing more. How, then, was Avraham convinced that the intention was full sacrifice with a knife and fire? The Malbim argues that indeed Avraham erred in his understanding of God's command:

*Chazal* have already said: "Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it to my mind" (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5) – this refers to *Akeidat Yitzchak.* But surely He commanded him: "And offer him up there as a burnt-offering"? And furthermore, how did He issue a command and then retract it? However, had Avraham been more precise, he would have understood that God had no intention whatsoever that Yitzchak be a burnt-offering… This proves, that that which He said: "Which I will tell you of" (*Bereishit* 22:2), does not refer to the mountain, but rather to "and offer him up there." That is to say, offer up that which I will tell you of, that is, the ram… From all of this, he should have understood the truth. But God spoke to him in a manner which he mistook to mean that Yitzchak himself was to be offered as a burnt-offering. And because of his great love and his great desire to fulfill His commandments and His great joy that his son merited to be a burnt-offering to God as a sweet savor, he did not investigate the matter, and he did not probe deeply, and he ran like a deer to quickly fulfill His commandment to the point that the angel had to stop him. (*Malbim* 22:2)

As opposed to the Malbim, we find one view that argues just the opposite: Avraham himself knew that it was not God's intention that he slaughter his son. R. Elimelech of Lezhensk writes as follows:

And it seems that we should explain that Avraham and Yitzchak actually knew that it was not God's intention that he be slaughtered, and that Avraham, whose attribute was the attribute of lovingkindness, went off in confidence that the two of them would return, as it is written: "And we will worship, and come back to you" (*Bereishit* 22:5). Nevertheless they went with total dedication as if to actually slaughter him. (*No’am Elimelech, Vayera*, s.v. *va-yomer hineh ha-esh ve-ha-etzim*)

Similarly, we find in the *midrash*:

At that time, the holy spirit was enkindled within him, and he prophesied that the two of them would return whole.[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Midrash Ha-Gadol, Vayera*, p. 352)

Avraham and Yitzchak were expected to demonstrate total dedication, even though it was clear to them that they would both return.

The two positions presented here are extreme and exceptional. The commentators who dealt with the issue generally claimed that that while it is possible to interpret God's command as not requiring Yitzchak's slaughter, this is an exceptional interpretation of God's intention only after Avraham was explicitly told not to lay a hand upon his son. At the beginning, Avraham, in the purity of his heart and soul, was correct to understand God's words in their plain meaning – that offering Yitzchak up on the altar included his slaughter.

If this is the meaning of God's command, all of the questions that accompanied Avraham return: What will be with Sara? What will happen to the promise: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you"? Avraham did indeed ask these questions, but as was already explained, the *Akeida* expresses the innocence of his faith. As the *midrash* puts it:

And I overpowered my passions and did not argue with You. (*Tanchuma, Vayera*, 23)

Avraham does not condition his fulfillment of God's command upon his understanding, but rather suppresses his questions.

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, the Admor of Izbica, presents an even deeper level of Avraham's faith. According to him, Avraham did not suppress his questions, but rather rose up above them. He knew that the command regarding the *Akeida* contradicted God's promise, but nevertheless, he continued to believe in the truth of all of God's words, as he had heard and received them:

What was tested at the *Akeida* was the magnitude of Avraham's faith in God. For even though He had said to him: “So shall your seed be” (*Bereishit* 15:5), and "But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak" (*Bereishit* 17:21), and now he was told: "Offer him up as a burnt-offering" (*Bereishit* 22:2), nevertheless he believed the first words as before, giving up nothing. This is faith – human reason cannot reach it. (*Mei Ha-Shiloach*, *Vayera*)[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. An entirely different way of "returning whole" from the *Akeida* is found in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (31), where it is suggested that Avraham killed Yitzchak, but Yitzchak merited resurrection. It is possible that the integration of resurrection in the second blessing of the *Amida* prayer, the blessing of Yitzchak, is connected to this *midrash*, but this is not the forum to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Mei Ha-Shiloach* wrote these words decades before the Danish philosopher Soren Kierekegaard, founder of the existentialist school of philosophy. In his book, *Fear and Trembling*, Kierekegaard speaks of Avraham as the "knight of faith," as one who believed he was bound to slaughter Yitzchak and as one who believed that Yitzchak would live by virtue of God's promise to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)