

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: The Akedah Revisited

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Who is the real hero of this tale? Is it the father, or the son? The mother? Or is it a story without any hero? Or is it a story in which everyone is a hero? We read the story, usually, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, with a very beautiful melody, *achar ha d'varim ha-ela*, which means, following all these things and events, God again, for the tenth and last time, [00:01:00] tested his chosen messenger and friend, and thus begins another chapter, another dramatic tale, in the history of the Jewish people's endless trials and tribulations. Harsh, but fascinating.

Somewhere, at dawn, a man and his son walk through secret mountain path towards an unknown destination. The father is old, very old, almost a hundred years old. But his pace is no less quick than that of his son, whose age is recorded as 37. Both seem preoccupied. What are they thinking about? Is it the future? Or perhaps, the past? The father thinks of God. The son, of his father. For the most part, they are silent, [00:02:00] as are the two servants walking behind them. They all feel that the event in which they are involved lies beyond

words and perhaps, beyond understanding. After three days, and three nights, the leader of the group stops. Is he tired? No. This tale is not about physical endurance. It is about something else.

It is about fear, and its limits. It is about faith, and eternity, and the eternal. The father knows it. Does the son feel it? They stop. They are almost at the journey's end, and soon, the curtain will rise on the last act of a story of infinite solitude. Soon, [00:03:00] a father and his son, both prisoners of their faith, will be alone, as only someone who is going to confront death, or cause death, can be alone.

And so, they are about to lead us into the tale of the *Akedah*. We have been there at least once before. Let us observe them. This is not the first time. We studied this disturbing episode, of an aborted human sacrifice, ordered by God, more than a quarter of a century ago, here. It seems that we, sons and daughters of the Jewish people, have not finished, nor shall we ever finish, telling and retelling it, whenever we feel compelled to grasp the meaning of our sadness, [00:04:00] both individual and collective, at God's behavior towards those who believe in Him. Perhaps, in spite of Him.

The *Akedah* is always topical, and this year, perhaps, more so. I think I cannot not share with you something that we all lived through, two weeks ago. The story of a young man called Nachshon Wachsman. Like you, I, too, have followed every minute of the tragedy. The way, the way the terrorists, crazy with cruelty, and inhumanity, the way they treated him. The way they killed him. And then, the dignity of the parents. [00:05:00] There is something in that story which is an *Akedah*. Here was one young man, pious, virtuous, a friend of his friends, and he was killed. Not by his father -- fathers don't kill in our tradition -- but by the enemy, for no reason. Just to show that they are strong. Big deal.

Anyone can kill. The stupidest person in the world can take life. And then, we saw the parents. It was Friday evening. The mother was lighting Shabbat candles. Waiting for the promised event to happen. [00:06:00] On the other side, the best unit of the Israeli army, the *Sayeret Matkal*, the commander-in-chief's unit, tried to rescue him. And I read what the deputy chief of the *Shin Bet*, of the Security Service, said. He said his dream was to rescue the boy, and take him in his arms, and bring him to his parents without announcing his coming first. And make him sit at the table. Instead, a general, a certain Yair, came, knocked at the door, told the story.

And the parents and their children and their friends began reciting psalms. There was no anger, it was Shabbat. There was no [00:07:00] expressed sadness. It was Shabbat. The dignity of the parents. And so I thought of the *Akedah*. How long will the *Akedah* last? The *Akedah*. That is what this tale, the tale of fathers and sons who believe in the eternal justice of the Eternal -- the tale is called in Jewish theological literature, the Binding -- the Binding of Isaac by his father, Abraham.

Naturally, the story provokes many questions. How can a father kill his son? A Jewish father, especially one who has never done anything to hurt him? There is no record of any misunderstanding between them, any dissension between them, or any distance between them. Why did he accept to kill him?

[00:08:00] Only because God had ordered him to do so? How could God give a father such a cruel and inhuman order? When we first explored this majestic but frightening episode in scripture, I said that this strange tale is about fear and faith, fear and defiance, fear and laughter. Terrifying in content, it has become a source of consolation to those who, in retelling it, make it part of their own experience. Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained by the single spark by which it comes to life.

Every major theme, every passion, every obsession, that makes Judaism the adventure it is, can be traced back to it. Man's anguish when he finds himself face to face with God. His quest for purity and purpose. The dilemma of having to choose between [00:09:00] dreams of the past and nightmares of the future. Between absolute faith and absolute justice. Between the need to obey God's will and the need to rebel against it. Between his yearning for freedom, and for sacrifice, his desire to justify hope and despair with words and silence, the same words and the same silence -- it is all in the *Akedah*.

When we analyzed the Biblical text, with the indispensable help of Midrashic sources, I tried to understand the event from Abraham's viewpoint alone. It was the father that appealed to me. It was the father that haunted me. It was the father that was the center of my interest, of my exploration. Of my investigation. I tried to understand the father. After all, he is the central character of the narrative. It is God who spoke to Abraham.

God, Almighty and Eternal, [00:10:00] He remains eternally misunderstood. How did Rabbi Eleazar HaKalir of the eighth century put it? "Ilu yedativ, heyitiv, If I would know God, I

would be God." Isaac? Isaac, he can be defined in the text by a single word, on the surface. Submission. Obedient, too obedient. He always does what he's asked to do. But Abraham? How can we solve his problem? He must have been torn between his loyalty to God and his love for his son. *Chesed l'Avraham, Avraham* -- Abraham, to us, is always *b'bechinat chesed*, in the category of grace, of compassion, of love.

And then, I think, 25 years ago, a quarter of a century ago, I did find a new human approach, too, and a new psychological interpretation of [00:11:00] Abraham's role in the *Akedah*. At that time, I worked, as always, then, with a man whose name I always mention, because he was my teacher and my friend, Rabbi - - *Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman z"l*, and we went through the *Akedah*, and he accepted my interpretation, which was, to me, the greatest compliment.

At that time, the world was younger. And so were we. And that was the era of student uprisings, everywhere, in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, in San Francisco. Campuses were in turmoil, the establishment was the target for young people's anger. It was dangerous to be old. (laughter) It was dangerous to possess knowledge. It was dangerous to have titles. In Paris, students occupied the Sorbonne, and in Manhattan, [00:12:00] they took

over Columbia. Granted, the motives varied from place to place. In the United States, the students' goal was to end the war in Vietnam. The war in Vietnam did not end on the battlefield, it ended on the campus.

In Europe, it was something else. A determination to narrow the generation gap. The goal belonged to the past, they said. But was Jean-Paul Sartre that young? He was not. But he yielded to their passion. The real, new prophet? A German-Jewish social philosopher, Herbert Marcuse. Who remembers his name? (laughs) Whatever was old, therefore, whatever was accepted, whatever was part of the acquired knowledge, was rejected by those who were proud of their youth. It was a rebellion of the sons against the fathers.

Is this the reason why I chose, [00:13:00] then, the *Akedah* as the subject for one of our first study sessions here? To acknowledge the impact of the zeitgeist on every academic's unavoidable search for good topics? Was it my wish to transpose into the present the ancient episode of a father, who had problems with his son? Did Isaac intrigue me more than Abraham? No. Abraham, then, intrigued me. And the *Akedah*, as we know, when you study the text about it, the *Akedah* has fascinated, throughout the centuries, poets and painters, philosophers and

theologians. In Denmark, Kierkegaard used it as the cornerstone for his existentialist theories. You remember, "fear and trembling." In Holland, Rembrandt, who dwelt in the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam, was inspired by its intensity, and I love to study [00:14:00] Rembrandt's dream and interpretation of the *Akedah*. In the beginning, he had drawings to prepare the painting, and the drawings -- you can see the development, you can see the progression. The first drawings are the imagined, or accepted, projection. Abraham as a fierce old man, with his knife -- with his knife in his hands, and Isaac, poor Isaac, was stretched out on the altar.

Rembrandt, who had a -- he had a feeling for things Jewish. His portrait of the Jew was a beautiful classic approach to the Jew whom he had known, and that we remember. So, at first, Abraham cruel, and slowly, gradually, Abraham became less cruel.

[00:15:00] After the tenth or the fifteenth drawing, it's no longer Abraham with his knife. It is Abraham and Isaac embracing, and the knife is on the ground. And that became the portrait. That became the painting.

So, we know that not only in painting, but also in philosophy, in history, Christian thinkers saw in the *Akedah* a prefiguration

of Golgotha. Except that in the Bible, Isaac did not cry out in protest. And Isaac was saved by God's angel.

As with all my work on Jewish texts, I was helped, naturally, by the text. I was helped by the sources. By the commentaries. And they are so imaginative, and they are so beautiful. So this year, again, as we open our annual series of encounters [00:16:00] with our forebears, together we shall study their stories, and in the process, watch them walk mysterious paths, leading from human affection to divine love, and the other way around. Everything is in the text, affirms the Talmud, and of course, the Talmud is right: Hafokh ba va'hafokh ba, dikhola va, turn the pages, repeat our ancestors' words, and you will always find in scripture a new idea, an old new idea, a new old way of receiving its light. To study their legacy is to enter their universe, and meet those who make words sing and dreams catch fire.

And so, my friends, let us enter that universe. And as for those who find it difficult to enter, may they be reassured. Whoever wishes [00:17:00] to enter study will never be excluded. To him or her, the doors are open. (laughter) (applause)
(pause)

So, let us begin again. And, forgive me, I cannot resist the tune. [00:18:00] When we sing it, when we read it, on Rosh Hashanah, we say, Vayihi akhar hadevarim haeyle, vi'haElokim nisa et Avraham vayomer eylav . . . I won't continue.

(laughter) Well, again, following all these things, God tested Abraham again, for the tenth time, by ordering him to bring his son as an offering. And not -- this son means what? God wanted him to bring his hope for the future, as well as his faith in God's promise.

And, the text goes on, saying, Vayashkem Avraham be'boker, and Abraham rose in the morning hours, woke up his son, picked up dry wood and fire, and accompanied by [00:19:00] two young servants -- *n'arav* means, "must be young" -- began his journey towards the place to be shown by God Himself. At the first reading, the story seems simple and logical. Man's faith may and even must be tested. If God decides to test anyone, who is arrogant enough to say, don't? Though God knows the outcome, man does not.

And that applies to all human beings, of all creeds, and more so, to the very first believer, Abraham, who, thanks to his ability to ask the proper, necessary questions, discovered in his youth that God is one, and eternal. He has already endured

nine trials. This one, the most difficult, will be the last.

[00:20:00] God who gave him his son now wants him back. What is Abraham's response? He does not weep. Nor does he hesitate for even a second. Without asking for any explanation, he submits immediately to God's will. But at the very last minute, when Isaac is already bound to the altar, a heavenly voice prevents the deed from being done. The tragedy is averted, the drama unfulfilled.

The story has all the characteristics of a great happy ending. Everybody's happy. God, because He is not disappointed by Abraham. Abraham, because God was merciful. Isaac? (laughs) Because he is alive. Isaac, because he came back from very far. Bravo, everybody. All is well, [00:21:00] since death is defeated.

But then, how is one to explain the anguish which pervades the narrative? And the fear that invades the reader's heart as he follows Abraham and Isaac to Mount Moriah? In other words, since the story is uplifting in its outcome, why do we approach it with a singular trembling that reminds us of the days of judgement? Clearly, when we reread the story, we stumble upon problems and obstacles, for the behavior of the principal

protagonists, in plural, seems incomprehensible. Who appears to be more heartless, God or Abraham?

As for Isaac, we fail to understand his passivity. Why doesn't he resist? Or at least, argue? He could say to his father, among other things, that while Abraham must obey a commandment given by God, he, [00:22:00] Isaac, received no such commandment. Nowhere is it written that God told Isaac to allow himself to be sacrificed by his father. Why, then, should he take part in the ritual? He could say to Abraham, "Look, Father, if God wants me to die for Him, I would gladly do so. But the least He can do is tell me Himself." (laughter)

And yet, Isaac accepts his faith. Could it be that his father's behavior shocked him into silence and paralysis, or numbness? Mind you, Isaac is always like that. Isaac, of all the three patriarchs -- he is the most discreet one. He is the silent one. He is the poet. He is the poet of the three, of the patriarchs. He is the only one who never left his home. And he is the one who composed the prayer, [00:23:00] the *Mincha*. He would walk, he would walk, and dream. He was a dreamer. Dreamers have no sense for practical decisions. Let others make decisions. Poets are there to decide whether a word is good, but not whether an action is necessary.

But what about Sarah? The quintessential Jewish mother. What is her part in the story whose outcome affected the destiny of an entire people, and of so many others? What did she do? What happened to her? What kind of son did she bring up, who was so submissive?

Now, let us examine the text by scrutinizing the characters. First of all, naturally, there is, and always will be, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Creator of all things. At the origin of history, He lives in all stories. [00:24:00] So He is there. His presence is there. God is, and that is enough.

Then, there is Abraham. He is at the center of the drama. It is through him that the divine trial finds its illustration and accomplishment. Of course, there is the silent Isaac, the classic victim. And we think of Isaac -- we think of Isaac, usually, when we think, even in modern times, of all those fathers and sons and brothers and sisters, who were faced with death and so many of them went, simply, with prayers on their lips. They succeeded Isaac. Isaac is his father's victim, just as Abraham is God's.

Now, Sarah? [00:25:00] In scripture, she is kept, so to speak, in the dark, or quite simply, offstage. You know, in those times, not like today, women were always offstage. (laughter) But Sarah is present, and very much so, in Midrashic literature, where she pays the price for heavenly plots. Midrashic commentators look at two other characters: Isaac's older brother, Ishmael, and Satan. The good old fallen angel, on whom we may forever count to separate father from son, man from his or her fellow mortals, and all of us from our Creator.

And now, having projected them all onstage, on the stage of memory, and legend, and imagination, perhaps, we ought to observe ourselves as well, so as to understand our own attitudes towards the *Akedah*. Who are we, in relation to its protagonists? [00:26:00] On whose side do we stand? Do we favor the father, or the son? Or God?

In the beginning, one might say that the *Akedah* is a private affair. A private matter, between God and Abraham alone. We said it earlier: it is the last trial of the first believer. Abraham won the nine previous ones. They were all of a physical nature. He had to confront the unknown inherent in pain and adversity. He fought mighty kings. He emerged from a burning furnace unharmed. This time, the suffering is mental,

psychological. Will he, or will he not, bring honor to God by becoming an orphaned father? Only God, and God alone, knows the answer. Does Abraham know the question?

[00:27:00] Talmudic sages felt compelled to interrogate the Biblical text. Why does God inflict suffering on Abraham, who was the first to proclaim His uniqueness? God had no better friend than Abraham. Why does God torment those who love Him? Instead of rewarding them with joy and serenity, He constantly plagues them with troubles and misfortune. Is this just? Is this fair? In the Midrash, a generous explanation is offered to the student. Whatever God did to Abraham was for his own good. So many enemies of the Jewish people used to say that through the centuries. When they made us suffer, it was for our own good. Thanks for the gift. (laughter)

But God wanted, says the Midrash, to strengthen Abraham.

[00:28:00] To give him self-assurance. And now, because of the trials and thanks to the trials, he knows that he can take his faith to the limits. Does it mean that he didn't know this before? Before, he thought he could, but now he knows that he will. He will be able to be strong, and to use his strength to affirm his faith.

Another approach, and another possibility. That God tested Abraham as to make him into a symbol. To single him out to other nations, as if to say, "Look at him. Look. See the depth of his faith in me. See to what lengths he was willing to go. Nothing will frighten or discourage him in his work on my behalf." To Abraham, God said, "I shall make you into a *nes la-goyim*. *Nes* means miracle, but also, banner. *Nes* and *nisayon*, trial, are etymologically close. [00:29:00] For Abraham to become a banner, a guide for all the nations on the earth, he must endure trials and hardship, and tests. To be worthy of the mission entrusted unto him by God, he must suffer at the hand of man and God. In the eyes of God, therefore, we are told, nothing is gratuitous.

But there is a third Midrashic version that explains the *Akedah* in terms of God's need to defend Himself against the envious and the jealous. Listen. Says the Midrash, "If God -- if tomorrow, people criticize God for His alleged favoritism, claiming that He crowns and enriches those whom He loves, God will answer them, 'Why not? Would you be capable of doing what Abraham has done?'" What? [00:30:00] Is it possible that God is worried about what people would say? Since when is God, the judge of all that exists, concerned with gossip? Or criticism? Or with what evil tongues might insinuate with regard to His intentions?

So let us quickly, to balance the effect of what we just read, quote other sources and other hypotheses. Some sages blame Abraham, and invoke an argument which Satan will use later, namely, that he, Abraham, had forgotten to thank God for giving him a son, which means, Abraham was not grateful, and we know -- I know, and I'm sure you do, that gratitude is probably one of the most cherished virtues in the Jewish tradition. A Jew is he or she who knows the measure and the weight of gratitude.

[00:31:00] The first prayer we say in the morning when we wake up is *Modeh Ani l'fanecha*, I thank You. The whole tradition, the whole ethical attitude of life -- towards life -- of the living towards life, can be explained through gratitude. No people, no community, no ethnic group, is as grateful as we are to those who deserve our gratitude.

So Satan says, "Look, Abraham had forgotten to thank God. Oh yes, he did arrange a huge party for his friends and neighbors when Isaac was born, but not a single animal, not even a dove, was offered to God in gratitude." God didn't care, really. But others did. Who were they? Evil angels, or Satan himself. And they said, "Look how thankless Your Abraham is. He remembered everybody, except You." [00:32:00] At which point God answered, "Come on. Really? Your accusations are baseless and silly.

Were I to ask Abraham to offer me not an animal, but his own son, he would do so, gladly." Well, that is how it happened. (laughter)

One source suggests that Abraham himself thought up the idea. It was he who remembered his fault, or omission, later, and became remorseful. That is when he asked God to test his faith in absolute terms. The *Akedah*, then -- what is it? A divine punishment? Or something else? A way of allowing Abraham to overcome his guilt, which he, as the first Jew, must have carried within himself? (laughter)

Some sages take another tack. They place the responsibility with Isaac. [00:33:00] You see, there is nothing new about blaming the victim. And, for good measure, these commentators also blame his brother, Ishmael. According to this hypothesis, Ishmael returned from the desert, where Abraham had exiled him and his mother, Hagar, and once at home again, the two brothers quarreled -- what else could they do? Nothing else to do.

The older one, Ishmael, began, saying, "Isaac, I am better than you. I am more observant than you. I am more pious than you. Look, I was circumcised at the age of 13." "And I," replied Isaac, "at the age of eight days. So I was earlier. I preceded

you." "Then," said Ishmael, "I have more merits than you."
"How is that?" Isaac wondered. "I," said Ishmael, "was old
enough to protest, [00:34:00] yet I did not." At that moment,
Isaac reflected aloud, "I so wish God would ask me to offer Him
a limb of my body. I would gladly give it to Him." And God
acceded to his desire, and gave Abraham the order, which, you
know.

Yet, another version of the same dialogue. To Ishmael's
argument that he was a consenting adult when he was circumcised
by his father, Isaac replied, "True. But you gave God only
three drops of your blood, whereas I, at 37, am ready and
willing to allow myself to be slaughtered, if God so ordered
me." And then God said to him, "Thy hour has come." All this
is perfect. Except for the fact that it is not mentioned in
scripture. Why is there not even a hint in the text? In the
Bible, God speaks to Abraham, [00:35:00] not to Isaac.

As for Abraham, he breaks his silence when he addresses not his
son, but his two servants. Instructed them, "Wait there for us
until we return," *v'nashuva aleichem*, both, we shall return.
And so, the *Akedah* is a conflict between Abraham and God. And
no one else. Deprived of personal initiative, Isaac's role is
of secondary importance. Unaware of what is happening, it is

only later, much later, at the end of a long journey, that he turns to his father Abraham and says, only one word, "Avi." Father. Just that word. And Abraham answers. One word. "Hineini," Here I am.

And then Isaac continues. "You told me that we are going to offer a lamb [00:36:00] as a sacrifice to God. I see the fire. I see the dry wood. But where is the lamb?" Until then, father and son walked together, vayeilkhu shnekhem yakhdav, but were united in silence, but not in awareness. Is Isaac really 37 years old? Based on its own data and calculations, the Talmud's answer is affirmative. But the great Judeo-Spanish commentator, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, objects. "If," he says, "Isaac was in fact, that old, the Bible would have celebrated his piety, his love for God, not Abraham's. After all, to be ready to kill is less terrifying than to be killed, especially by one's own father."

However, there is still another theory, advanced by the marvelous Midrash, [00:37:00] which feeds our imagination and helps us in the exploration of these characters. This theory advances -- projects a different image of Isaac. The image of a son devoted to his father and to their common faith. He learns, or guesses, the impending future, either from the lips of his

father, or, according to another version, from those of Satan. And his response is total acceptance. His sacrifice, or martyrdom, is the result of a choice on his part. Rather than run away, as he could have done, according to Ibn Ezra, he encourages his father to accomplish God's will. He asks him to tie him to the altar, so as to prevent him from moving and thus, interfering with the ritual act. If so, one thing remains clear: [00:38:00] Isaac did not know, could not have known, that the *Akedah* is only a test.

What about Abraham? Did he know? Did he guess? When? If the answer is yes. All these questions are pertinent, but in all hypotheses, one point remains clear. Tradition ascribes to Abraham the main part. He is at the center, always. All the threads lead to him. Isn't he the ally of God, who told him, "Ani yekhidi ve-ata yekhidi, I am alone and so are you. You alone believe in me, and you alone broke with your past in order to follow me." Whatever God made him do was a means to strengthen their bonds. In life in general, in Abraham's in particular, all events are linked. There is no coincidence in Jewish history. [00:39:00]

Why does the *Akedah* follow so closely the episode of Sodom? The two events belong to the same *sidrah* of *Vayera*. In the first,

we see Abraham trying desperately, courageously, to save the sinful city and its corrupt inhabitants. Has God asked him to do that? Has anyone invited him to do that? Has anyone come to him and said, "Be our lawyer"? He appointed himself defense attorney for an urban agglomeration, where not even ten just men could be found to justify God's forgiveness.

Wasn't it a waste of Abraham's energy and time? Didn't he know that God's blessings could not be obtained through negotiations? (laughs) *Ha'af tispe tzaddik im rasha*, he pleaded with God. "Are You really going to condemn and eliminate at the same time, [00:40:00] the just and the wicked? Together?" *ha'af* means also, but Onkelos the proselyte prefers to translate it as "anger." It is with anger that Abraham argued with God, or it is Abraham who argued with God's anger. What?

Abraham, God's loyal servant, dare to speak with anger? And mention His possible injustice? Or is Abraham appealing to anger rather than compassion? If Onkelos' interpretation is correct, we understand better the reason for the *Akedah*. It would then be a kind of punishment, aimed at Abraham, putting him back in his place. As if God had wished to tell Abraham, "Well, well. You showed such concern for the fate of thieves, liars, scoundrels, and murderers. [00:41:00] Let's see whether

you will demonstrate the same compassion for an innocent human being, namely, your own son. The one, the only one, you love.”

Logically, Abraham should now implore God to spare Isaac, just as he had done for the citizens of Sodom. But he did not. Is it that human logic differs from divine intent? If so, which must prevail? So, what is the *Akedah*? A punishment? This theory found expression in another Midrashic source, which blames Abraham for favoring Isaac over Ishmael. And thus, God’s order becomes more plausible. What was it? Remember: *Kakh na binkha, et yakhidkha, asher ahavta*, “Take your son, your only son, the one you love.” [00:42:00] What? Isaac? The only son? What about Ishmael?

Repudiated by Abraham, was he also forgotten by God? To better understand the text, I suggested a different punctuation. That is, removing one of the two commas. “, *Kakh na et binkha, take your son, comma, et yahidkha asher ahavta , the only one you loved. I want him as an offering.*” In parentheses, may we add, that in the Koran, it is Ishmael who is more beloved, and it is he who is chosen by God as a sacrifice. Only, Abraham’s role remains unchanged. The role of a father who looks straight ahead, fearing no one except God, whom he loves more than anyone, even more than his own son.

Now, let us return to our question about Abraham's awareness of the *Akedah* as nothing but a test. Did he know or didn't he? [00:43:00] Most Talmudic commentators answer negatively, otherwise Abraham's determination to obey God's orders would be meaningless. Does it take courage to confront death, when one knows that the victim will survive? Is it only theatre? At the end, the victim stands up and takes a bow? Until the very end, I believe he was supposed to have been kept in the dark. That is what the Midrash says. May I humbly beg, for once, to differ.

With all my heart, I believe that Abraham knew. I believe that his faith in God was so powerful, so anchored, so total, that he couldn't conceive at any moment that God would really ask him to bring his son, his only son, whom he loved, [00:44:00] as a sacrifice. I believe that he knew, and yet, his deed is among the greatest imaginable. No wonder Maimonides regards Abraham with such reverence. In his eyes, Abraham, and not Moses, was the greatest innovator in Jewish history. Neither before nor after has anyone opened the gates to such compelling truth. Moses transmitted what he received from our ancestors. Abraham discovered on his own, everything. The uniqueness of God. The presence of God. The everlasting presence of God in history.

The *Akedah*? A turning point in humankind's religious history. Until then, in pagan societies, children would often be killed in honor of the gods. Abraham's experience would put an end to those practices. Children symbolized life, [00:45:00] not sacrifice. It is through life and its sacredness that father and son are bound together. But then, the theologians wonder, why did Abraham choose God over Isaac? And then I ask, did he? Commentators say yes. Among Christian philosophers, Kierkegaard especially was troubled by the *Akedah*, which had an impact on his entire religious *weltanschauung*. In his book, *Fear and Trembling*, already mentioned, he describes the ultimate scene between father and son on Mount Moriah.

"Suddenly," says Kierkegaard, and I quote him, "suddenly, Abraham turned his face away from Isaac, and when he looked at him again, his expression was no longer the same. His gaze was wild, and his countenance frightening. He seized Isaac and [00:46:00] threw him to the ground and said, 'You stupid boy, do you really think that I am your father? A pagan, that's what I am. You think I'm about to fulfill God's commandment? It is my own desire that I am following.' Then, Isaac trembled with fear, and exclaimed, 'Oh God in heaven, have mercy on me. I have no father. You be my father.' And Abraham thought,

'Master of the Universe, better that he take me for a savage than to lose his faith in You.'" End of quote.

In other words, Kierkegaard's view is somewhat like the Talmud's, namely, that Abraham was unaware of the outcome of the *Akedah*. He is convinced that Isaac will die at his hands, but out of compassion for his son and his love of God, he tried to save Isaac's faith, rather than his life. But Isaac, in his mind, listens. Listens to his father, and his father says, [00:47:00] "Let Isaac give up on his father, but not on God." And with all my admiration for the Danish theologian, I feel, again, I must disagree with his interpretation. I do not believe that it was the intent of those who established the foundation of our faith to show a father as a cruel murderer, for no -- there is no excuse for that. I don't believe that.

I, therefore -- I believe that Kierkegaard was wrong, and it has to do -- his error is part of an entire context of the story. Though it is at one level a story of obedience rooted in faith, I believe it is also a tale of defiance anchored in faith. There is defiance in faith, [00:48:00] and it doesn't diminish the faith. I believe that in the *Akedah*, we meet an exceptional man. An extraordinary faith. A man of faith who allows himself

to challenge his Creator, and ours, by saying to Him, "Let us see whether You really want me to slaughter my son."

It is the first time a human being forces God kaviyachol, as it were, to be charitable and merciful. We have attempted, 25 or six years ago, to bring forth textual evidence, all drawn from Midrashic sources, in support of such an approach. Abraham was not ready to go to the end. That is why he told his two servants that not I, but we, shall return to you. After having kneeled and prayed to God. He knows, he feels, the outcome. In the depths of his being, he knows, that at the last minute, [00:49:00] God will revoke the order. And to God, he says, "Yes," but he thinks, "No." As if to say, "Let's see who of the two of us will blink first."

And Isaac, our friend. What about him? Why was he made to suffer, to endure anguish and agony? (laughs) It was a quarrel between Abraham and God, and he was the victim. His image disturbs me in this majestic chapter, which, in addition to everything else, must be included among the literary gems of religious texts. The tale, a tale of anguish, is condensed, filled with tension, packed with drama. But why is the focus so much on the father? [00:50:00] To me, it is the story of Isaac.

It is because in scripture, Isaac appears to be pale and weak, rarely, if ever, having an opinion, an idea, a belief of his own. He lets others decide for him. His father says, "Come, let's go for a walk," and he leaves home without even saying goodbye to his mother. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, playing the matchmaker, advises him to marry Rebecca. And he becomes her husband, at the age of 40. Rebecca favors Jacob over Esau, and Isaac, who prefers Esau, ends up blessing her protégé.

When Philistines see his wife and admire her beauty, he claims she is his sister. Asked by the king why he lied, he admits that he was afraid that the Philistines might kill him. When he and his shepherds later quarreled with Philistines over wells, he retreats to other places. A pacifist, Isaac? No. A dreamer. [00:51:00]

Was he like that before the *Akedah*? Was he ever a rebel? Did he ever feel the need to say no? To assert his right to live his life, rather than the one shaped for him by others? What did he feel? What did he think, when alone with his father, he discovered a knife in his hands?

Isaac, in his shyness, must have led a sheltered life until then. He was Sarah's boy, Sarah's cherished and spoiled child.

Abraham was always away, away from home. Abraham was a kind of statesman, a world leader, traveling on missions entrusted to him by God, fighting kings and converting their subjects. A religious leader, a social agitator, he must have had little time for his own son. He was rarely at home. [00:52:00] It was Sarah who brought him up. Consequently, Isaac must have missed his father, and dreamt of the day when he would have him all to himself, so they could talk, eat, pray, dream together, maybe play together.

So for 37 years, he waited for that day, and finally, it arrived. Finally, his father said, "Come. Let's go. We shall be alone." Together they went on what would be called a bonding journey today. (laughter) And then, all of a sudden, Isaac discovered the truth. His father did not take him along to enrich his life, but shorten it. (laughter) So if one has to take sides in this tale, on whose side would you be?

Well, when in doubt, open the Midrash. And there, we come across a third protagonist, [00:53:00] who offstage, will move heaven and earth to save Isaac. Who is he? Satan. Unlike God kavyachol, he speaks to both father and son. An eternal intruder, he appears always where he is not expected. His goal? To convince God that his dear friend Abraham is not sincere, and

his faith, not trustworthy. He believes in God only when it's good for him. Proof? "Look," Satan says. "Abraham will never do God's will. He will find a thousand and one excuses for disobeying the order." And so that's really the Midrash, which is a very beautiful text.

As Abraham journeyed towards Mount Moriah, an old man appeared before him. It was Satan in disguise, and he inquired, "Where are you going?" "To prayer," said Abraham. "With a knife? [00:54:00] With a fire stone and wood? Nobody goes to prayer like that." "Well," Abraham explained, "we may be delayed a day or two. We then would have to slaughter the lamb, place it on a fire, to feed ourselves. We'd be hungry. It's wise to be prepared for all eventualities." Thereupon, Satan dropped his mask and exclaimed, "Poor old man, with your silly old tales. Do you think you can fool me? Don't you know I was present meakharei hapargod, behind the screen up in heaven when the order was given?"

Was it because he was caught in, let's say, a non-truth, that Abraham did not reply, but Satan, turned moralist, continued shouting, "Tell me, old man, have you lost your mind? Have you emptied your heart of all human feeling? Will you really sacrifice the son given to you at the age of 100?" "Yes," said

Abraham, "I shall." "But tomorrow, old fool, He will demand more sacrifices, more cruel yet. [00:55:00] Will you perform them, too?" "Yes, I hope so," replied Abraham. "But tomorrow, poor mortal, He may accuse you of murder. He, who issued the order. He will condemn you for having obeyed. Will you go ahead nevertheless?" "Yes, I will," answered Abraham.

I have a problem there. Why did Abraham engage in dialogue with Satan? And since he did, why didn't he refute his arguments? How could Abraham countenance Satan saying that God may make Abraham do more cruel things? For a father, is there anything more cruel than becoming his son's slaughterer? Anyway, having failed with Abraham, Satan tried his luck with Isaac, to whom now he appeared disguised as a young boy.

"Where are you going?" "To study Torah," said Isaac. "Now, or after your death?" [00:56:00] (laughter) "What a foolish question," answered Isaac. "Now. Don't you know that the law was given only to the living?" "Poor son of a poor woman," said Satan. "For years and years your mother lived in hope and prayer to give birth to you, and now this old man, your father, has gone mad. Look at him. He's going to kill you." Isaac did not believe him. Instead, he looked at his father with love. So Satan went on feigning compassion.

"Yes, you are about to die. Believe me. And do you know who will be happy? Your brother, Ishmael, because your clothes, your possessions" -- today, you would say, your toys -- "your gifts, meant for you -- he will get them all." And this argument, so childish, so human, gave Isaac pause. And he turned to his father and whispered, "Look. [00:57:00] Look at this person, father. Listen to what he is saying." "Don't pay any attention to him," said Abraham. "Don't pay any attention to his words."

In the enchanting Midrashic source, the story does not end there. Satan rarely concedes defeat, and to stop Abraham, he tries everything. His imagination knows no boundaries. He transforms himself into a cloud, into a river, but Abraham perseveres. He's not afraid of drowning or anything else. Finally, Satan uses his most dangerous weapon: truth. And he says, "Abraham, this is what I heard up there in heaven: Ha'se ha-olah, the lamb will be sacrificed. The lamb, not your son." In other words, why torment yourself and your son? All this is nothing but a test, [00:58:00] a game, a play. The end has already been written down. Take your son, go home.

Now, why didn't Abraham heed Satan's advice? Because it was Satan's. One must never follow Satan. Even when, or especially when, he pretends to wish you well. Such is the power of evil: even when it speaks the truth, it distorts it. Naturally, it would have been easier for Abraham to go back home. That's just the point. Abraham never liked easy solutions. Was it easy for him to leave his father's home in his youth, and reject his father's religion, and plead on behalf of the doomed city of Sodom, and lastly, walk with his son towards the mysterious point of separation through death on Mount Moriah?

We are still following Abraham and Isaac as they walk together, with their two servants behind. [00:59:00] With the authority of the Midrash, now we can identify them as young Ishmael and old Eliezer. Why are they called *n'arav*? Because, maybe, to pay a compliment to the old Eliezer. Everybody likes to feel young. But why has Abraham taken them along? Of all people, why them? Eliezer has known Isaac since his childhood. Why did Abraham wish to make him suffer as well? And why Ishmael? Wouldn't he, on the contrary, rejoice a bit too much?

In general, why did he need servants at all? And the Midrash offers three explanations. The first deals with protocol. Important personalities must always be escorted. The second is

true even today. It is dangerous to go for a walk alone.

(laughter) You need bodyguards. [01:00:00] And the third is more subtle. The two servants may subsequently serve as witnesses. More precisely, since the purpose of the event is to publicize Abraham's faith in God, who would tell the tale? Abraham himself? Who would believe him? That is why the two servants are necessary, to be able to testify that on the third day, Abraham and Isaac left them somewhere on Mount Moriah, and that Abraham came back alone.

As much as I like this last interpretation, it's not without problems. How could Eliezer and Ishmael bear witness to something they have not seen? Remember, they remained behind. A Midrash lends the scene a poignant illustration. At a certain spot, Abraham turns towards Isaac, and asks him, "What do you see on the horizon?" "I see a mountain," says Isaac. "I see above it a cloud of fire." Then Abraham puts the same question to the two servants. [01:01:00] "What do you see on the horizon?" "Nothing," they answered. "We see nothing."

In other words, everything is in the eye of the beholder. It all depends on the way we look at things and people. Two persons can be in the same place at the same time, looking at the same trees. The same clouds, the same crowd. And yet, see

different things. Abraham and Isaac shared the same vision. That is how Abraham knew that the place was the place, reserved for him and his son by God Himself. And that only he and his son are to go forward. Incidentally, one commentator believes that Abraham was afraid: the servants, if too close, might interfere, and prevent him from doing what he was supposed to do. That's why he ordered them to stay behind.

And now, father and son are alone. And on a certain level, united as never before. Never have they been as close to one another. Vayelkhu shnekhem yakhdav. [01:02:00] They proceeded together towards their goal. And the emphasis is on *yakhdav*, together. With no one there to separate them. Satan has vanished. The entire creation is holding its breath. Will the Angel of Death capture its prey or lose it? What will Abraham do? What directions must he follow to fulfill his destiny? What does he want God to do?

Again, the focus is on Abraham, whereas it ought to be on Isaac. Suddenly, seized by an obscure premonition, Isaac is frightened. His father had told him that they were bringing an offering to God, but where is the lamb? And Abraham answers enigmatically, "Hashem yireh lo ha'se le'olah beni , God will see, or will

show, the burnt offering." God will see? When? Where? And what about them? Will they see? [01:03:00]

Nevertheless, they continued their journey, *yakhdav*, together. Says the Midrash, "*Zeh le'akod ve'zeh le'aked*," one to bind and the other to be bound. *Zeh lishkhot ve'zeh lishakheit*, one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered." And together, they built the altar. Together, they placed the dry wood and the fire. Together, they ready themselves to do what no one should ever do, but --

At this point, I fail to understand both Abraham and Isaac. How can a father be so pitiless? Even if he knows the outcome. How can he be unmoved by the anguish of his son? How can a human being be so inhuman? Why doesn't he say, "Master of the Universe, You need an offering, a life, take mine." How can he implement the ritual [01:04:00] which customarily ends in death? What does he think that Isaac thinks, or feels, seeing him bent over his body, knife in hand?

Nor do I understand Isaac. Why doesn't he scream? So, is it possible that he is, after all, the real hero of the story? Is it possible that he wants to help his father because he feels sorry for him? Says the Midrash, "Abraham's eyes are on

Isaac's, as are those of the angels in heaven. The angels weep, and their tears fall into Isaac's eyes. That is why Isaac, with the burning tears in his eyes, will become blind. But the tears also fall on the knife, and the universe is weeping, as Abraham is about to commit the irreparable."

Fortunately for all [01:05:00] of his descendants, an angel orders him to stop. "Al tishlakh yadkha el ha'naar, do not lay thy hand on the lad, ve'al taasei lo meuma, do not hurt him in any way." And at this point, it is time for us to come closer to our grandfather, Abraham. Our eternal intercessor in heaven. Let's not abandon him to his feelings of remorse. Let's be with him. We must find reasons to explain this behavior, which in spite of appearance, is profoundly, (laughs) I believe, and painfully, human. It is because he is human, therefore vulnerable, that when binding Isaac, he sees him not as his child, but as a ram. The one destined from before creation to be a burnt offering. That is why, after the angel's intervention, we are told in the text, "Abraham sees ayil akher neekhaz be'karnav, another ram [01:06:00] whose horns are caught in the bushes."

Another ram on the scene? Where did it come from? It is not mentioned in the text. And the only explanation I have is that

Abraham, while he was binding him, saw Isaac as a ram, and psychologically, I think, this interpretation may seem sound. Morally, it isn't. A human being is not a ram. But I still have difficulties in accepting the idea that the founding father of the Jewish people, the discoverer of monotheism and God's law, could have been ready to sacrifice his son, just as I cannot fathom why God had ordered him to do so.

To test him? The previous tests did not involve other people's death. This one did. Was it a matter of divine will, to inform Abraham that God is also cruel? And just cruel because just? [01:07:00] And that He, God, is to be loved in spite of His rigor? For the Kotzker Rebbe, the answer was simple. Abraham had placed his entire faith in God, and that was sufficient. He who believes in God can and must do everything, anything, for God. Said the Kotzker Rebbe, "Having heard God's order, it was more difficult for Abraham to spare Isaac than to slaughter him."

As for myself, to those of you who were here 25, six, years ago, I suggested a different approach during our first study of the *Akedah*. I wanted to redeem Abraham, and his attitude towards Isaac, and it wasn't easy. I viewed the *Akedah* as a twofold test. God tested Abraham, who then tested God. The first was

visible, tangible. The second took place [01:08:00] in Abraham's heart and mind. It is because Abraham had such faith in God's kindness and justice that he knows that his son will not die. He knows that he will not die on the altar. That is why he finds the strength within himself to submit to the order given by God, and play along, as if to declare, "Master of the Universe, You want the life of my son? You want it from my hands? *Hineini*, here I am, and here is my son. Now, let us see, whether You will really require me to become the instrument of his death. Let us see if You want me to go to the end."

And Abraham's intuition is correct, because Abraham then -- and I am using text from the Midrash right and left -- they are all there -- that then, Abraham is extracting the price from God. Promises. He said, "I will not move from here until You promise me something. [01:09:00] Didn't You tell me," says Abraham, "once, that this son will be my continuity, and that he will be the founder of a nation? Didn't You? So why do You want me to kill him? So if You don't promise me that whenever we shall remember You, You will remember us, I will kill him."

And God revokes the order. Abraham receives the news not from God, but from an angel. Why not from God? We are told that because God alone may order capital punishment, whereas man is

entitled to save a human life. I don't think so. I think there was another reason. God kavyachol didn't say that because He was embarrassed.

End of story? Not in the Midrash, where the reader witnesses an astonishing reversal. A veritable *coup d'état*. [01:10:00] As I said, instead of shouting his joy, if not his gratitude, Abraham, the first *Ivrit*, the first Jew, begins to argue.

(laughter) He, who has not argued with God before, argues with Him now, when he says, "I swear, I shall not leave the altar before I speak my mind." "Speak," said God. And again, he said, "Didn't You promise me that my descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky?" "Yes, I did promise you that," said God. "Whose descendants will they be? Mine alone?" "Isaac's, too," said God. "Well, Master of the Universe, I could have told You that Your order contradicted Your promise. I contained my grief, and held my tongue, and in return, I want You to promise. Promise me now that whenever my children will sin against You, You will also say nothing, and forgive them." "So be it," said God. "Let them retell this tale, [01:11:00] and they will be forgiven."

That is why the tale of the *Akedah* is read on Rosh Hashanah, on the Days of Judgement. We remind God of that promise. Didn't

God mind being, as it were, pushed into a corner? Says the Talmud, "The Holy One, blessed be His name, loves to be defeated by His children." (laughter) What is, then, the *Akedah*? A victory for Abraham? It surely is a defeat for Satan, who did not succeed in provoking a split between God and His people.

But unlike God, Satan cannot bear to lose. Defeated by Abraham, he vented his anger on Sarah. He appeared before her, disguised as a messenger, according to one source, and as Isaac, according to another. And he told her the true story, but leaving out the end. [01:12:00] Struck with fear and pain, Sarah let out three screams of horror, and fell to the ground, dead. That is one of the lessons of the *Akedah*. Abraham saw it as a matter between him and God alone. He was wrong. At the level of absolute injustice eludes man, the end is not ours. It is written by God. God demanded Isaac's death, but it was Sarah who paid for it, with her life.

So what about Isaac in all this? Like many of us, today, I feel close to him. How did he survive his anguish and despair? Where did he find the strength to start a new life, to marry and become a father himself? In our liturgy, he is the hero. Mention is repeatedly made of [01:13:00] *Akedat Yitzchak*. Isaac is the chief protagonist. But in the story, he is passive, and

we hear him only once, actually, briefly. Nevertheless, I believe that Isaac is whom we should admire. For we should have compassion for him.

Some commentators believe that the divine intervention came too late. I recommend you to read a very great book on the *Akedah*, the best, by Spiegel -- Shalom Spiegel, called *The Last Trial*. You will find all the material that we have touched upon tonight.

Yes, according to some, the intervention came too late, and that is why scripture uses the singular -- *vayashav Avraham el niarav* -- in relating Abraham's return to his servants. He came back alone. [01:14:00] Where was Isaac? One sage says he died, and from this we learn *tekhiyat hametim*, resurrection of the dead. He died, but was resurrected.

Another contends that he didn't die, but lived as if he had died. Others, still, say he went to *yeshiva*. (laughter) It's possible that something in him died on Mount Moriah. Whatever the place, what is certain is that Isaac remained behind. The fact is, he didn't even attend his mother's funeral. He married Rebecca three years later, and became a father of twins. And that must have been some family.

In conclusion, I remain fascinated by the tale of the *Akedah*. Every Jew, at one time or another, is passionately and personally [01:15:00] involved in it. Whenever I discover the text, I rediscover new questions, old solutions, timeless insights, and eternal wonders. How did Isaac manage to avoid bitterness and frustration, and not fall prey to anger? Did he wish to forget or to remember what he had lived through? Did he talk to anyone about it? Did he confide in anyone? Did he learn anything from it? Did the experience enter his dreams? What was he dreaming at night?

I think of the angels who interceded in heaven on his behalf, and I wonder, in those times, angels wept because one Jew was in danger. Where were they when an entire people was led to a gigantic altar, whose flames reached the seventh heaven, if not beyond? [01:16:00]

Actually, the title of tonight's session was a kind of return to the *Akedah*. Have we ever left it? (applause)

M:

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at 92y.org.

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