

The Akedah: Exploring Uncertainty and Faith

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 11, 2007

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) For those of you who know this story, you know how the story's being told, on Rosh Hashanah. In the niggun, is "*Vayehi achar ha-d'varim ha-eleh v'ha-Elokim nissah et-Avraham*", which means, "Let us return to the Akedah, the binding of Isaac." It is a story about anguish and faith, a story that has never left us. In fact, actually it never let us go. The event that happened on Mount Moriah 4,000 years ago continues to hound our memory and our lives, like a stinging wound.

[00:01:00] It is impossible to detach ourselves from it. It is with fear and trembling that Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, approached the subject, and it is still the same for us. The more I explore it, the less I come closer to resolution. The more I dive into it, the more I find myself lost, as if in a thick black forest, for which no way out leads to a single, and maybe reassuring, truth. All the questions I asked myself more than 40 years ago here, since my first study on this subject, all of them remain vibrant and open.

Was the history of the Jewish people going to begin [00:02:00] in a way that violates what is most frail and human in every one of us? I still do not understand why Abraham needed a tenth test to prove the strength and solidity of his faith in one God. I don't understand why God needed this. And did Abraham already have his free will? Was he able to freely able to decide what to say to his creator? At the beginning of my search, years and years earlier, I had suggested that it was perhaps a double test. In the same way that God was testing Abraham, Abraham was testing God, as he said to himself, "Let's see if God truly and [00:03:00] sincerely insists on this sacrifice from me. He who has already prepared the Torah, as we are told, the Torah, the law in heaven, forbidding murder and child sacrifice. Is it possible that he wants me, Abraham, to do that? Why?"

But is it also possible that the test has a completely other meaning? That God wanted, even hoped, that Abraham would refuse, and so Abraham would have won the bet by refusing. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Are we sure that Abraham knew it was a test? Was he really thinking right from the start that this was [00:04:00] indeed divine will to see how a father becomes his son's murderer? How could a creator of the universe and a father of its creatures demand such an act from the one,

the only one, who first crowned him God, the only God, the all-powerful compassionate God? And how could this same one, known for his compassion towards others -- after all, Abraham was the first hospitable man in the world, the best, the greatest -- how could this hospitable and compassionate man, always so friendly with others, people unknown and even guilty -- after all hasn't he interceded [00:05:00] for Sodom, the sinful of all cities? How could he submit himself to such a command? The man who was able to hold his own against the creator while defending the wicked people, why did he give in when it came to his own son?

In my research I discovered that the Akedah -- the binding of Isaac, a term which only appears in this chapter of the Bible and nowhere else -- that it preoccupies our most important sages of the Talmud, our illustrious theosophists and mystics of the Middle Ages, as much as their successors and students throughout the ages. Maimonides and Nachmanides, ibn Ezra, and Levi ben Gershon the RaLBaG, and the RaDaK, and naturally the uniquely marvelous, exquisite Shalom Spiegel, the great [00:06:00] scholar of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and so many others.

Pulling my hypothesis from theirs, taking into account their analysis, as well as their philosophical and poetic insights, I

proposed explanations here and there which I believed to be original, more out of naiveté than pride. But these had already been covered extensively in Midrashic texts. With the years, I can only admit that there is still, and perhaps there will always be something serious, obscure, profound, and unexplainable which escapes and troubles me and us in this whole story. I inevitably will feel the need to cite my own work, something which I rarely do. But I'll do it only to better [00:07:00] identify the path, the direction of my quest.

The Bible remains the so-called urtext for all those interested and involved in learning and scholarship. It is *hafoch ba ve-hafoch ba, de'khola va*, turn and turn the pages, or study the same page, the same passage, again and again. We shall always discover in them something new, always exciting and enriching. I remember as a child I would learn in kheyder , in school, of Sarah's difficulties to have children. And then one day I rushed home to my mother and announced the great news, "Mom, Sarah is pregnant!" (laughter) I remember when Joseph was sent by his father Jacob to Shechem, today's Nablus, and I heard my grandmother saying, "Poor lad, [00:08:00] why is going there? Doesn't he know that his brother's prepared himself to kill him or to sell him in slavery?" She was waiting for the next

chapter, of course.

Sure, more serious commentators believe that the Torah is not only a story or stories of the ancient past, but also a blueprint for the distant future. In other words, the Akedah is not only about Abraham and Isaac, but about their descendants as well. Isn't this the reason why we invoke their tale in our prayers?

But, before we continue our renewed exploration of this dramatic tale, I feel we should follow our own tradition and recall the guidelines that we have established since the very beginning of these 40-odd annual encounters. One, each of [00:09:00] these sessions is meant to be a quest, and I hope you know how grateful I am to you for your presence and participation. Just as the reader takes an active part in the book he or she is reading, the person who listens helps the speaker place a step or a thought one after the others, or one before the others. Two, my objective has been and remains to share with you a passion, mine, which is a passion for learning. In doing so, I wish to transform information into knowledge, knowledge into sensitivity, sensitivity into commitment. Three, I really never had, as an ambition, to innovate commentaries or

interpretations. All I want is to be able to go deeper into them. [00:10:00] Four, I firmly believe that the past is in the present. Whatever we do today contains elements that we have received from our parents and teachers and theirs, which means somewhere a father and son are still climbing a mountain, waiting for God to say what He expects them to do. Five, with luck and patience, we in study could open hidden and not so hidden doors into text and into lives. Look, they are opening.

So, let us again look at the biblical text , shall we? *Vayehi achar ha-d'varim ha-eileh* "And it happened only after these events." In another place, [00:11:00] Rashi, the great commentator, says in his commentaries that each time the term *vayehi* is used, it means the story to follow will be sad. So we understand the importance and meaning of this word *vayehi*. It's a sad story. But what about the meaning of the following words, *achar ha-d'varim ha-eileh*? After these events, which events? The last episodes preceding the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, first describe Hagar's expulsion and the miraculous survival of her son Ishmael in the wilderness, and the alliance that Abraham made with the King Abimelech after a dispute over several wells. [00:12:00] What is the relationship between these events? Is it some sort of allusion to the fact that God is unhappy with his

faithful servant and friend, and chooses to put him to test in order to punish him? Is it possible that Abraham was wrong to chase his son, Ishmael and his mother Hagar, so despised by Sarah, instead of concluding an alliance with the family as he did with the foreign king?

Rashi, forever full of imagination, and thinking perhaps about Job, whom the Talmud frequently compares to Abraham, believes it is necessary to introduce Satan into the narrative. Whenever we have a problem with theodicy, we always come to Satan, [00:13:00] even when we don't have a problem. Satan likes to be part of the story. Whether we want it or not, he is the uninvited guest. And, for him, no door is closed.

So what we do therefore, we follow Rashi and we say let's consult our favorite sources, the Midrash -- which is the commentary to the Bible -- and listen. "And it came to pass after these things that God tried Abraham." After what things? According to the sage Rabbi Yochanan, in the name of Rabbi Jose ben Zimra, after the things, following the feast given by the parents upon the child's having grown and being weaned. When Isaac, therefore, who was born [00:14:00] when Abraham was 100, Sarah 90, they must've been very young parents, and they needed

a good drink, so they had a fiesta. And, when this happened, Satan spoke to the Holy One, master of the universe, "Out of the entire feast, that this old man upon whom you bestowed fruit of the womb at the age of 100, out of the entire feast he prepared, could he not have spared, say one turtledove, one fledgling, and bring it as an offering to you, not to them?" And the Holy One replied. It's always strange to see how God and Satan participate in the drama and they speak to each other. God doesn't say, "Satan, go away. Come on." Or, better yet, "Go to Hell." [00:15:00] (laughter) But he got answers. Why should God listen to Satan? He said, "Satan," he said, "is it not true that Abraham prepared the feast in honor of his son? Therefore it had to go everything to those who came for his son. Still, if I were to say to him, 'Abraham, sacrifice not a dove, not a fledgling, but sacrifice your son to me,' he would sacrifice him at once." And what did Satan say, "Try him." At once God tried Abraham.

Clearly, therefore, in this context, *ha-d'varim ha-eileh*, these things would not mean events, but words. The words after, the words exchanged between God and Abraham happened. What happened? [00:16:00] No wonder that Job is often compared to Abraham because both were virtuous and exemplary, because both

were tested. Only that? No, something else. Because both tests were suggested, willed, imagined, not by God, but by Satan. Strange the influence Satan has, both on people and in heaven. Strange and perplexing that he can have his way with frail and vulnerable human beings as we are, is more or less normal. But how was one to explain this ability to induce God in making him do curious things? Imagine by someone whose name is synonymous with evil. Really, friends, is it but conceivable that the Akedah, [00:17:00] the binding of Isaac, one of the most meaningful episodes in scripture, thus in Israel's religious history, was nothing but a banal wager in heaven, as in Job's case? What, therefore? Is it possible that the Akedah is nothing but a game and little else?

In another version, Satan accuses Abraham of having given nothing to beggars, having not fed the needy. What? Abraham is indifferent to the care and suffering of the poor? Is it possible? Is it in character? And God replies, "Abraham is neither stingy nor selfish. He would be willing to give me all that he has, even his dearly beloved son."

I must admit that this account disturbs [00:18:00] me. Is it possible that Akedah, again, that it was simply a trick, a

manipulation, by a perverted actor, Satan? It seems to me that Rashi himself is unsatisfied with this sole hypothesis, as suggests another. It is after the exchange between Ishmael and Isaac that the story is set into motion, not between God and Satan, but Isaac and Ishmael -- two brothers. Ishmael boasts before the younger brother, saying, "Ha. You were circumcised when you were eight days old, but I was already 13 years old when I was circumcised, and I didn't protest one bit. So, ha, who are you?" And Isaac's response is, "You speak of only a body part, but I would be willing to give up my entire being [00:19:00] in sacrifice, if God asked me to do that." So therefore, the story is that the two brothers spoke and God decided to put Abraham to the test.

This second explanation carries its own set of difficulties. It is, in fact, Isaac, who is put to the test. But so he is the hero of the story, not Abraham. Furthermore, is it conceivable that this grandiose account was just a result of a jealous bet between two brothers who didn't like each other?

Let's continue reading the chapter: *ve-ha-Elokim nissa et Avraham*, "And God put Abraham to test." What? Again, as with Job? Didn't God know the outcome of the story? [00:20:00] God

the omniscient didn't know? Was he unaware it would stop half way through, incomplete? That the act would remain unaccomplished, unfulfilled? *Vayomer elav* says the text, "And God says him, 'Avraham or Abraham,' who answers, *Hineini* 'Here I am.'" Listen to the Midrashic dialogue, "And God says, 'Take thy son.' Abraham, 'I have two sons.' 'Good,' says God, 'Your only sons.' Abraham says, 'Both are my only sons. Isaac is the only son I have from his mother, Hagar (sic), Sarah, and Ismael is the only son I have from his mother, Hagar.' God, 'The son whom you love.' Abraham, 'Master of the universe, are there two separate compartments in one's inner most self for love? [00:21:00] I love both of them.' God said, 'Okay, I want Isaac.'" Only then did he name Isaac.

Question raised by the Midrash, why did God engage Abraham in such a lengthy question and answer, when he knew the outcome? What kind of text, what kind of script is it? And the answer, God knew the outcome. Abraham did not. Furthermore, God was worried that Abraham's mind would be stunned by such a heartbreaking demand. He had to be prepared. My commentary on this dialogue is a bit different. By changing the punctuation of the verse, it alluded to the question of sin and punishment, and here is my reading -- God says take my son, comma. Your

only son, comma. The one you loved, comma, Isaac. All these commas. In other words, [00:22:00] God blames him for loving only one of His sons, Isaac. And this is why he is put to the test. It comes back to Ishmael. God says, "You did not love Ishmael enough." And, therefore, is it possible that really the whole story is the story of sin and punishment? Is Abraham now surprised, shocked? Does he ask for a reason? Time to think over and to prepare? He could answer, "Lord, why do you insist on testing the faith and fidelity of man through suffering, rather than through happiness?" He doesn't answer, but rises in the morning and of course we know what happens next.

He's on his way but, again, here we must stop. A new question arises. And Søren Kierkegaard has already asked it. [00:23:00] How did Abraham know it was the voice of God -- God's voice and not Satan's? Maimonides and Don Yitzchak of Abarbanel of Spain answered quite simply, that Abraham possessed prophetic gifts in varying degrees, and thus could not be deceived. Kierkegaard, *l'havdil*, takes for granted that the voice one he hears is always the voice of God. "The only right response, therefore, is obedience," and I quote Kierkegaard.

Abraham, to be sure, could not confuse with another the voice which once made him leave his homeland. It can happen, however, that the sinful man is uncertain whether he does not have to sacrifice his, perhaps also very beloved, son to God, for his sins, as it's written in the Prophet Micah. For Moloch, [00:24:00] the horrible god that wants child sacrifice, "Moloch," says Kierkegaard, "imitates the voice of God." In contrast to this, God himself demands of this -- as of every man, not of Abraham, his chosen one, but you and me -- nothing more than justice and love, and that he walk humbly with him, with God. In other words, not much more than fundamental ethical.

So the question is a good question, even though the answer is not precisely, not inevitably, convincing. On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, who didn't stop speaking about God, in whom he refused to believe. I have never heard an atheist speak so often about God as he has. (laughter) [00:25:00] And he echoes Kierkegaard's anguish, which in fact reflects the Midrashic sages. Sartre wonders -- I quote him, "If an angel were to appear before me, where is the proof that it is an angel? And, if I hear voices, who will persuade me that they come from heaven and not from hell? From

my subconscious or from a pathological state of mind, rather than from a holy source?" In the Midrash, Abraham knew it since he realized that the role of Satan here is precisely to keep him from fulfilling divine will. Besides, it's because of Satan that the journey took three days, in spite of the short distance. A master of magic, expert in roadblocks and obstacles, Satan made sure there were many along the way. This beautiful [00:26:00] story from the twelfth and thirteenth century, is cited by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms in the Midrash Tanhuma, and the chapters of Rabbi Eliezer, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer. Let's listen to the Midrash.

"As Abraham journeys towards Moriah, an old man appeared before him. It was Satan in disguise. He asked, 'Where are you going?' 'To prayer,' said Abraham. 'With a knife? With a firestone 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 a lamb, place it on a fire to feed ourselves. It's best to be prepared.' Thereupon, Satan dropped his mask and said, 'Poor old man with poor old tales. Do you think you can fool me? Don't you know I was present when the order was given?' [00:27:00] Abraham did not reply. Satan continued shouting, 'Tell me, old man, have you lost your mind?

Have you emptied your heart of all human feeling? Would you really sacrifice your son, given to you at the age of 100?' 'Yes,' said Abraham, 'I shall.' 'But tomorrow, old fool,' says Satan, 'He will demand more sacrifices, more cruel yet. Will you be able to perform them, too?' 'I hope so, replied Abraham. 'I hope to always be able to obey God.' 'But tomorrow, poor mortal, He God may accuse you of murder, He who issued the order. He will condemn you for having obeyed. Will you do it nevertheless?' 'Yes, I shall,' Abraham insisted. 'I shall do it anyway. I must obey him. That is my desire.' Having failed with the father, Satan tried his luck with the son. He appeared before Isaac, disguised [00:28:00] as a young boy. 'Where are you going?' 'To study Torah,' answered Isaac. 'Now or after you're dead?' asked Satan. 'What a foolish question,' said Isaac, 'Of course now. Don't you know the Torah is given only to the living?' 'Poor son of a poor woman,' said Satan. 'For years and years she lived in hope and prayer to give birth to you. And now this old man, your own father, has gone mad. Look at him. He's going to kill you, Isaac.' Isaac would not believe him, and 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 rejoice? Your brother,

Ishmael. He will be happy. Your clothes, your possessions, the gifts meant for you -- he will get them all.'" [00:29:00]

"This argument," says the text, "so childish, so human, gave Isaac pause. And he turned to his father and shyly asked, 'Father, look at this person. Listen to what he says.' 'Don't pay any attention, son,' said Abraham. His words are empty of meaning and truth. Don't listen.' Still the story does not end there. Satan refused to concede defeat. He invented other obstacles. He turned himself into a river. Abraham chased the waves away. He then changed himself into a cloud, only to be dispersed by Abraham. And finally Satan had a brilliant idea. He would use the most dangerous weapon of all, truth. He would use truth as a weapon. And he decided to gamble, to reveal the facts, the future, and declared, 'Abraham --'" [00:30:00] (brief disturbance in the audience) Abraham was happy there were no cell phones at that time. Today you would say the cell phone's Satan, yes? (laughter)

"And Satan would say, 'Abraham, this is what I have heard backstage, up there. Ultimately you will not sacrifice Isaac.'" No, really. "'Ultimately the lamb will be the offering -- the lamb, and not Isaac. Do you hear me, old man? You have nothing

to fear, neither does Isaac. Whether you continue or turn back, it will be all the same. It's nothing but a game, a simple test. So stop tormenting yourself. [00:31:00] Stop taking yourself for a hero.'" Had Abraham believed Satan who was, after all, telling the truth, the drama would have ended there and then. Instead he ignored Satan and proceeded with his now silent march towards that precise point where despair and faith were to meet in a fiery and senseless quest.

Don Yitzchak of Abarbanel is one of my favorite medieval thinkers. I like the depth of his vision and his penetrating insights. A man of great erudition and culture, he was admired by the Jews and respected by the gentiles. He held an important position in the royal court, not at all an easy feat during the reign of [00:32:00] Catholic Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He must have been good, extremely gifted in his work as a counselor. Yet, in 1492, under the Grand Inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, he was forced like all Jews to choose between conversion and exile, and he chose exile, leaving behind fame and fortune.

Another influential and intelligent Jew, also a rabbi, held a high position at the court at the same time as him. His name,

Don Avraham, or Abraham, Senior. He also faced the same choice, and he chose conversion. And he disappeared from Jewish history, while Don Yitzchak of Abarbanel has remained for centuries, and even today, a source of melancholic pride and joy for teachers and students alike. [00:33:00] I especially admire his literary sensitivity to the binding of Isaac chapter. I admire his analysis of the event on Mount Moriah. He quotes Rabbi Jonah ibn Yanach, who offers quite an interesting, grammatical interpretation of the test. God commands Abraham to bring his son as an offering to him. The term in Hebrew is *l'olah, l'olah*, which means a burnt offering. But it also means the opposite, the opposite of its usual meaning. It means not as a burnt offering, but in place of an offering. In other words, the first acceptance [00:34:00] will serve as a substitute for the act. The walk up to Mount Moriah itself will serve as a sacrifice. From the very beginning, the test never involved human sacrifice, says Abarbanel. The text continues.

"On the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw. But why on the third day?" asks the Midrash. "Why not on the first or the second, so that nations of the world would not say God deranged Abraham, deranged his mind, so he cut his son's throat. That he did it in an act, today, it was of insanity." Question -- why

should the nations of the world, their leaders and their populations, care about what one Jew would do or not do, far away? Perhaps the Midrash wanted us to be aware of the Jew's place in the world. [00:35:00] It is out of all proportions to its size. We'll talk about it maybe next week. There is something quasi-metaphysical in Jewish history. Look in today's newspapers. Events in or around Jerusalem get more attention than those taking place in Moscow or Beijing. What's happening today? It's out of all proportion.

So, on the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar. In the biblical text, the father was alone to see it. In the Midrash, he turned to his son and asked him, "Do you see what I see?" And Isaac replied, "I see a mountain, radiant in majesty, with a mysterious cloud hovering over it." Abraham then asked the servants what they saw. They saw nothing but wilderness. So Abraham understood what he was supposed to do. He told his servants, [00:36:00] "Stay behind with the donkey while," quote, "I and the boy go over there to kneel down, and we shall return to you." The verb is important, remember it well. It is *nashuvah*, it is in the plural, "We shall return." After the test was done and the story finished, "We shall return." But then the story at the end says, *vayashav Avraham*

*el na'arav*, Abraham returned to his servants. It was in the singular. Where was Isaac? What became of the other main character of the Akedah?

Several answers exist and all indicate there was a rupture, if not a separation, [00:37:00] between father and son. Rabbi Jose bar Hanina thinks that his father sent him back home to protect him from the evil one. Others believe that he stayed on site at Mount Moriah, alone for three years, before coming back to marry Rebecca. This is why the young bride Rebecca fainted and fell from the camel upon seeing him. He didn't look well. He didn't look like he came from this world. Another theory still that he, Isaac, was led away to Paradise, that he was treated for his depression during three years. Some believe that, sick and traumatized from what he had just undergone, he stayed behind to rest. Or perhaps that he went to study at the famous school of Shem. Or even that he had died. Abraham's dagger or knife had already scored [00:38:00] the throat of Isaac, whose soul had left the body. In other words, the angel's intervention came too late. Some sources and litanies speak of the blood of Isaac, even the ash of Isaac. He had died on the altar, suggests these litanies. But some say that he resurrected miraculously the instant following, and then he recited just the

right prayer, "Praised be thou Lord, for resurrecting the dead." That is the prayer we recite even today, but we learned it from him.

And one last story that he didn't accompany his father, who went no one quite knows where. Isaac went home. [00:39:00] It's Abarbanel who says it, and I must admit to have succumbed to the elegant charm of his interpretation. He quotes the Bible that Abraham came to bury Sarah and mourn her. And Isaac, didn't he come to his mother's funeral? No, says Abarbanel, he did not come because he was already there.

The Akedah story which reverberates so deeply in the Midrashic realm strangely had a profound impact on Jewish communities during the Crusades. And we shall talk about them, I think, next week as well. At that time, filled with fury and malediction, countless men and women all pious and God-loving, in fear of being violated, tormented, mutilated, and eventually converted by faith's demented [00:40:00] armed mobs, chose collective suicide as a way of demonstrating the loyalty to the God of Israel. All seemed to have been influenced by this episode, imitating both Abraham and Isaac, dying for the sanctification of God's name.

To understand that quasi-mystical collection, one must read books on martyrology, such as *Emek HaBacha* The Valley of Lamentations, *Shevet Yehudah*, *Yeven Metzulah*, scenes of relentless, unbearable cruelty fill their pages. You read them and you wonder, you read them and you weep. How could people, invoking their love for their God of love, commit such atrocities? I hesitate to quote any of them, [00:41:00] lest we all will be robbed of sleep for nights to come. But you must also reread the late Shalom Spiegel's masterfully written volume called *The Last Trial*, on the Akedah, and its impact on that period in Jewish and Christian history. Anyone who wrote anything on that dramatic event owes him a lasting debt of gratitude. Eighteen liturgical poems, or *piyyutim*, litanies, were written about what happened then in the Rhine Provinces. A twelfth-century sage, Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, quoted by Spiegel, who calls it a work on the slaughter of Isaac and his resurrection.

Listen. Down upon him fell the resurrected dew, and he revived. The father seized him to slaughter him once more. Torah, bear witness. [00:42:00] Well-grounded is the fact. And the Lord called Abraham even a second time from heaven. The ministering

angels cried out, terrified. O Lord, even animal victims, were they ever slaughtered twice? Instantly they made their outcry heard on high. Lo, Ariels cried out above the earth. Why twice? Because the angel addressed Abraham a second time? Or is it because the Akedah moved from Mount Moriah to the Rhine Provinces during the Crusades? Rabbi Kalonymus bar Yehuda laments, "Fathers slaughter their sons and wallow in their blood. Rejoicing, they make haste to affirm God's unique name. Fathers and sons together, grooms with their brides [00:43:00] hurry to their slaughter, as to their bridal chamber. And Rabbi Dovid bar Meshulam weeps. Has it ever been heard or ever been seen? Who can believe so amazing a thing as to the beautiful bridal canopy? Sons are led to the slaughter, most highly exalted. When such things happen, O God, how can you hold your peace?

In these laments, one finds echoes of Midrashic legends. The faithful conscious choice of death, faced with the ultimate agony of apostasy. Let's note that events of self-sacrifice and collective suicide, so as to avoid forced conversion, are to be found in the Rhine Provinces of Ashkenaz, but not in Sephardic history. Is it that forced conversion to Islam was judged less severely than conversion, [00:44:00] under duress, to

Christianity? The late Gershon Cohen wrote a remarkable essay on this subject, and we may return to it another time. What remains as a fact is that the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, impacted the two communities in different ways.

To better understand the dramatic meaning of this story, it's necessary to go to the Rembrandt Museum in Amsterdam. There one can see to what degree the great artist was fascinated by this story. HaRav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, found in the paintings the original and secret light of the universe -- the mystical light which crosses the world from one end to the other. Numerous sketches show the anguish engulfing Abraham, [00:45:00] dagger in hand, leaning over his terrified son, motionless on the altar. Unflinching, the old father's face shows his painful determination to carry his task out to the end. But a completed painting shows a different picture. The knife is on the ground, while father and son embrace, reconciled. I love Rembrandt. In this moment one realizes this time death did not win. Man, the Jewish man, has won. The father has won, against God, or rather with God.

Because, after all, we must repeat and say the Akedah is not just in the past, but also in the present. All we need to do is

look at what is happening today in this torn, blood-soaked world, riddled with almost apocalyptic convulsions, and we [00:46:00] wonder, where is God in all this? Where Satan is we know. But God? We still ponder this question in looking back on the century we have just left behind. Where was he? When did the sentence of Abraham get subjected to the torments of the Akedah, day after day, night after night, under a sky of fire? When, contrary to what happened on Mount Moriah, it was the sons who symbolically sacrificed their fathers and mothers and came back alone, their hearts heavy with grief, despair, and remorse.

We ask the question and ask it again. And what about God? Where was he when death took his place and his role, in digging the invisible cemeteries in the heart of humanity? Before such questions, we should throw so many certainties into question. The cry in silence -- [00:47:00] is it God's fault? Are we his orphans or his victims? Must we, can we shed tears over creation and even its creator? Must we weep for him, perhaps?

And Isaac in all this -- Talmudic commentaries talk a lot about Abraham's situation, but little, truly, too little about Isaac's, and yet the story is called *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Isaac. Was it his test, too? What were his thoughts

during the ordeal? What did he feel when he opened his eyes on the altar, seeing his father with a knife in his hands? Midrashic sources depict him as a consenting victim, if not enthusiastic associate and participant. One Midrash says, "While Abraham [00:48:00] was building the altar, Isaac kept handing him the wood and the stones." Abraham was like a man who builds the wedding house of his son, and Isaac was like a man getting ready for the wedding feast, which he does with joy. At one point, when already slashed on the altar, he tells his father, "Please, father, tie me tighter to the altar so I do not move inadvertently and make the knife impure by hitting it." Which means that he, Isaac -- 13 or 37, according to different sources -- was really willing to die because of an order given by God to his father. But why didn't he protest? Why didn't he say, "If God wants my life. I'll give it to Him, but He could at least tell me about it." On the other hand, is it possible that he had such love for, [00:49:00] and such faith in his father that, until the last moment, he was convinced that his story would not end in death, but in love?

After all, he also heard his father tell the two servants, "We shall return." Remember? *V'nashuvah* in plural. Could Isaac have thought that his father was anything but a liar? And what

about compassion, and pity, and all that? It seemed -- I don't know -- the God of justice, and Abraham the man of kindness, have both conspired against Isaac, with no one feeling sorry for him. Well, the angels did. They, like Satan, did try to prevent the trial. They pleaded with God to stop it. They wept, the Midrash tells us, and their tears fell into Isaac's open eyes. That's what later on caused his blindness, [00:50:00] but their intercession was in vain. Angels do not rule the heavens in the world of truth. Actually, in the Tractate *Ta'anit* and the Midrash *Rabba* on Genesis, the suggestion is made, it is quite possible for the entire Akedah episode to be nothing but a misunderstanding, a mistake on the part of Abraham. In fact, God himself tells him that on Mount Moriah, on Mount Moriah he told him, "Abraham, what were you going to do? You were going to kill your son? But you haven't understood me at all. I did not ask you to slaughter Isaac. All I asked you was *v'haalehu sham*, that you bring him back to the top of the mountain, as if for sacrifice, nothing else." If Abraham answered, it has not been recorded. [00:51:00]

Much has been said and much is still said about the anguish of Abraham in having to choose between two loves -- the one he experienced for his son and the other which he kept for his

creator. Between religious faith and human morality, between fidelity to that which transcends and compassion for that which is imminent. Did he ever doubt the origin of the voice that gave the order against which any human being would have rebelled? Did a dark thought ever cross his mind that this voice was perhaps not coming from our merciful God, but from someone else, maybe even from Satan?

Let's take a step back for a look. Earlier we have read the Midrash which emphasizes the moment when Abraham is overwhelmed by the deepest of anguish. [00:52:00] This is the moment when, because of Satan's ruse, he and his son think they're going to drown, when Satan became a river. His brow wrinkled with worry, the desperate, distressed father cries out to the world and to the stars. "If death wins now, if I and my son die, what will become of the mission conferred on us by God Himself?" And he refined the grandeur of Abraham in the dismal moment, the most serious of his manhood. It is neither about himself nor his close ones he thinks, but about God. About his name, about his glory, about his suffering.

Thus the test was a double-edge test. God subjected Abraham to it [00:53:00] yet, at the same time, Abraham forced it on God.

As though Abraham had said, "I defy you, Lord. I shall submit to your will, but let us see whether you shall go to the end. Whether you shall remain passive and remain silent when the life of my son, who is also your son, is at stake." And God changed his mind and relented. Abraham won. That is why God sent an angel to revoke it, and then congratulate him. Because He, Himself, God was too embarrassed.

Now suddenly we have another *coup de théâtre*. Abraham never ceases to astonish us. Having won the round, he became demanding. Since God had given in, Abraham was not going to be satisfied with one victory and continue the relationship as though nothing had changed. His turn had come to dictate conditions, or else he would pick up the knife and come what may. [00:54:00]

Let us listen to the Midrash. When Abraham heard the angel's voice, he did not cry out the joy or express gratitude. On the contrary, he began to argue. He who until now had obeyed with sealed lips suddenly showed inordinate skepticism. He questioned the counter order he had been hoping for. First he asked the angel to identify himself in due form. Then he demanded proof that he was really God's messenger, not Satan's.

And finally he simply refused to accept the message, saying, "God himself ordered me to sacrifice my son. It's up to him to rescind that order without an intermediary." And, says the Midrash, God had to give in again. And it was he himself who finally had to tell Abraham not to harm his son. This was Abraham's second victory, yet he was not satisfied.

Listen. When Abraham [00:55:00] heard the celestial voice ordering him to spare his son Isaac, he declared, "I swear I shall not leave the altar, Lord, before I speak my mind." "Speak," said God. "Did you not promise me that my descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky?" "Yes, I did promise you that." "And whose descendants will they be? Mine, mine alone?" "No," said God, "They will be Isaac's as well." "And didn't you promise me that they would inherit the earth?" "Yes, I promised you that, too." "And whose descendants will they be? Mine alone?" "No," said God, "They will be Isaac's as well." "Well then, my Lord," said Abraham unabashedly, "I could have pointed out to you before that your order contradicted your promise. I could have spoken up. I didn't. I contained my grief and held my tongue. I didn't say anything. I didn't embarrass you. I didn't object. [00:56:00] In return, I want you to make me the following promise -- that when, in the

future, my children and my children's children throughout the generations will act against your law and against your will, you will also say nothing and forgive them." "So be it," God agreed. "Let them retell this tale and they will be forgiven."

But, unlike God, Satan hates to lose. Unlike God, he takes revenge, however and against whomever he can. Defeated by Abraham and Isaac, he turned against Sarah, the mother. Appearing before her disguised as Isaac, and he told her the true story that was taking place on Mount Moriah. He told her of the march, the ritual ceremony, the heavenly intervention. Barely had Satan finished talking when Sarah, in fear, [00:57:00] fell to the ground, dead.

But the story does not end there. Of course, one lesson is on one hand you have God and Abraham had the fight, and Sarah died. In theology we think we can have something to do with God, for or against, and we argue. And an innocent person pays the price for it. But Isaac survived. He had no choice, he had to make something of his memories, his experience, in order to force us to hope. For our survival is linked to his. Satan could kill Sarah. He could even hurt Abraham, but Isaac was beyond his reach. Isaac, too, represents defiance. Abraham defied God,

Isaac defied death. What did happen to Isaac after he left Mount Moriah? He became a poet. He's the author of the [00:58:00] Mincha service in the afternoon. He did not break with society, nor did he rebel against life. Logically, he should have aspired to wandering in the pursuit of oblivion. Instead he settled on his land, never to leave it again. Retaining his name, he married, had children. Refusing to let faith turn into a bitter man, he felt neither hatred nor anger towards his contemporaries who did not share his experience. On the contrary. He liked them, and showed concern for their wellbeing. After Moriah, he devoted his life and his light to immortality, to the defense of his people.

It will be Isaac's privilege to remain Israel's *melitz yosher*, the defender of his people, pleading its cause with great ability. He will be entitled to say anything he likes to God, ask anything of him. Because he suffered? No. [00:59:00] Suffering in the Jewish tradition confers no privileges. It all depends on what one makes of that suffering. Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer, into love, rather than into rancor, and malediction, and curse. This is what gives him rights and powers no other man possesses. His reward? The temple was built on Mount Moriah, not on Sinai.

In conclusion, is this the end of the Akedah? Was Sarah the only victim? God and Abraham were part of it, but so are we, says the Midrash. The Midrash simply says whatever happens had to happen, and whatever happens then, happens now. [01:00:00]

But several questions remain open. Sarah died in that accident. What has she done in this story to deserve death? Is it for her role in the previous story, namely the injustice done to Isaac's brother Ishmael and his mother? It is she who forced her husband Abraham to send them into the wilderness. It's true, the whole Akedah, as we said, could have been a result of that injustice to Ishmael. What else? God says to Abraham at the end of the story, He says, "Because you have not withheld your son from me, I shall bless him and give you everything you want," and so forth. The term is *lo chasachta*. But not so.

[01:01:00] The son was withheld. And, when he says, "Now I know that you, Abraham, are God fearing, for you have not hesitated to inflict fear and trembling upon your son."

What does it mean? In these words there is something which must perturb the reader and student. It says like this, in Hebrew "*Ki lo chasachta et binkha et y'chid'kha mimeni*". "For you have

not withheld from me your son, your only son." The same words God had used at the outset when he ordered him to bring him to bring Isaac as a burnt offering. The same? No. Earlier, in the earlier version, another word was added to the order. *Et binkha asher ahavta*-- "Give me [01:02:00] your son, your only son, the one that you have loved." And now *asher ahavta* is missing, vanished, erased, censored. The word "love" doesn't figure in the next sentence. Why? Does it mean that Abraham's love for Isaac was no longer the same? Does it mean that now God says to Abraham, "Your love was not total, because it's missing"?

And so we come to the end of the episode. Actually all the participants ought to feel good about the outcome -- Isaac for remaining alive, Abraham for being a father, and God for witnessing his loyal friend's faith emerging unscathed, and a good lawyer. Question -- did Abraham ask Isaac [01:03:00] to forgive him for his agonizing experience? Did father and son speak to one another again? We don't know. Probably not. The text would have mentioned it. The term *yachdav*, which from beginning -- they went together, they went together, together -- is no longer operative here. When God speaks, not to Isaac but to his father.

So various commentators, of course, raise many questions. So do we. What does it mean? Does it mean that the Akedah actually is a story about questions? The questions are here, and we are here, and I believe the tale itself is still burning. It is burning [01:04:00] like an open memory, like a memory wounded, full of light, pain and, above all, wonder.

Thank you. (applause)

END OF VIDEO FILE