

Elie Wiesel:

Life is not made of years, but of moments. The *Akedah* is such a moment. There is a before and an after. Without it the history, the destiny, and the religious memory of our people would not have been what they are, and what we are. This metaphysical dimension affects all of us collectively. And every one of us individually to this day. We shall speak of the *Akedah* tonight.

[00:01:00] But first as we always do, we must open some parentheses for preliminary remarks. Our goal for the last 44 or 47 years -- we are trying to ascertain, Saul and I, when I came here for the first time -- our goal has been and still is to engage ourselves in study. In learning, which is a quest for learning again and again timeless lessons that generations of teachers and students have left us as precious gifts.

Again tonight we shall delve into pages of ancient Midrashic sources, all filled with audacious beauty and grave imaginary discoveries. The term Midrash as you know comes from the word

"drosh," which means to demand, to study [00:02:00] to extract hidden meaning from the depth of ages. Sometimes it takes centuries to come up with success. If it takes longer, we shall continue searching and digging. If the texts of mystical time itself will change its pace so much so that success would seem unattainable, so what? Learning carries its own reward. Waiting for the Messiah who is bound to be late (audience laughter) is already a messianic experience.

So at the outset, allow me to declare that among the protagonists that inhabit the huge world of the *Akedah*, I mostly love Isaac. I love him with all my heart for a variety of reasons. [00:03:00] The most important one being that he has lived a unique moment in Jewish history. No one has known the same solitude or a similar anguish, or a similar metaphysical challenge. In all the texts, ancient and contemporary relevant to the biblical tale much is being written on Abraham the Father and this ultimate test or trial. But not enough about his son.

Granted the original story, particularly during the High Holidays, and the liturgy-- some texts, some prayers do bear his name. It is called "*Akedat Yitzhak*." But it is centered on Abraham, on his faith, his absolute faith in God, [00:04:00] the

grandeur of his soul, his passion for the creator of worlds, whose ineffable name, he Abraham made known to all human beings in the universe. He was God's Messenger in God's plan, God's ally. Of Isaac we know only bare essentials; that he was almost sacrificed, almost in death. We know that he had seen the fierce look in the eyes of his old father. He has seen the cold knife in his hands. He felt it on his throat. He was going to die, but was saved by the voice of an angel.

So usually we are so totally taken by Abraham's determination to obey God's order without experiencing the slightest doubt -- that we are not aware of his son's [00:05:00] unspeakable suffering. What does Scripture tell us? "*Vayehi achar ha'divarim ha-eileh*" "After all these things." Which means after the nine challenges, of trials which Abraham had to face to overcome -- God imposed upon him the tenth and last, "take your son." "*Kach-na et binkha, et yechid'kha asher ahavta.*"

He said to him: "Take your son, your only one, the one you love and go with him to Mount Moriah. And bring him to me as a fiery offering. And what followed is known. The journey lasted three days and three nights. "*Vayeilchu sh'neihem yachdav.*" They walked all the time together, two servants accompanied them.

But they, Abraham and Isaac, father and son were [00:06:00] alone. Each existed only for the other.

One Midrash believes that at one moment Isaac did realize the horrible truth of the situation. And that he tried to dissuade his father from going through with his plan. He knew, he must have known of the rumors that were going around his birth. People were whispering that actually he was the son, not of the hundred-year-old Abraham, but of the young king Abimelech.

Now, Isaac used it as an argument to save his own life saying, "I am ready to die. But what would it do to you, Father? To your reputation? If you kill me, people will see it as proof [00:07:00] that rumors were true. For if you were my father you would not put me to death. No true father would do death. And says the Midrash, Abraham replied with a counter-argument. "*Hineni b'ni*" "You are my son, and I am your father. It is I who must obey God's will. If you were the son of Abimelech I would never have the right to kill you. For you would be unworthy of serving as God's burnt offering. In words, it is precisely because I will slaughter you that people will admit that you are my son."

Oh, do I love Isaac. I love him because he suffered so much, probably. I love him because he was used [00:08:00] by the Almighty in a situation in which on a personal level, he did not have to be involved. If God wished to test Abraham, why did his son have to undergo fear and trembling? What has he done to deserve such an ordeal? Can or may a human being be used as a means rather than a goal, even by the Almighty Himself?

Does it mean that the son's faith also had to be tested? His faith in his father, and above him the Father of all of us. Is he meant to be their victim? Who is a central figure of the story, Abraham or Isaac? Or maybe their common creator? I love Isaac because what happens to him seems unjust to me.

[00:09:00] If Abraham and God had a problem in their relation, Isaac did not. And yet he endured meaningless agony on the altar which he and his father were ordered to build. From any angle we view the event, my sympathy goes to Isaac.

Doesn't he remain in our collective memory as our first survivor? But then the question arises, was he really? How then do we deal with those great ancient commentators, great sages who believed that he has not survived? *Vayashav Avraham el nearav.*" We shall return to his verse. The verb is in

singular, Abraham returned from Mount Moriah alone. The father left the son [00:10:00] behind. We may feel sorry for the Father. Somehow, theologically it makes sense. But it is the son I am fond of and attached to; can we imagine his loneliness.

The relationship of young Isaac with his old father is not really recorded. What is known is that Abraham has given a festive party in honor of the birth of his son. Wait a second, of his son? Not so sure. It's quite possible according to some texts that the father's intention was to honor his beautiful barren wife, Sarah. Both words are in the Bible.

But what about Isaac's early years? He was 37 at the *Akedah*. What had he [00:11:00] done before? Had he studied Torah? With whom? Probably he stayed home with his mother. Wasn't he that only beloved son? In the Midrash the sources are more generous, but they belong to its imagination. So why not use ours as well? He must have been spoiled by his mother. Especially so since his father was too busy. Always traveling, journeying, seeking new places, lost souls, teaching strangers, fighting kings.

To young Isaac the *Akedah* must have been a special moment in his life. Finally, something is happening. (audience laughter) The very idea of having a bonding experience with his father couldn't but appeal to him. [00:12:00] To be alone with him, for him, without being disturbed by anyone, not even by his mother. To discover together faraway landscapes. To bring an offering to God together, "yachdav" -- on a distant mountain.

But then one morning at dawn, while everyone was asleep in the house Abraham woke him up. Naturally, Isaac must have been taken by that promised adventure. Filled-- to use Kierkegaard's language again, "fear and trembling." And the voyage or the walk lasted three days and three nights. They didn't talk much, mostly because they were both overcome by emotion. Their silence became a language in itself, interrupted a few times by Isaac's curiosity, [00:13:00] which turned into anguish. And Abraham's bleak replies.

"Where are we going?" Asked Isaac. "And why this lamb?"  
Nearing Mount Moriah Abraham asked, "Do you see the mountain? That's where we are going to bring an offering to God." And thus we are on the edge of one of the most traumatizing events in biblical history. Does Isaac know the tragic truth of the

situation? Father and son we are told built the altar together. Isaac carries the wood on his shoulder and the fire in his hands. At what point does he realize that the burnt offering will be he? Is it when he is looking for the lamb and doesn't find it? "*V'ayeih haseh l'olah?*" he asks. And the father answers, [00:14:00] "*Hashem yireh-lo haseh.*" "God will show us the lamb."

And he leans over his son. Abraham-- and his son who lies on the altar -- the knife in his hand. In a second the deed will be done. But a heavenly voice intervenes: "*Al tishlach yadkha el-ha-na'ar.*" "Do not lay thy hands on the lad." Abraham obeys. And Isaac? Does he find the strength in his being to respond to what his eyes had just seen? To the pain he just endured? We need a second to breathe.

This is the fourth or fifth time that we chose to return to the *Akedah*. Why? Actually we would say as most Jews would, [00:15:00] "Why not?" (laughter) It certainly is one of the most important, poignant and enigmatic passages in Scripture. But in between I always found in all the new sources, new visions, new commentaries -- new insight.



And one of them was actually last year in my shul, the Fifth Avenue synagogue. During a marvelous, sensitive, beautiful *drasha* by Rabbi Yaakov Kermaier. I recall his approach, his personal, unique approach to the eternal mystery of the *Akedah*, which still resonates in my own.

And now before we allow latecomers to enter, an anecdote. Two men travel in a train. It's late, the night is dark, and one doesn't stop complaining. [00:16:00] "Do I have a headache! Do I have a headache!" "Please," says the other, "I need to sleep." "I have a headache." So he gives him two aspirins and they work, thank God. So the second person thinks, "now I'm going to sleep." But after a few minutes he hears his neighbor again, "Did I have a headache!" I'm saying this because really, this is the fourth or fifth time that we speak about the *Akedah*. But the *Akedah* is my headache. So let's open the doors for the latecomers.

Well, I love Isaac. But I alone? Either way, his father loved him, his mother loved him. God loved him, [00:17:00] too much perhaps. So much that he wanted him in heaven? Alive or dead? As a burned offering? The emphasis in the ancient texts, at this moment in the Scripture of course-- I find it strange,

troubling, and even unfair. Unfair because Abraham is the main protagonist. This tale on one simplistic level is filled with as much faith as it is with the unimaginable pain. All of its protagonists: the father, the son, his brother Ishmael, and their mother Sarah. And also with an uninvited guest named Satan. Who seems to dwell in a sphere, always -- a sphere [00:18:00] which isolates them from the outside world in general, and their own surrounding environment in particular. Is that all? No.

As always, there is also God, of course, God is everywhere. God is there for he is everywhere. God, creator and King of the universe and judge of all its creatures. In the beginning, we hear only a dialogue between God and his chosen friend and ally Abraham. For whom his faith will now be his tenth. The other nine implied his life, the last one targeted his son's.

Until now, Abraham was at the center of everything. The long waiting for his wife, finally giving birth to a son. The battle with the five mighty kings of the region. His plea to God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, from total annihilation for its sins. Everywhere [00:19:00] he preached faith of and allegiance to an

only God. The style is terse, the tale condensed. The content rich in thought and dramatic intensity.

When Isaac asked him a question, whether profound or practical -  
- he answers us with a short syllable. *Hineini*, "Here I am."  
He seems to have neither time nor patience to engage in long discussions or explanations. But at that moment our sympathy-- for the first time perhaps -- goes to the son. As does our curiosity. What does he feel? What does he know? What is his hope? Oh, I love him.

When Isaac was born, we are told, on Passover at noon [00:20:00] to two old parents there was laughter everywhere. At that time several miracles occurred. The blind began to see and the deaf to hear. Why the name? It is linked to laughter. Why? Firstly, for Sarah, then Abraham, followed by Ishmael. "And finally," says the Midrash, "God himself in heaven joined in that laughing." God laughing. Why were they all laughing? What is there to laugh about the destiny of the central character of the story? Which must have been sad, melancholy, if not despairing. What kind of laughter was it?

Isaac spent his life in Beersheba until the age of 37 when he was taken by his father to Mount Moriah. [00:21:00] Soon after he became an orphan of his mother. Together with his estranged brother Ishmael in a moment of sublime, yet sad moment, they buried their father in Hebron. Abraham was there also, for he delivered the moving eulogy at the funeral. From this by the way, we learn that the husband should eulogize his wife. Abraham was there and therefore, he must have seen his son. Did they speak at that occasion? I'm not sure. If so why isn't it mentioned in the text? So they did not speak.

We know what Abraham was thinking during the *Akedah*. What about Isaac? What were his thoughts? It was the first time that father [00:22:00] and son were together really alone. Isaac loved his father and trusted him. And he must have been happy, perhaps exalted. At one moment Abraham stopped to cut some wood, when he placed it on his son's shoulder, while he himself carried the knife and the fire. At that point Isaac must have understood the journey had a specific goal, to bring an offering to God.

That's what father told him, but something had to disturb him. He was unable to repress his anguish. He expressed it in one

word, "father." Just that, "father." And Abraham responded in two words, "*Hineni b'ni.*" "Here I am, my son." Then Isaac continued, "I see the fire. As I see the wood. Where is the lamb we are supposed to sacrifice?" A perfectly [00:23:00] logical question. Abraham avoids it, saying "God will show it to us."

It's worth noting that Isaac does not include the knife in his question, the knife. The knife is absent from it. Was it due to some nefarious intuition on his part? Or is it that he was too young to comprehend at 37 the tragic dimension of the moment and its immediate future? Many Midrashic commentaries-- that he was young. But in that case why is he referred in Scripture to *hana'ar*, the young, the lad. But in that case, therefore we don't understand. What was he?

Is it possible that he then and there became [00:24:00] younger, weak, fragile, and vulnerable? That on the altar nearing his death he became a child? The opposite would have been more reasonable. A person can age during an extreme tragedy. But is the reverse also possible?

I myself have met a Jewish journalist from America who spent the war years in London. Every evening he would cable his short report which was limited to 300 words. And one day in the early '40s, his article included information about what was happening to Poland's ghettos and death camps. There was too much to say and not enough words. He spent hours to find them. In the morning [00:25:00] he went to the washroom. He looked in the mirror and did not recognize himself. His black hair had turned white. But in the *Akedah*, strangely, Isaac is old in the beginning and young at the end.

For those of you who are old enough to remember, accompanying us since the beginning of this story-- of these lessons in this very hall studying together -- have surely realized that the *Akedah* continues to fascinate me more than any other text in the Bible. Even, even "*Har Sinai*," the story of Mount Sinai. This episode has been hounding all my writing, and my entire existence. Is it because the relationship between father and son in my own lifetime, I have seen what it was?

[00:26:00] Each time I returned to the *Akedah* I feel closer to Isaac. It's enough to go deeper into the text and the numerous commentaries, especially Shalom Spiegel's *Midrash Akedah*, or in

English, "The Last Trial." To become aware of its extraordinary weight and importance. Couldn't Jewish history be defined as a series of sequels of what had taken place then on Mount Moriah? The fathers who during the Crusades slaughtered their children in synagogue courtyards to save them from forced conversion. Were they not following in the footsteps of the first believer by adopting his eternal total fidelity to God?

Haven't we forever remained what a Gerrer Hasid called to me one day? [00:27:00] Haven't we been an *Akedah Volk*, the people of the *Akedah*. In the Midrash a great sage, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, wonders: "Why does the heavenly voice, telling Abraham to spare the life of his son, why does it have to repeat the order twice? Because it addresses future generations as well. Every one of them," says this sage, "will have its own Abraham."

Still most questions again related to the event remained the same. Why is the text so poor in evoking Isaac's faith and feelings? Isn't he, he also a principal protagonist in the story? In other words, why does God seem more interested in the father than in his son? Thankfully, some Talmudic sources rectify this error. If it [00:28:00] indeed was an error. As we often witness in the Talmudic universe our ancient sages do

try to show all aspects, all possibilities, all hypotheses linked to difficult questions and situations.

What was Isaac waiting for? If indeed he was 37 years old why was God waiting so long to make his father undergo such a horrible test? And here the Midrash does not hesitate to answer. Isaac had to be old so that people do not say, "Look at him, he's too young, too weak to resist." In other words, surely Isaac must be considered a victim of God or his father. But still a consenting one. Said Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai: "Isaac was already an adult in full [00:29:00] strength. He could have given one blow to his father and saved his own life."

But he used restraint. Why? Because he respected his father. Since Abraham decided to sacrifice him, he, his son felt that he must and will do everything not to stop him. Thus the *Akedah* is a tale of their common submission. And so Isaac may be remembered as the first martyr of Jewish history. But doesn't any act of martyrdom mean a desire to please God by dying for him? Yet I don't believe so.

I believe that we who believe in God, in his Torah, in his commandments is "*u'vecharta bechaim.*" Which means you must



choose [00:30:00] life, not death. Furthermore, I would even say *bechaim* means—*u'vecharta*, in the living, you must choose the living. If you live in a world where too many of your brothers have been killed of course you must remember them. But choose to live with the living.

For the moment let us stay with father and son on Mount Moriah. We know Abraham's feelings but not Isaac's, not yet. What did the event mean in his eyes? Some commentaries hold him unwittingly responsible, facing his older brother Ishmael when they were both young he appears superior, if not vain. Their discussion turns around their piety. Isaac says, "I am more pious. After all, I was eight days [00:31:00] old when my father circumcised me." "Really?" Answer Ishmael. "That means that you were unconscious. That I was 13, 13 when I was circumcised." And then Isaac exclaimed, "Yes, but I am ready now to give God my entire life, if he so wants it."

This thesis supports the view that both father and son participated in the procedure. Isaac went as far as helping Abraham when being bound to the altar, so as not to move and be wounded by the knife. Thus becoming an unholy sacrifice. But then another sage doesn't agree, he declares that just before

the act being completed, just then when Abraham was busy preparing it. Isaac pleaded [00:32:00] with him, twice saying, "Avi, avi, my father, my father." As if to say, "Remember that you are my father!" Just to arouse his compassion.

But then at that moment still other sources point at the arrival on stage as we said, of Satan. He's always there, at the most critical moment in man's relations to his creator. Here he will do everything in his power to sabotage Abraham's plan. And at the same time for his own reasons save his son from being slaughtered.

Another Midrashic story. This time it involves Satan, who is the bearer of truth. Strange, Satan is the bearer of truth. He appears as an old man who addresses Abraham. And he says, (listen, listen to the dialogue) "Where are you going?" asks Satan. [00:33:00] "To pray." Comes the answer. "Then why do you carry fire, wood, and a knife?" "We may stay a while," says Abraham. "Perhaps a day or two, and need them to prepare sustenance."

"Do you take me for an idiot, old man?" asked Satan. "It's you who will appear as an imbecile. You were 100 years old when you

had a son. And now you are going to slaughter him. If you think that you are doing it for God, who gave you orders in a dream, you are wrong. God would never give such an order. And if it told you also in a dream to throw yourself in the sea and die, would you do that?" Abraham refuses to listen.

So Satan disguised as a young lad asked Isaac, "Where are you going?" "To study Torah." Says Isaac. "When? Now or after you die?" Asks Satan. "Oh," says Isaac, "no one studies in death." "Poor boy," says Satan. "Do you know [00:34:00] how many times your mother fasted for you to be born? And now this old man lost his mind and is ready to slaughter you."

"Nevertheless," answered Isaac, "I shall not oppose my father's will nor God's."

Still something of Satan's poisonous words did enter Isaac, for he questioned his father. "Father," he said, "have you heard what he said?" "Don't pay any attention." "But father, do you know what really he is saying? Is it true?" "Oh, don't pay any attention," says Abraham. Now, did Satan's words really have no effect on Isaac? They did, but only partially. Was he simply a victim of a joke? Perhaps a heavenly one?

Actually, he seems to have been more anguished later, much later. When his wife [00:35:00] Rebecca, who is now still a baby that's absent from the *Akedah*, together with a favorite son, Jacob organized a plot against Esau, Isaac's favorite. When Isaac realized that he had been cheated, says the text: "*Vayecherad Yitzhak charadah gedolah.*" "He was seized by a great, tremendous fear." Well, that fear was worse than during the *Akedah*. How can one not feel compassion for Isaac? His entire life was a near tragedy.

At one point in the story Isaac did become aware of what was going to happen. It is accentuated in Midrashic sources, making him a [00:36:00] co-conspirator in the sacred ceremony of sacrifice. They put these words on his lips, "Please father, now be careful." So then if Isaac did not wish to help himself why should someone else? He was worried about the act, so the act should remain pure.

Actually, we are told someone did care. When the angels in heaven looked down and saw Isaac stretched out on the altar under his father's knife they let out a powerful scream, pleading with God to intervene. And their tears fell into Isaac's eyes blinding him forever. But claims still another

Midrash the intervention almost came too late. The knife had [00:37:00] already cut the slight wound in the victim's throat and drops of his blood were shed. And here we come again to our last question. Is it, is it possible that the heavenly intervention by the angels did come too late?

And Isaac? How did he react? Almost all of a sudden in one minute, in an eye blink what could have been the happiest moment in his life has now turned into his darkest. Isaac had never imagined that his father could be cruel, an instrument of death, of his death. So what was his reaction? Did it really try to dissuade him? To arouse his pity? Some Midrashic sources say yes. [00:38:00] That's why he says *avi*, father, twice to remind him.

An illustration of this approach, actually it offers-- I'd like to repeat that because it's so marvelous -- by the great Rembrandt, the great painter, among the greatest in history. What we know, we have seen it. It illustrates with his art the theory. In the museum in Holland, I think in Amsterdam, one could view a series of drawings showing the *Akedah* before he completed the effort for this extraordinary painting. In the drafts Abraham, knife in hand has an expression of anger on his

face. Angrily at whom? At himself? At his son? At the father of humankind, of the people?

[00:39:00] Is this then the story in the *Akedah*? A tragic situation in which the love of God is in conflict with the love of a son? That was the problem for Abraham, torn between two loves. Whatever the motive, the anger dissipated soon. In the final painting Abraham's face shows immense pain and profound compassion and love. Was Rembrandt sad for the father or the son? Whose plight was greater? Abraham's? Not necessarily so. After all, he obeyed God's order. But to whose will (did) Isaac submit? God did not speak to him now.

So what was he thinking? Is it possible that he felt sorry not only for his father [00:40:00] but for God too? That God was somehow involved in his drama was clear to him, since Abraham in a way mentioned it. What then did Isaac think of God's role in the history of our people? He must have felt alone, abandoned not only by the person whose presence and love he sought all these years. But also of their common protector and benefactor, the source of all that is happening in creation.

In my very first lecture on the *Akedah* here years and years ago, I tried, I hope successfully to offer my own interpretation on Abraham's part in it. I brought a large number of Midrashic commentaries proving that he really never envisages to go through with the deed. In other words, the man known for his humanity never [00:41:00] considered even the possibility of slaughtering his son. When he said, when he said, to two, to two of his servants who stayed behind, to them he said, "*Ha-na'ar va-ani*" the lad and I, "*v'nishtachaveh v'nashuvah*" in plural, "We shall return, and we shall bow, and then return. We shall return to you." He meant it literally.

We may wonder, is this possible? That our father Abraham intended to cheat God? Didn't he know that God knows all our intimate thoughts? That he remembers what we have forgotten? In other words, if my interpretation is correct then the *Akedah* was a double test. God tests Abraham, who in turn is testing God. As if to say, "Let us see whether you the God of mercy [00:42:00] will force me to go ahead and be merciless, and kill my son whom you made all these promises."

Thus we could perhaps make peace with Abraham, who went up obtaining great surrender conditions for the people of Israel.

But what about Isaac? How can we forget his pain and his fear on the altar? What was he thinking of his father and God? Especially so since we find other Midrashic sources claiming, really that what happened there truly we will never know.

It's quite possible that it came-- the salvation came too late. That Isaac did lose his life on the altar. That is why [00:43:00] the closure of the tale, the text says "vayashav" in singular. That Abraham returned to his servants alone. We should seize the Midrash to wonder, and what about Isaac, where was he? At least one source believes that he was slaughtered, and then resurrected. And then what? One source seems well-informed, he went up into paradise to cure his wound. Another equally well-informed -- places him in Yeshiva. When we don't know what to do with a character we sent him to Yeshiva. (audience laughter) In that Yeshiva he stayed three years.

Still another also knowledgeable accompanies him to his home where he was greeted by his mother Sarah, still alive. As a good Jewish mother forever worrying over her child's welfare, questioned him. [00:44:00] "Where were you? What kept you away so long?" And he, a devoted Jewish son told her the whole story. That her husband, his father almost killed him and he



was saved by an angel's voice. The mother was so shaken that she fell and died on the spot.

There's another story of course, saying the same thing that the messenger was Satan. He is the one who came to tell, tell Sarah, "Do you know what your husband is doing now to your son?" And he told her, that's when she fell and died. And Isaac in all this, was it really his test too? For what reason? What were his thoughts during his ordeal? What did he feel when he opened his eyes on the altar, seeing his father with the knife in his hands? [00:45:00] Was he really a consenting accomplice? Oh yes.

"While Abraham was building the altar," the Midrash says, "Isaac kept handing him the wood and the stones." And the Midrash says, "Abraham, actually it was like like a man who builds the wedding house for his son. And Isaac behaved like a groom getting ready for the wedding feast. Which he does with joy, knowing that he will die." But that means that he, Isaac, aged 37, was really willing to die because of an order given by God to his father? Why didn't he protest? Why didn't he say, "If God wants my life, let Him tell me, and I'll give it to Him. At

least He could tell me about it.”

But on the other hand, is it possible too that he has such love and such faith [00:46:00] for and in his father till the last moment. That he was convinced that the story will not end in death. After all, he too heard his father say to the servants, “we shall return.” He could have thought anything about his father except that he was a liar.

Once I quoted Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher who didn't stop speaking about God, in whose existence he refused to believe. And he would echo Kierkegaard's anguish which in fact reflects a Midrashic sage's. Sartre wonders: “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 from hell? From my subconscious or from a pathological state of mind other than from a holy source?”

Actually in the tractate Ta'anit, and on Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, [00:47:00] the suggestion is made that it's quite possible that the entire *Akedah* episode was nothing but a misunderstanding. A mistake on the part of Abraham. In fact,

God himself tells him that. "On Mount Moriah," God says to his faithful servant, messenger, and friend: "What were you going to do, Abraham? Kill your son? But you have not understood me. Not at all. I did not ask you to slaughter Isaac. All I asked was: *"V'ha'aleihu sham"* You should bring him up to the top of the mountain as if for sacrifice, nothing else." Poor Abraham. He lost again. But if he answered it has not been recorded.

In truth, Sarah is the only character in the story that died [00:48:00] as a consequence of the *Akedah*. Why? I have looked for an answer in Midrashic sources without real success. She wasn't involved in the event. Why then was she singled out simply to pay for it with her life? Is it that she died in order to atone for the sin of sending Ishmael away? Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness, those two. Exposing him and his mother to danger and death. Is that why Isaac lost his mother and Abraham his wife? Was the *Akedah* simply a tale of correcting an injustice?

As we come to the conclusion of the *denouement* of the episode - actually, all the participants ought to feel good about its outcome. [00:49:00] Isaac for remaining alive, Abraham for being a father, and God for witnessing his loyal friend's faith

emerging unscathed. Did Abraham ask Isaac to forgive him for his agonizing experience? Did father and son ever speak to one another again? We don't know, probably not. Clearly, the text would have mentioned it.

The term, term *yachdav*, together is no longer operative here; but God speaks not to Isaac, but to his father. He speaks to his father and says, "*Atah yadati*" "Now I know," *ki-y'rei Elokim atah.*" "Now I know that you are a God fearing man. For you were ready not to spare your son, your only son for me." Reread the passage and you will be surprised. What? God [00:50:00] knows now? So late in the story? Isn't the *Akedah* Abraham's tenth and last trial? Weren't the previous nine sufficient evidence?

Various commentaries raise the question: in generally, isn't God by definition omniscient? All-knowing about man's contact with the past or future? Could the answer be that God knew but Abraham didn't? Or that before God knew -- but now he was certain. Many questions about the *Akedah* story remain questions; the tale itself is still burning like an open wound.

The conclusions are sapient. And again, the angel speaks for God: "Now I know," and so forth and so forth. And he says "*v'lo*

*chasakhta*" [00:51:00] "You have not withheld Isaac." In this verse there is something else which must perturb the reader and student. "*Ki lo chasakhta et binkha et-y'chid'kha mimenie.*" "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, Isaac as a burnt offering. The same "no."

Earlier two other words were added to the order, that he spoke about his son "*et bin'kha asher ahavta.*" "Give me your son, your only son, Isaac whom you have loved." "*Asher ahavta*" is missing from the second passage. Vanished, erased, censored. Why? Does it mean that Abraham's love for Isaac was no longer the same? And that God's omission is in fact a heavenly reproach? [00:52:00] That actually God didn't want him to kill his son out of love. That means you didn't love your son enough.

"*Vayashav Avraham el-na'arav.*" And Abraham returned to his servants, that it is it remains one of the most painful and enigmatic verses of the tale. "*Vayashav,*" he returned, singular. But Isaac, where was Isaac? So therefore some commentators believe that there was a rupture. A breakdown between father and son, they have never spoken to each other.

Rabbi Yosef ben Hananiah thinks that Abraham sent home his son to protect him from an evil eye. Others believe that he remained on Mount Moriah, dwelling in melancholy solitude for [00:53:00] three years before going back home to marry Rebecca. That is why seeing him for the first time she fell from the camel, because he seemed to belong to another world. It was a different third theory, he went up to paradise where he was treated for depression.

In conclusion my friends, what is the meaning of the *Akedah*? Is it that it does not only belong to the past, but also to the future? That our people has been tested in its faith as well as in its resolve more than once? Is it something that we have seen in our lifetime during the darkest of the dark periods in history? When father and son walk together in death and were separated. [00:54:00] Do I love Isaac because the *Akedah* transcends centuries and frontiers on more levels than one?

Or because as the first survivor of burnt offerings of men and women and children of our people consumed in fire -- he represents many children, their parents, and grandparents even today. Do I love him because he remembers and is being remembered as one who has seen the fire? I love him not only

for what had happened to him, but also for what he had done with his memories. And the reason for his blindness. Rather than living a life of solitude and sadness, he married, had children, loved nature, [00:55:00] and composed prayers for future communities all over the world.

As for laughter, laughter. In his memoirs from Treblinka, a member of the Sonderkommando. The most despairing of all, a Jewish carpenter, Jankiel Wiernik wrote: "Will I ever be able to laugh again?" For a long time I believed that this question is the most somber and despairing of all that has been written by and about the tragedy and these witnesses. Then I discovered from the mountains of ashes in Birkenau, the memoir by Zalman Gradowski. Also a member of the local Sonderkommando, and he wrote: "Will I ever be able to weep again."

Our forefather Isaac could have asked himself the same question [00:56:00] and it is up to us, his heirs and successors to answer him. Thank you. (applause)

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