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Actualizing Our Potential

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The Akeida: A Test of Faith and Its Purpose

One of the most fascinating, perplexing, and thoroughly unexpected narratives of the *Tanach* (Bible) is the *Akeida* (Binding of Yitzchak). Who could have anticipated that Hashem, the ultimate *Meracheim* (Compassionate One), would direct His most faithful servant Avraham to take his son Yitzchak and offer him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah?

The story raises a host of questions, foremost among them: Why did Hashem issue such a bewildering command?

The classic medieval debate between the Rambam (Maimonides) and the Ramban (Nachmanides) offers two distinct answers.

Rambam vs. Ramban: Differing Views on Avraham's Trial

According to the Rambam, it was not Hashem's intention to discover the full extent of Avraham's righteousness, for everything is known to Him, and He need not ever conduct any experiments in order to obtain new knowledge. (Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:24)

According to this Sage, the "test" was arranged for the sake of humanity at large. The intention was that all mankind would learn from Avraham's conduct, the extent to which man must strive to manifest the 'fear of G-d'.

If so, why was the act of Avraham performed in the utmost privacy, since he even separated himself from the youths who had accompanied him on the journey? My understanding is that what took place at Mt. Moriah was not revealed to the contemporaries of Avraham. Rather, it was to become public knowledge only with the Revelation of the Torah. Those who believe in the divinity of the Torah will read the story and learn the appropriate lessons it contains.

However, the Ramban offers a different interpretation. He maintains that the objective of the command was to give Avraham an opportunity to raise himself to a higher level in his service of G-d. For until now, the full extent of Avraham's fear of Hashem existed only in potential. Fulfilling this difficult task would have the effect of *actualizing* his fear of Hashem and placing Avraham on the highest pedestal of those who cultivate the pure awe of the Creator. (Ramban, *Commentary on Bereishit* 22:1)

Actualizing Spiritual Potential Through Challenge

Yet did the Akeida, in fact, achieve its objective? Avraham did as he was told, and after tying Yitzchak to the makeshift altar, he picked up the knife to slaughter his son. Quite unexpectedly, at that moment an Angel of Hashem (i.e., a prophecy) instructed him,

"Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him; for now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me. (Bereishit 22:12)"

In response to this new divine message, Avraham desisted from touching his son. He thus did **not** do what he had originally set out to do and, if so, asks the Abarbanel, how did Avraham achieve in actuality what had only been in potential?

We can resolve this difficulty in accordance with the Rambam's approach. For the Rambam, the Akeida was intended to demonstrate to mankind the full extent of the true service of G-d. Therefore, once Avraham lifted the knife to kill his son, he demonstrated that nothing held him back from doing that deed and the objective of the test was achieved. (i.e., there was no further need to actually slaughter Yitzchak once it was clear that Avraham was ready to do it).

However, the Ramban maintains that the trial was for the benefit of Avraham; giving him an opportunity to fulfill his potential by really sacrificing his son to Hashem. According to this view, it would be necessary for Avraham to practically perform the deed that would manifest his potential. But in point of fact, the Angel intervened, preventing Avraham from completing the sacrifice. If so, in what sense did the Akeida achieve its intended objective?

I believe we must consult the text which says that after Avraham was told to desist from slaying Yitzchak:

"He raised his eyes and saw, behold, a ram afterwards, caught in the thicket by its horns; so Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an Olah (Burnt Offering) in the place of his son. (Bereishit 22:13)"

Avraham's reaction to the message of the Angel strikes us as strange. We would have expected him to hug his son and experience a feeling of near euphoria. But this was not the case. Hashem did not command him to sacrifice the ram, yet he went ahead and did so. Why?

It seems that Avraham reached the exalted level where he wanted to actually experience the offering of his son, Yitzchak. When this was prohibited, he sought to accomplish that goal through a **substitute**. The ram that he slaughtered assumed the character of his son.

From a psychological standpoint, the actions he undertook were directed at his son. Says Rashi,

"Over each service that he performed he would pray and say, 'May it be Your Will that this should be as if this were done to my son, as if my son were slaughtered, as if his blood were sprinkled, as if his hide was stripped, as if he were set smoking and became ashes' (ibid.)."

In effect, Avraham redirected the psychological energy attached to his beloved son toward his love and awe of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. He needed to express this devotion tangibly.

According to the Ramban, Hashem intervened in the life of Avraham with a seemingly impossible demand, all for the sake of elevating the spiritual potential of His faithful servant to the level of actuality.

Teshuva Beyond Sin: Fulfilling Our Divine Capabilities

This story has great relevance to our lives, especially at this time of the year when the theme of *Teshuva* (repentance) is paramount. We tend to think of repentance purely in terms of rectifying sins of the past and correcting defects of our character. Of course, the primary objective is to introspect and recognize the various transgressions that we have committed between man and G-d and between man and his fellow. And to the best of our ability, repair the damage we have caused, and engage in the requisite repentance.

But is there another kind of *Teshuva* that is not connected to past sins or character flaws that we must also perform? What about our failure to fulfill our potential by exposing ourselves to challenges with which we may not be comfortable? Everyone of us has certain capabilities that we may not even be aware of, and others of which we are cognizant but fail to utilize.

We often go through life without developing many talents with which we are endowed, talents that could bring great personal fulfillment and benefit to ourselves as well as to others. This can be because we are too lazy or simply too fearful of failure to make the efforts necessary to reach a higher level.

In the realm of spiritual life, I believe that everyone of us has the potential to reach a higher level of *Avodat Hashem* (Divine Service) if we are willing to do the work that is required. Everyone has the ability to learn more Torah, especially in these times when there is a proliferation of quality classes available at various venues and online.

One should strive to find teachers who have the ability to elucidate the Torah in a way that makes it enlightening and inspiring. If you search for Torah diligently, you will definitely find it (Megilla 6b). And one has the potential to engage in *Chesed* (Loving-Kindness) activities in manifold ways, thus bringing joy to others and a deep sense of fulfillment to oneself.

The greatest source of happiness is the successful use of one's talents in the achievement of a worthy objective. Using one's creativity in a worthwhile manner produces a profound sense of satisfaction and makes one feel that one's life is 'worth living'.

May the goal of actualizing our potential be part of our *Teshuva* program, and may Hashem assist us in this worthy endeavor. And may we all be sealed in the *Sefer HaChayim* (Book of Life).

Chag Kippurim Sameiach.

Questions? Comments?

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