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## THE AFTERMATH OF *AKEIDAT YITZHAK*: A LESSON IN PAIN AND HEALING

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One of the most troubling and often discussed episodes in *Humasb* is *akeidat yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac. The Torah does not offer any direct answers to the myriad questions that this incident raises: How could God—a God of mercy and compassion—make such a demand of Abraham? Why did Abraham go along with God’s plan? Thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have wrestled with these questions throughout the ages.

Despite the many questions that the episode raises, the *akeidah* is ultimately seen as a positive religious experience. As the Torah frames it, God had tested Abraham and Abraham passed with flying colors:

בראשית כב:א  
ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר  
הנני

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “I am here.” (Genesis 22:1)

בראשית כב:טו-יח  
ויקרא מלאך ידוד אל אברהם שנית מן השמים: ויאמר בי נשבעתני נאם ידוד כי  
יען אשר עשית את הדבר הזה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך: כי ברך אברכך

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.” (Genesis 22:15-18)

An equally important issue is the impact of the *akeidah* on Isaac. Many com-

mentators explain Isaac's general passivity and lack of proactive activities as a result of the *akeidah*. There are Midrashim that connect Isaac's blindness later in life with the *akeidah*. On Genesis 27:1

ויהי כי זקן יצחק ותכהין עיניו מראת ויקרא את עשו בנו הגדל ויאמר אליו בני  
ויאמר אליו הנני

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dimmed from seeing, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son. He answered, "Here I am."

The Midrash comments:

מראות מכה אותה ראייה שבשעה שעקד אברהם אבינו את בנו על גבי  
המזבח

"From seeing"—from the strength of that vision, when Abraham bound Isaac his son to the altar. . . (Genesis Rabbah 65:10)

As the Midrash puts it, we should read the verse as "When Isaac grew old and his eyes were dimmed **from having seen** [at the *akeidah*]. . ." The *akeidah* continues to affect Isaac into his old-age. The Midrash does not tell us if Abraham is aware of the impact of the *akeidah* on Isaac. A cursory reading of *Tanakh* and the normative midrashic tradition shows that Abraham is unaware of any negative effects of the *akeidah*. At the same time, Isaac's response to the *akeidah* and the way that he deals with it offers much insight into his character. The interplay between these two dynamics—the impact of the *akeidah* on Isaac, and Abraham's oblivion toward it—teaches a valuable lesson in the religious lives that we lead.

### ISAAC AFTER THE *AKEIDAH*

The first time that Isaac appears in the narrative after the *akeidah*, he is about to meet Rebecca, the woman that Abraham's servant finds for him as a wife at Abraham's command. The Torah paints the following scene:

#### בראשית כד:טב-סה

ויצחק בא מבוא באר לחי ראי והוא יושב בארץ הנגב: ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה לפנות  
ערב וישא עיניו וירא והנה גמלים באים: ותשא רבקה את עיניה ותרא את יצחק ותפל  
מעל הגמל: ותאמר אל העבד מי האיש הלזה ההלך בשדה לקראתנו ויאמר העבד הוא  
אדני ותקח הצעיף ותתכס:

Isaac had just come back having gone to Be'er la'Hai Roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negev. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching.

Raising her eyes, Rebecca saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, “who is that man walking in the field toward us? And the servant said, “that is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. (Genesis 24:62-65)

Rashi comments:

מבוא באר לחי ראי - שהלך להביא הגר לאברהם אביו שישאנה

**From having gone to Be'er la'hai Roi**—he had gone to bring Hagar for Abraham, so he could marry her.

This episode raises a number of questions. First, why does the Torah inform us that Isaac went to *Be'er la'Hai Roi*? It seems rather odd that we should care where Isaac is coming from. If the Torah is telling us of the relationship between Isaac and Rebecca, we should only be concerned with where they are now. Rashi's comment raises even more difficulties. Abraham, it will be recalled had just sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. Yet, according to Rashi, Isaac has been occupying himself finding a wife for his father. If Isaac is capable of, and concerned with finding a wife for Abraham, why does Isaac not find a wife for himself? Furthermore, if Isaac is about to get married and begin building his family, why is he at all interested in finding a wife for his aging father? It would seem as though Isaac should be worried about getting his own affairs in order.

### BE'ER LA'HAI ROI—A WELL TO THE LIVING GOD

The first step in beginning to answer these questions is to understand the significance of *Be'er la'Hai Roi*. Isaac's journey to *Be'er la'Hai Roi* is not the first time we encounter this place. *Be'er la'Hai Roi* was named by Hagar in *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, after she had been sent away by Sarah, who was jealous of Hagar for having become pregnant with Abraham's child. Ironically, it was Sarah who suggested that Abraham take Hagar as a wife because of Sarah's inability to conceive.

#### בראשית טז:ה-יב

ותאמר שרי אל אברם חמסי עליך אנכי נתתי שפחתי בחיקך ותרא כי הרתה ואקל בעיניך ישפט ידוד ביני וביניך: ויאמר אברם אל שרי הנה שפחתך בידך עשי לה הטוב בעיניך ותענה שרי ותברח מפניה: וימצאה מלאך ידוד על עין המים במדבר על העין בדרך שור: ויאמר הגר שפחת שרי אי מזה באת ואנה תלכי ותאמר מפני שרי גברתי אנכי ברחת: ויאמר לה מלאך ידוד שובי אל גברתך והתעני תחת ידיה: ויאמר לה מלאך ידוד הרבה ארבה את זרעך ולא יספר מרב: ויאמר לה מלאך ידוד הנך הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו ישמעאל כי שמע ידוד אל עניך: והוא יהיה פרא אדם ידו בכל ויד כל בו ועל פני כל אחיו ישכן:

Sarai said to Abram: “The wrong done to me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!” Abram said to Sarai, “Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her. An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur and said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.” And the angel of the Lord said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.” The angel of the Lord said to her further, “Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael. For the Lord has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man; His hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.” (Genesis 16 5:-12)

This revelation with the angel prompts Hagar to call God by a new name:

**בראשית טז:יג-יד**

ותקרא שם ידוד הדבר אליה אתה אל ראי כי אמרה הגם הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי: על כן קרא לבאר באר לחי ראי הגה בין קדש ובין ברד:

And she called the Lord who spoke to her, “You Are El-Ro’i” for she said, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!” Therefore the well was called “*Be’er la’Hai Roi*” (the well to Hai Roi); it is between Kadesh and Bered. (Genesis 16:13-14)

Hagar names God “*El Roi*” which literally means “God who sees me.” She also names the place of her revelation “*Be’er la’Hai Roi*” “A well to the Living One Who sees me.”

The Midrash is troubled by Hagar’s name for God. What is it that God sees? The Midrash explains:

**בראשית רבה מה**

אתה אל ראי אמר רבי אייבו אתה הוא רואה בעלבון של עלובין

**You are God Who sees me**—R. Aybu said: You identify with the embarrassment of those who have been insulted and humiliated. (Genesis Rabbah 45)

Hagar had been treated improperly by Sarah, and was humiliated by the lack of dignity and respect afforded her. Her encounter with the angel allows Hagar to feel that God identifies with her plight and is sympathetic to her humiliation. *Be’er la’Hai Roi* comes to symbolize her pain and the comfort she feels when

she realizes that she is not alone in her suffering. God recognizes her plight and has compassion for her.

### THE CONNECTION TO ISAAC

Though the text does not explain how, it is clear that the *akeidah* had a deep impact on Isaac, as indicated in the Midrash cited above. One may raise the possibility that Isaac felt that he had been wronged, insulted, and abandoned both by his father Abraham, and by God who had commanded this on him. In other words, Isaac had many of the same feelings that Hagar had after being kicked out of Abraham's house by Sarah.

The Torah leaves room for speculation about Isaac's exact intentions, but it is clear that his travel to *Be'er la'Hai Roi* should not be seen as a random detail of his wanderings in the desert. Rather he went there because he identified with Hagar's plight. Perhaps Isaac sought out the compassion that Hagar had felt at that same place—Isaac wanted to relate to a God Who identifies with the plight of the downtrodden and humiliated. But Isaac may have gone to question the very existence of the place whose meaning he so desperately sought. In light of his experience at the *akeidah*, Isaac may have questioned the very possibility of *Be'er la'Hai Roi's* existence. "How could there be a place that testifies to God's compassion," wondered Isaac, "when I feel so abandoned and hurt?" The Midrash on our verse confirms this understanding.

#### בראשית רבה ט

ויצחק בא מבוא, אתא ממיטא, ולהיכן הלך, באר לחי רואי, הלך להביא את הגר אותה  
שישבה על הבאר ואמרה לחי העולמים ראה בעלבוני

He came from a mission to fetch someone. And where had he gone? To *Be'er la'Hai Roi*. He had gone to fetch Hagar, **the one who had sat by the well and besought the Eternal God** "See my humiliation!" (Genesis Rabbah 60)

Isaac fetches Hagar because he identifies with her feelings of humiliation. His bringing Hagar has nothing to do with a lack of concern for his own life situation, or an inability to find a wife for himself. Rather, just as Hagar sat on the well and cried to God, "See my humiliation!" so Isaac was crying out to God, to Abraham and perhaps to the rest of the world, "See *my* humiliation!" Abraham was unaware of Isaac's pain and humiliation. Isaac's going to the place named after the pain and humiliation felt at being rejected and abandoned was his way of telling Abraham about his pain. Perhaps Isaac's bringing Hagar back to Abraham was his way of making Abraham aware of the pain that he had caused to others. Just as Abraham was unaware of the deep psychological impact the *akeidah* had on Isaac, he may not have been aware of the pain and suffering felt

by Hagar after being expelled from Abraham's house.

According to this understanding, before he could marry Rebecca and get on with his life, Isaac had to come to terms with his experience at the *akeidah*. This included a need to cry out and admit that he felt hurt and betrayed. He went to the only place he knew of to make such a plea—to *Be'er la'Hai Roi*. Additionally, Isaac had to mend his relationship with Abraham. Bringing Hagar back to Abraham's house was not a way to avoid dealing with his own life. On the contrary, in order for Isaac to deal with his life he needed his father fix the wrong he had done. Abraham begins to do this by taking back Hagar. If the source of Hagar's pain and humiliation was being expelled from Abraham's house, then the way to fix it is to bring her back. By urging Abraham to take in Hagar, Isaac hopes to force Abraham to reassess the other times Abraham may have caused other people to feel the same way as Hagar.

### THE LESSON FOR US

The above analysis teaches two important lessons. First, we learn how Isaac dealt with his pain, suffering and humiliation. He went to the one place he knew of that could help him deal with his feelings of abandonment, and he sought out the one person he knew to have had similar feelings and issues. When confronted with life's difficulties we should follow this model. Even more important than having a community and support network to celebrate with us in our times of joy is to have that network in times of trouble and despair. Although he was unable to directly confront Abraham about the traumatizing effects the *akeidah* had on him, Isaac knew how to make Abraham aware of his suffering.

Much has been written about how the subsequent events in Isaac's life parallel those of Abraham's. Isaac travels to the same places and digs the same wells as Abraham. Isaac deals with similar political and military issues as Abraham, and he builds altars to God in the same place as Abraham. One explanation of this may be that Isaac has to rebuild a relationship to God in light of his *akeidah* experience. Isaac is not able to relate to God in the same way as Abraham—after all God was the source of Isaac's trauma. Isaac therefore builds a relationship to God on his terms. At the end of the day, Isaac's relationship with God and his actions may closely resemble those of Abraham, but only because Isaac engaged in a process of building that relationship. His initial questions and concerns were very different from his father's. Isaac's willingness to engage in the process of rebuilding his shattered relationship to God should serve as inspiration to us when we have questions about our own spirituality and relationships with God.

A second lesson that emerges from the above analysis is to realize the effect and ramifications that our religious lives may have on others. As the Torah tells us, Abraham passed God's test with flying colors. He did what God demanded

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of him, despite the many inherent difficulties contained in such a demand. Abraham, however, was unaware of the effect of his actions on Isaac. It is often the case that religious actions have unintended or undesired consequences. Isaac's silent plea to Abraham—manifest in his bringing Hagar back to Abraham's house—makes Abraham aware of the pain that his desire to follow God's word had on others. This is not to say that Abraham should have acted any differently, or should have refused to follow God's command. Rather, Abraham should have been sensitive to the pain that the *akeidah* caused Isaac and acknowledged it. He should have been aware of the strain in their relationship and of the difficulties in Isaac's personal spiritual life that resulted from the *akeidah*. We too should be aware of the consequences of our religious actions. The demands that *halakhah* makes of us are numerous and can have unintended effects on our family, friends, colleagues, and on our own sensitivities. The *akeidah*, and Isaac's reaction to it, teaches us the need to be sensitive to the possible negative ramifications our personal spiritual quests can have on others.