

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Sacrificing Yitzchak was the last and final test which Avraham was challenged with and was the ultimate trial that Avraham withstood to express his commitment to the Almighty. The following Sicha will discuss the significance of this test.

The *mishna* in Avos tells us:

Text 1

With ten tests our father Avraham was tested and he withstood them all—in order to make known how great was our father Avraham's love [for G-d]. G-d had Avraham go through various ordeals, hardships, and adversity to declare to all generations the great devotion that he had for the Almighty.

Avos 5:3

8) Sara is taken by Avimelech.

9) Throwing out Hagar and Yishmael

10) The binding of Yitzchak.

When G-d desired that Avraham bring his son as a sacrifice before him, he instructed Avraham as follows:

Text 2

And He [G-d] said, "Please (*na*) take your son, your only one, whom you love—Yitzchak—and go away to the land of Moriah; bring him up there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you."

Bereishis, 22:2

Figure 1

The Ten Tests ¹
1) Nimrod throws him into the furnace.
2) The instruction to leave the land of his birth.
3) The famine in the Land of Israel.
4) Sara is taken by Pharaoh.
5) The war against the five kings.
6) The notification that his children would go into exile.
7) The <i>Bris Mila</i> .

Avraham was requested by the Almighty to take Yitzchak, the beloved child borne to him at an old age, and sacrifice him before G-d. Instead of this child being the progeny that he had wished for, he was to be an offering before the Almighty.

G-d tells Avraham, "Please take your son." The verse does not employ a language which expresses a command from the Almighty, it rather uses a word that connotes a *request*. G-d did not demand that Avraham offer his son before him, but entreated that he do so.

¹ According to the Bartanura, *ibid*. See Pirkei D’Rebi Eliezer for another version of the ten tests.

None of it is real

The Talmud explains the reason that G-d expressed His request to Avraham in this particular manner:

Text 3

R. Shimon ben Abba said: “‘*Na*’ can only denote entreaty. This may be compared to a king of flesh and blood who was confronted by many wars, which he won by the aid of a great warrior. Subsequently, he was faced with a severe battle. Thereupon he said to him, ‘I pray thee, assist me in battle, that people may not say, there was no reality in the earlier ones.’ So also did the Holy One, blessed be He, say unto Avraham, ‘I have tested you with many trials and you withstood them all. Now, be firm, for My sake in this trial, that men may not say, there was no reality in the earlier ones.’”

Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b

Were Avraham not to have passed this final test of being prepared to offer his son as a sacrifice before G-d, his entire dedication to G-d would have been uncertain. People would say that all the previous tests of Avraham were meaningless. G-d therefore was particularly interested that Avraham withstand this test and therefore beseeched him to go through with it.

From the fact that we see G-d’s concern “that men may not say, there was no reality in the earlier ones,” it leads us to understand that their words would have had merit, were Avraham not to have passed this test.

However, the accusation that would have been leveled against Avraham—were he not to have

overcome this challenge—does not seem to make sense.

Why would his failure to stand up to the last test be indicative that all the rest of the nine tests were meaningless?

One can imagine that this trial of sacrificing his son on an altar before G-d was supremely difficult. Seemingly though, the only thing that his failure to overcome the last test would express, would be that although extremely dedicated, his self-sacrifice was not to the degree that he would slaughter his son borne to him in old age.

How would a failure to pass an extremely difficult hurdle indicate that all the other amazing feats that Avraham performed, indicating his commitment to G-d, were meaningless?!

A big deal

In general, Judaism holds this test in great significance. It is considered as the ultimate test and the fact that Avraham rose above it serves as the fundamental merit for the Jewish people. The Abarbanel writes concerning this trial:

Text 4

This section of the *akeida* (the binding of Yitzchak) is the entire pride of the Jewish people and their merit before their Father in Heaven. It is therefore a regular prayer that we say in our daily prayers.

Abarbanel, Bereishis 22:1

We constantly remind the Almighty, so to speak, of the great merit of our forefather Avraham’s triumph over this tremendous test—a merit

which protects the Jewish people for all of eternity.

Seemingly this must be understood: What is the big deal of Avraham's sacrifice?

The history of the Jewish people is replete with martyrs. Why does Avraham's sacrifice stand out above and beyond theirs? On the contrary, Avraham's sacrifice seems to be less significant. Not only did others sacrifice themselves before G-d, but they did so even *without* G-d speaking to them and requesting that they do so.

Text 5

For, the *akeida* itself is not really regarded as so great a test in relation to the level of our father Avraham, peace to him, especially as G-d said to him, "Please take your son..." After all, there are numerous saints who gave their lives for the sanctification of the Lord even though G-d did not speak to them.

Tanya, Igeres Hakodesh, Igeres 21

Why then, do we make a big deal concerning Avraham's sacrifice?

His own child

While one might assume that Avraham was special in that he sacrificed his son—an act which is extremely difficult and runs contrary to a parent's natural mercy on their children—this too was something that was done throughout Jewish history².

One such example is brought in the Talmud concerning Chana and her seven sons, who were killed in sanctification of G-d's Name.

² See Kinos for 9 Av, Kina 23, for a particularly moving account of such an example.

Text 6

...This refers to the woman and her seven sons. They brought the first before the Emperor and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the second before the Emperor and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the next and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the next before the Emperor saying, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They then brought another and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They then brought the next and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...So they led him away and killed him. They brought the next and said to him, "Serve the idol." He replied...The Emperor said: I will throw down my seal before you and you can stoop down and pick it up, so that they will say of you that you have conformed to the desire of the king. He replied: "Fie on you, Caesar, fie on you, Caesar; if your own honor is so important, how much more the honor of the Holy One, blessed be He!" They were leading him away to kill him when his mother said: "Give him to me that I may kiss him a little." She said to him: "My son, go and say to your father Avraham, 'you bound one [son to the] altar, but I have bound seven altars.'" Then she also went up on to a roof and threw herself down and was killed...

Talmud, Gitin 57b

Chana herself implores from her child going to his execution, to tell Avraham that her sacrifice was greater than his. Why, then, do we indeed say that it was specifically Avraham who made the ultimate sacrifice?

Pretty please

The Medrash tells us that when Avraham was asked by G-d to sacrifice Yitzchak on an altar, he would have justifiably been able to protest G-d's request.

Text 7

Avraham said before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe! You clearly know that at the time when You told me³, 'Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, yea, Yitzchak, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering,' I would have been able to say, 'Did you not already tell me⁴, "For in Yitzchak will be called your seed?!"' I didn't say that though, rather I held back my mercy and I didn't question your desire."

Bereishis Rabba 56:10

Avraham had already been promised that Yitzchak would be the progeny that would continue on his path of monotheism and inherit the blessings that Avraham had been assured. If Yitzchak would have been killed on the altar, that promise would have gone up in the flames of Yitzchak's martyrdom.

It was for this very reason that when G-d tells him to sacrifice his son, He says, "*Please* take your son." G-d does not command him, but *asks* him to do so, as commanding him would have contradicted a previous promise that G-d had made to Avraham.

This is what is special about Avraham's sacrifice, explains the Ikarim. It was the fact that he was not commanded to martyr Yitzchak, and his

ability to protest, that sets him apart from the martyrs of all the generations that followed him.

Text 8

It is for this reason that we constantly mention in our prayers, Avraham's binding of Yitzchak, more than the sacrifice of the righteous and the martyrs that sacrificed themselves for G-d, blessed be He—for example, R' Akiva and his colleagues, and the martyrs in every generation. This is because all other martyrs sacrificed themselves as a fulfillment of the commandment⁵, "You shall not desecrate My Holy Name. I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel." Concerning Avraham, however, even if there would have been a commandment, it would not have compelled him.

Sefer Ha-Ikarim 3:36

Avraham stood out, in light of the fact that his sacrifice came from his deep commitment and that he was not coerced in any way. He sacrificed his son merely because he was deeply committed to G-d.

The Ikarim makes two assumptions to support his statement:

A) Avraham sacrificed his son freely, without any external pressure from G-d.

B) All other martyrs were *commanded* to sacrifice themselves and therefore their martyrdom is not as significant, as it is not expressive of the same level of commitment.

On both of these assumptions we can question:

³Bereishis 22:2.

⁴Bereishis 21:12.

⁵Vayikra 22:32.

A) Although G-d may not have commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son, He asked him to—and when G-d asks, one listens.

B) Throughout our history, there have been many Jewish martyrs who have sanctified G-d's Name, even in instances in which they were not commanded⁶.

It seems then, that Avraham's sacrifice was not drastically different than the martyrdom of the generations that followed him. Why then, do we make such a big deal of it?

Being the first

In *Chassidus*⁷ it is explained, that although Avraham may not have been the *only* one to martyr himself, he was definitely the *first*.

Being first means that there was no one that Avraham could draw strength from. There was no one that could serve as an example for him in his self-sacrifice; no one who had revealed the essence of the soul before he did. Avraham didn't merely sacrifice himself, he blazed a path and "opened the spigot" so that other generations could easily follow his lead.

"All beginnings are difficult," says the Mechilta,⁸ and Avraham's sacrifice of human life, in a way that ran contrary to his nature, is what gave the Jewish people the strength throughout history to sanctify G-d's Name.

The strength that a Jew has to sanctify his life for G-d is rooted in the depth and the essence of the soul. Though it is indeed the essence of the soul, it is a part of the soul that is hidden and covered. Were it not for Avraham revealing this depth, and going on actual self-sacrifice (*mesiras nefesh*), we would not have had the ability to do so ourselves.

It is because Avraham was the first to sanctify G-d's Name, that for the rest of eternity, he is looked to as the paradigm of martyrdom.

What happened to the furnace?

This explanation, though, is insufficient. If we are looking at the first instance where an individual sacrificed themselves for G-d, there is no need to look at the tenth test of Avraham, as already by the *first* test, Avraham let himself be thrown into a furnace in order to sanctify G-d and to proclaim his unity throughout the world.

Maimonides describes at length the path Avraham led, until ultimately, he was nearly killed for expressing his belief of the one true G-d to the world.

Text 9

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve...Ultimately...he realized that there was one G-d...He knew that the entire world was making a mistake...When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path. He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the G-d of the world...When he overcame them through the strength of his arguments, the king desired to kill him. He was [saved through] a miracle, and left for Charan.

Maimonides, Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:3

⁶ See Tur, YOD, Ch. 156.

⁷ See Sefer HaMaamorim 5678.

⁸Yisro 19:5. See as well, Rashi *ad loc*.

Already at the beginning of Avraham's journey, he lived a life of sanctification of G-d's Name, to the extent that he was willing to die for the Almighty.

If sacrificing his son was not the first instance where Avraham sanctified G-d's Name, why was it specifically given the most attention—to the point where G-d specifically asks him to overcome this challenge, in order “that men may not say, there was no reality in the earlier ones,” and that it “is therefore a regular prayer that we say in our daily prayers?”

Ready to die?

While we usually define martyrdom as the act of dying for our beliefs, true martyrdom is actually much deeper than that.

True martyrdom is not about dying for a cause, it is about giving your entire being to the Almighty.

Merely dying for a cause does not show that your whole identity is for G-d, as it is possible that the reason the person is willing to die is one of personal benefit.

Text 10

Because the concept of self-sacrifice is specifically when it transcends reason...even a person who actually gives their life for the sanctification of G-d's name, if their intent was to achieve something such as a reward, for example, this is not true self-sacrifice...the true concept of self-sacrifice is that a person has no other desire besides G-d, as the verse⁹ says, “For whom do I have in heaven, and I desired no one with You on earth.”

Torah Ohr 120d-121a

It is possible that the person gives up his life since he believes that by giving up his physical life, he actually gains more than he would have, were he to have remained alive.

In addition to a *gain* that a person may believe he will receive in an afterlife, a person can be so dedicated to his cause that he believes his life is not worth living, were he to be forced to give up that cause. He is therefore willing to die.

In both of these instances, his giving up of his life is not in contradiction to his identity, but is rather an expression thereof.

True martyrdom is when the person gives over his entire being and identity completely to G-d, above any logic or personal feeling. The person is completely given over to G-d in a way that his personal identity is non-existent.

It is this trait of complete relinquishment of personal identity that was expressed in Avraham's martyrdom, and it was this trait of ultimate self-sacrifice with which Avraham blazed the path for his descendants to follow.

Ur Kasdim vs. the binding of Yitzchak

This ultimate degree of martyrdom was the trait that was expressed by offering Yitzchak as a sacrifice, and was not expressed in the act of Avraham being thrown into the furnace.

When Avraham gave up his life and let himself be thrown into a furnace, it is possible that there was some rational—albeit a sacred one—that drove him to sacrifice his life.

Avraham saw that the world was in a tremendous state of darkness and he therefore made it his mandate “to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim, and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path¹⁰.” He was so driven by this goal, that he did

⁹Tehillim 73:25.

¹⁰Maimonides, Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:3.

not let anything stand in his way—even if that meant giving up his life.

Were he to have indeed been killed by the event of Ur Kasdim, this act itself would have propelled the declaration that there is only one G-d, and shown that an individual believed in this so much, that he was willing to die for that belief. Being ready to die in the furnace did not extinguish his mission, it helped drive it.

By the sacrifice of Yitzchak however, his giving up of his life didn't serve an objective of spreading G-dliness. It was merely an expression of complete dedication to G-d. Were Avraham to have gone through with slaughtering Yitzchak (G-d forbid), not only would it not have helped his goal, but it would have squelched any hope that monotheism would continue in the world. Together with the death of Yitzchak, would have died his heir in declaring to the world that there is only one true G-d.

Text 11

And he said, "Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad, nor do the slightest thing to him, for now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me."

Bereishis 22:12

Only after Avraham sacrifices his son, does G-d say, "Now I know that you are a G-d-fearing man," as only then is it clear that all of Avraham's actions were driven by his devotion and submission of his entire identity to the Almighty.

¹¹ See Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chaim 1:10 which says: "It is proper to say every day the section of the binding of Yitzchak...and also to subjugate his [evil] inclination to serve G-d in the way that Yitzchak

Understanding the Talmud

Based on the above explanation that the true martyrdom of Avraham was specifically expressed by the sacrifice of Yitzchak, we can now understand the Talmud's statement of G-d specifically requesting that Avraham pass this test, so that "men may not say, there was no reality in the earlier ones."

Passing this trial served as the litmus test for all the tribulations that preceded it. When Avraham proved in this test that he was completely dedicated to G-d in a way that superseded logic, this demonstrated that his previous actions as well, were not driven by rationale and reason, but by his devotion to the Almighty.

Were Avraham not to have passed this test, there would always be room for doubt as to what Avraham was truly all about.

This was the exceptional quality of the tenth test. It was specifically this unique self-sacrifice which expressed Avraham's true character and which gave us the paradigm through which to view him.

Opening the spigot

When Avraham brought his son as an offering and bound him on an altar before G-d, he opened a new path in serving the Almighty and gave his descendants the ability to have true self-sacrifice. When a Jew gives himself for Almighty, he does so in a way that his whole identity is given over to G-d¹¹.

Though our dedication to the Almighty may not seem to be in a way that truly expresses complete devotion, in truth, it is this complete dedication that one has at a soul level that drives him to serve his Maker. A person needs only to express his soul.

martyred himself." We are to learn from Yitzchak to serve G-d with complete dedication.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 20, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)