



## Vayera 2023

### The Candle in the Dark

2 minute read | Straightforward

Before God destroyed Sodom, He discussed it with Avraham. Avraham pleaded for Sodom to be spared and speculated that perhaps fifty righteous people would be worth saving the city for.

Hashem agreed:

בְּעִבּוּרָם – וַיֹּאמֶר ה', אִם-אֶמְצָא בְּכֶדֶם חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר-וְנִשְׂאתִי לְכָל-הַמָּקוֹם, בְּעִבּוּרָם  
Hashem said: “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous in the city, then I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” (18:26)

The Ibn Ezra notes that God requires these potential saviors to be righteous in public – בְּכֶדֶם / צְדִיקִים – בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches that righteous people are not scholars in ivory towers; they actively drive positive change in their communities by publicly living out the Torah's teachings. They live among and interact with other people, leading by example and inspiring their communities, like Avraham himself. A righteous man is not hidden away with books but is part of a community – including its sinners – as a teacher and a neighbor.

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz highlights Avraham as someone concerned and compassionate for the people and world around him – even people who stand against everything he stands for.

This leaves us with a remarkable lesson about Sodom's destruction; it was condemned because of its evil, but it was only doomed because it had no one willing to work for its salvation. If even 10 such people had existed, working with the public to improve the community's moral fiber, the city would have been saved.

Nechama Leibowitz notes that Yirmiyahu mentions a similar theme when warning of the fall of Jerusalem:

– שׁוּטְטוּ בְּחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם, וּרְאוּ-נָא וּדְעוּ וּבְקִשׁוּ בְּרַחוּבוֹתֶיהָ, אִם-תִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ, אִם-יֵשׁ עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט מִבְּקֶשׁ אֲמוּנָה-וְאֶסְלַח, לָהּ  
Run through the squares of Jerusalem and search its streets; if you can find just one single man who practices justice and seeks the truth, I will forgive her! (5:1)

The Radak explains that no righteous men could be found in Jerusalem's streets because they were in their houses. They were too fearful to publicly stand up for what they believed in, so Jerusalem fell.



The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that our souls are candles that God gives us to illuminate the world, like the Chanukah Menorah, which is positioned by the front door or window, so that it lights up the inside of our homes, but ideally, the outside as well. He famously dispatched followers to the ends of the earth based on the understanding that part and parcel of wholesome observance is seeking out others to encourage their own religious expression.

The discomfort of swimming against the tide of popular culture is the sacrifice that validates whether or not and how much we care about other people. If we concentrate solely on ourselves, abandoning those who wander or are lost, can we say we care for others at all?

R' Mordechai Gifter taught that altruism is superior to empathy; empathy only requires us to tune in to other people's needs, whereas altruism requires positive outreach. When Avraham had no-one to help, he literally went outside to find someone to bring in and take care of.

The few can save the many, so long as they care enough about their communities to get involved –  
בתוך העיר / בחוצות ירושלים / ברחובותיה

The Jewish People are a candle in the dark of the world. If you care for the vision the Torah has for us; you're in a small subset of candles that can burn especially bright. If you cared enough to live accordingly, how many people's lives could you touch?

A single candle can dispel a whole night of darkness.

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## **Make Some Space**

2 minute read | Straightforward

One of Judaism's most treasured traditions is gracious hospitality. We rightly praise altruism and kindness, aspiring to emulate the role models who practiced it so well, Avraham first and foremost among them.

There is one story that encapsulates the generous and loving warmth that so characterized Avraham, the first man to correctly intuit the right way to live.

After circumcising himself, an excruciatingly painful procedure to be performed as an elderly man with no modern anesthetic or medicine, he faced an agonizing recovery. While recuperating from the procedure that marked his body with the symbol of his family's new covenant with God, he parked himself at the door, and received a remarkable visitor – no less than God Himself:



וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה', בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵה; וְהוּא יָשָׁב בְּפֶתַח-הָאֹהֶל, בְּחֹם הַיּוֹם  
he sat by the tent door in the heat of the day. (18:1)

No sooner had this unusual visitor appeared that something even more remarkable happened. No sooner than God arrives, Avraham interrupts this extraordinary visit to chase some passing travelers and bring them home to rest with some food and drink!

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא, וַהֲנִיחַ שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָא, וַיָּרֹץ לִקְרַאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, אֶרְצָה  
He lifted his eyes and looked, and, saw three men standing nearby; and when he noticed them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth, (18:2)

The Midrash imagines that Avraham quite literally interrupted God, and asked God to wait a few minutes! Assuming that Avraham did the right thing, the Gemara concludes that hospitality is even more important than welcoming God.

We are religious people. We believe in God, we serve God, and live our lives according to our best understanding of God's law. How could anything be more important than God?!

The Maharal explains that when we honor guests, we honor the image of God in the other person. Accordingly, loving a human and loving God are close, if not identical.

The Malbim explains that the yardstick for measuring love of God is how much love we show others. Avraham calls the men his masters, and ask them not to leave – אֲדֹנָי, אִם-נָא מְצִאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶל-נָא תַעֲבֹר, – but this also reads as the moment Avraham asked God to wait – it's one of God's names, which suggests the teaching that welcoming God is subordinate to hospitality.

R' Jonathan Sacks highlights that in this story, God appears happy to wait, endorsing the essential lesson that we don't show our love of God by fasting, retreating into the mountains, vowing silence, or abstaining from earthly things. God's approval of Avraham's choice illustrates that we show our interaction with other humans is what proves our love of God.

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes that the arrival of traveller at the precise moment Avraham was communing with the Divine was the Creator's way of testing Avraham's commitment, his readiness to sacrifice his own personal spirituality in favour of caring for and recognizing the dignity inherent in another human being.

We honor God most by honoring those in His image – other humans. Nothing is holier or more sacred than making space in your life for others.



## How to Pray

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is deeply personal, and everyone prays in their own way.

While there are different approaches to precisely how prayer works or what it affects, we assume that the omnipresent and omniscient God is listening, and we know that not every prayer is answered in the way we might hope.

We intuitively understand that the Creator is the Source of all blessing, the final and only destination for all our hopes and dreams. The stakes couldn't be higher – the Creator holds all the cards and pulls all the strings, with the power of life and death and everything in between.

So it's important to pray properly so God will listen.

What are the requirements of a proper prayer that God will listen to?

If you think need righteous and holy saints to pray for you and bless you, you might be surprised because the Torah plainly states otherwise.

In the story of Yitzchak's life, the Torah recounts how his mother Sarah identified the older Yishmael as a corruptive influence on the young Yitzchak, and she sent Yishmael and his mother Hagar away from the family home.

The Torah tells how Hagar and Yishmael wandered, lost in the wilderness, until they ran out of water, and Yishmael slowly dehydrated. Knowing no one was coming to the rescue and with certainty that her son would die suffering, she cried out in complete and utter despair – וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ.

Completely and utterly miraculously, the Torah tells how Hagar received a vision of a nearby oasis, and she rushes to get the water she needs to save her son.

This seems to conform with our conventional understanding of prayer; the desperate mother crying for her suffering child.

But the Torah does not give credit to Hagar. An angel speaks with her and tells her that everything is going to be okay because the Creator has listened to the prayer – but not Hagar's:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת קוֹל הַנַּעֲרָה וַיִּקְרָא מִלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנַּעֲרָה בְּאֶשְׁרָהּ – God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven, and said to her: “Don't worry, Hagar; God has heard the voice of the boy in his state.” (21:16)



God listens to Yishmael's prayer, not Hagar's – כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר.

The story never ascribes an action or a word to Yishmael; he is a passive object in the story, the object of his mother's prayers, the person acted upon, and not the actor.

A mother's tears for her dying son did not move the heavens. But what moved the heavens was the voice of a dying boy, and he never even says a word! Perhaps, in his suffering, he cried or sighed; not even significant enough for the Torah to record it as an action he took.

That literally invisible moment of pain or sadness is what drives the entire story and goes on to shape history, and perhaps it should shape our understanding of prayer.

There are no requirements to pray properly; you just have to mean it, and you don't have to be anyone or anything special. You can just be a kid, and you can just cry because it hurts.

The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are – בְּאִשְׁרֵי הוּא נִשְׁמָע.

The story of Yishmael teaches us that prayer isn't confined to ritualized formalities, and maybe that's partly why we read this story on Rosh Hashana.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. You don't need to know how to pray or understand the words.

Our sages conclude from the stories of our ancestors that God loves righteous prayers – הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא – מתאוה לתפילתן של צדיקים. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that God loves righteous prayers, not prayers of the righteous – תפילתן של צדיקים / תפילת צדיקים –

You don't have to be perfect to generate a perfect prayer. Our daily prayers affirm that God is close to the people who call on Him truthfully – יקרואוהו באמת – לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת, לכל קוראיו, לקרוב ה' לכל קוראיו, לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת. It is not beyond any of us to ask for help and truly mean it – יקרואוהו באמת –

Everyone is capable of a one-off, pure prayer.

Just a single moment of pain from a suffering boy moved the heavens. It is not beyond us.

## A World of Kindness

3 minute read | Straightforward

Aside from the obvious quality of our great ancestors as figures we look up to and learn from, our sages teach that specific individuals came to embody certain essential attributes. Even before mysticism, our sages associate Avraham with the virtue of kindness, so much so that he came to be recognized as the avatar, conduit, embodiment, and manifestation of God's kindness in the world.

That God's kindness is everywhere is arguably one of Judaism's first principles. When God explains his attributes to Moshe, only one of them is "abundant," kindness – וְרַב־חֶסֶד. The first blessing of the Amida praises kindness as God's predominant form of interaction with the universe – גּוֹמֵל חֶסְדִּים טוֹבִים – וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל. It follows that Judaism's first ancestor is the archetype of kindness, and the first blessing is named for him – מִגֵּן אַבְרָהָם.

In mysticism, there is a paradox at the heart of our basic reality called the bread of shame – נֶהְמָא דְכִיסוּפָא. It would be a degrading handout for souls to remain in Heaven, basking in the ethereal light for eternity. Our souls are placed into bodies so we can earn our piece of Heaven, and it's no longer a handout. But the thing is, the notion of earning anything at all is an illusion – the system itself is a gift, the most significant gift of all – עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה.

As the Mesilas Yesharim teaches, God's entire purpose in Creation was to have a counterpart with whom to share the gift of God's goodness. R' Yerucham Levovitz asks us to recognize the kindness in every moment, from the air we breathe to the grocery store selling oranges – the fact it is a for-profit transaction does not change that the store objectively performs a kind deed by giving you something you want.

Avraham understood that we live in a world of kindness, but the people of Canaan did not share those values, so he sent his steward, Eliezer, to his ancestral homeland to find a suitable match for Yitzchak, his son, and heir. When Eliezer arrives, he prays for God's kindness to grace his mission:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה־חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם – And he said, "Lord, God of my master Avraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal kindly with my master Avraham." (24:12)

The Midrash highlights how people from the school of Avraham, the master of kindness, still look to God for further kindness. God's kindness is essential; our sages say we'd fail at everything without God's help.

The Beis Yisrael notes how in praying for kindness, Eliezer channeled his teacher and master by checking his ego. Feeling arrogant, confident, or self-righteous about such a sacred mission would be easy. It would be natural! He was sent by Avraham, one of the greatest humans to ever live, to find a



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suitable match – holy work – for Yitzchak, another one of our giants, to manifest the future greatness of Israel, bearers of the Torah, objectives of all Creation. Each element alone would be enough to get carried away, and rightly so!

But the way of Avraham is not to get ahead of yourself, holding onto groundedness and humility come what may – וְאַנְכִי עֶפְרַיִם וְאַפְרַיִם.

The Chiddushei Harim says that Avraham was a good teacher; Eliezer didn't harp on his master's merits and accomplishments and didn't approach God with a sense of claim or entitlement. Indeed, one of the most shocking discoveries along your spiritual journey might be the realization that you don't have a claim on the Creator; you've already been the recipient of abundant kindness any way you look.

But fortunately, God's kindness is readily available, and God's preferred mode of interaction with our universe, however masked it may be – הַסֵּד ה' מְלֵאָה הָאֵרֶץ.

Avraham doesn't just teach us the virtue of bestowing kindness on others; Avraham teaches the virtue of receiving kindness and recognizing the Creator as the Source of it all.

You are a grateful person, hopefully, thankful for your health, your family, and the things that get you by. You have been blessed!

But this story contains another lesson – even the spiritual world of Torah and mitzvos is a gift we must appreciate and continue to ask for, no matter how far we have already come.

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## **Come As You Are**

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.



Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

ואם־לא תשיג ידו לשתי תרים או לשני בני־יונה והביא את־קרבנו אשר הטא עשירת האפה סלת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)

Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – ריח ניחח לה. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נאמר בעוף ריח ניחוח ונאמר בבהמה ריח ניחוח, לומר לך אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he'd get to Heaven, he wouldn't be afraid to answer why he wasn't like Avraham, because he wasn't Avraham, nor why he wasn't like Moshe, because he wasn't Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn't like Zusha, he'd have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת־קדש הוא.





This idea is at the heart of Korach's folly, which leads only to ruin and misery. Everyone's service is different and yet equally welcome.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are here and now – בְּאֵשֶׁר הוּא נֶשֶׂם.

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you're supposed to be right now, and you are enough.

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## **Onward**

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah's stories have captured the awe of audiences for three millennia, and rightly so.

The Torahs tell us of astonishing moments like The Binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of human commitment with the future in the balance, where Avraham lifts a knife to his son's neck only for an angel to interrupt him, salvation averting tragedy through transparently divine intervention at the very last.

The Torah tells us of the harrowing crossing at the Red Sea, where the defenseless Jewish People desperately fled their oppressors, with the most advanced and formidable army in the world in hot pursuit. In a defining moment that upends the entire natural order of our universe, Moshe holds out his staff, and God parts the waters for the Jewish People to walk across the dry ocean floor. The Egyptian army attempts to follow, but once Moshe's people have crossed safely, the sea suddenly reverts to its normal state, and the Egyptians are drowned.

The Torah tells us of the theophany at Sinai, where the people gathered at a mountain enveloped in cloud and smoke, quaking, with fire and lightning flashing overhead, amid the sound of booming thunder and shofar blasts; and then the Jewish People hear the voice of God through the uproar.

These are some of the defining stories of our history and exhibit the dizzying heights of the supernatural. They showcase what is fundamentally magical about the Torah.

But despite the power of these moments to captivate us, the Torah doesn't indulge us by dwelling on them even a little. Just like that, with the stroke of a pen, the Binding of Isaac is behind us, the Red Sea is old news, Sinai is history, and it's time to move onward:

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יחדוֹ – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף, וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם – Moshe and the Children of Israel set out from the Red Sea. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. (15:22)

רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה. פָּנוּ וְסַעוּ לָכֶם – You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (1:6)

We have these distinctly unique stories of the Divine manifested in our universe, and then the Torah just moves briskly onward – רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבַת, בְּהַר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וְסַעוּ לָכֶם / וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף / וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ.

The Torah does not dwell in the magical moments, and the starkness of the almost dismissive continuity is jarring, and there is a vital lesson here. It suggests that even after the greatest of heights, the most noteworthy achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that you can't stay long once you get there. Before you know it, it's time to continue the journey and move onward.

Onward is an interesting word – positive and proactive, meaning going further rather than coming to an end or halt; moving in a forward direction. As the Izhbitzer explains, part of growth is moving on and walking away from where you once stood. We can't stay because the moment is gone – it's gone in time, irretrievably behind us, and it's our responsibility to realize that distance in mental and physical space too.

It's also true to life; the world will not dwell in your magical moments. Whether you ace the test, get the girl, close the deal, buy the house, sell the business, have the baby, or whatever the outstanding achievement is, it's still Tuesday, you're still you, you still have deadlines, you still have to get into better shape, your siblings still get on your nerves, and your credit card bill is still due. And so, by necessity, there comes a time to move onward.

In dull moments, we may find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the growth process. Eventually, those bitter waters can transform into a sweet oasis, and what appeared to be downtime is integrated into the journey forward.

Even the Golden Calf story has redeeming elements; apart from the critical teaching that using iconography to worship the One God is still idolatry, it decisively demonstrates God's predisposition for forgiveness and paves the way to the Mishkan and all the resultant forms of interacting with the Divine.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that what got you to where you are will fuel you to further heights; that energy does not simply overflow into everything else. Success is not final, and failure is not fatal; the proper response to both is the same – onward.

This lesson is challenging enough, but the Izhbitzer takes us further and forewarns us that what follows the heights of success is rarely smooth and straightforward lulls and plateaus of accumulation and consolidation to catch our breath; we can often expect an inverse experience in short order. All too often, great heights are followed by sharp declines and drawdowns, troughs and valleys; Avraham gets home to find his wife has died; the miraculous rescue at the Red Sea is directly followed by the people's complaints about the local water being too bitter, and the people worship a Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai itself.

Quite arguably, a failure to move on was the mistake at the heart of the debacle of the scouting mission to Israel – the spies just wanted to stay put in the safety of God's embrace in the desert. They weren't wrong; the road ahead was fraught with danger! But that's not how the world works; stagnation is not God's design for us or the universe – life must change, move, and evolve. Staying put and stagnating is what's unnatural.

The Torah is a guide to life – תורת חיים – and one of the defining features of living things is motility – they move independently. We shouldn't be so shocked by the ebbs and flows of life, moving and changing, with attendant ups and downs. When living things don't move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and die before long. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall and run out of breath plenty of times along the way, but that's part of it, so long as you eventually get back up and keep moving onward.

As the Leshem teaches, the dual pulsation at the heart of all things is the descent down and the return back up. The breaking is the descent and the fixing is the ascent back to a higher point. This is not only a historic process but a perpetual moment-to-moment one, the elevation of all things, the vibration of life and existence itself.

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, if you look at stock market performance over a century, the zoomed-out time frame looks like a smooth and steady incline; and yet, when you zoom in to years, months, weeks, days, and hours, the amount of choppiness and volatility increases. On an extended time frame, each part matters less. The bouncing highs and lows blend into a smooth line that only goes one way – onwards and upwards.

The past is not gone or forgotten; it forms the basis and foundations of today.

Although we can't dwell in the moments of achievement, there is a part we can carry in our hearts and minds.

And as we go, it comes with us, ever onward.



## **The Binding of Isaac Redux**

5 minute read | Advanced

The Binding of Isaac, the Akeida, is one of the most challenging stories in the Torah. Our best and brightest sages and philosophers have grappled with it since time immemorial, and with good reason.

The Torah is the source code for what we understand to be moral. Yet God asks Avraham to murder his son, and the Torah confronts the reader with a fundamental question: can God ask us to do something immoral and wrong?

The story concludes with a retraction of the notion that Avraham would need to follow through and kill his son in God's name. God is impressed that Avraham doesn't withhold his son, and we come to understand that God does not ask us to do the unethical. In stopping Avraham at the very last moment, God drives home the point that there is no sanctity in child sacrifice and death; this God is different. This God is the God of life.

But while the ending is illuminating, how we interpret the story until the reversal matters.

To be sure, there is a diverse spectrum of legitimate discourse; we should evaluate the relative standing of teachings by their lessons and values. The ramifications of what we teach our children are enormously consequential, so we need to get it right.

If we think about God's instruction and say that up until the final moment, God truly meant it and only then changed His mind, then it destroys our conceptualization of universal ethics and morality because they are ad hoc and fluid; morality is only whatever God says it is from one moment to the next.

If we were to think that Avraham had no hesitation in sacrificing his son and that he regretted not being able to obey God's command, then the whole story makes no sense. Child sacrifice was common in that era – if Avraham were willing to murder his son, it would destroy the entire notion of sacrifice! More pointedly, if Avraham was all too willing to murder his son, it would destroy Avraham as a role model, and it would be perverse to teach children that this is what greatness looks like. Should we be proud if one of our foremost ancestors was an eager child-killing barbarian?

But of course, apart from the fact these interpretations leave us in moral turpitude, they also make no sense in the broader context of the Torah, which explicitly condemns child sacrifice on multiple occasions.



By necessity, we need to reject the notion that Avraham truly wished to sacrifice Yitzchak. The story only makes sense if it was hard – excruciatingly hard, and fortunately, that’s very much the story the Torah tells. At no point does the story suggest that this is easy for Avraham, and actually, quite the opposite.

Until this point in Avraham’s life, his commitment to life and commitment to God were in perfect harmony – God wanted Avraham to be good to others, and he was. Now that God asked him to sacrifice his son, he had a dilemma because his two great commitments were no longer in alignment:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים... בַּיּוֹם – הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשָׂא אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מְרֻחָק... וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-יִצְחָק וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחַט אֶת-בְּנֹו – And He said, “Please take your son, your favored one, Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you...” On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar... And Avraham sent his hand and picked up the knife to slay his son. (22:2,4,10)

The Ran highlights that God never commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son; God only requests it – “Please” – קַח-נָא. This is not an instruction that demands obedience; it is a request that does not mandate compliance.

As Avraham struggled with turmoil about the position he was in, he looked up and saw the mountain in the distance – וַיֵּשָׂא אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מְרֻחָק. The Nesivos Shalom notes that there is a reference to one of God’s names, the Omnipresent, the attribute that God is everywhere and the place of all things – הַמָּקוֹם. In this reading, the whole affair felt wrong to Avraham. He’d opposed human sacrifice pagan worship his entire life, yet here he was, about to destroy his life’s work and snuff out his family legacy. He felt alienated and distanced from God – וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מְרֻחָק.

The Torah uses remarkable imagery to characterize what happened in the story’s dramatic crescendo. Avraham does not simply pick up the knife; he “forces his hand” – וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֶת. The Torah dissociates Avraham from his disembodied hand because Avraham was resisting what he was doing.

The Kotzker suggests that even to the musculoskeletal level, the cumbersome description of Avraham’s belabored muscle movements truly expressed and mirrored God’s desire that Yitzchak would remain unharmed – כָּל עֲצָמוֹתָי תֵּאֱמָרְנָה –

Lastly, R’ Shlomo Farhi notes that Avraham’s entire characterization in this story is lethargic, illustrating the slow heaviness with which he moves through the story. But lethargy runs counter to everything we know about Avraham up to this point! He is introduced to us as someone who eagerly and enthusiastically goes where God tells him, runs after guests to invite them in, and hurries to feed them. In this story, he is in stark contrast with his energetic, vibrant self because he faces the greatest challenge of his life, antithetical to and incompatible with his very being.



Of course, we know how the story ends. God would never ask us to do something unethical. But how we tell the story matters as much as how it ends.

This gut-wrenching story of moral turmoil is held in the highest esteem by humans and by God. And that's because it wasn't easy. It is not a story about blind faith and obedience but the opposite.

It is all too rare that we face a moral choice that is truly black and white. Most of the time, it's not a starving orphaned widow with cancer whose house burned down knocking on the door asking for help. Far more often, we face a difficult choice between competing ideals, none of which will resolve the situation in a manner that perfectly aligns with an established code of ethics or norms.

Will we tell the truth and be honest when confronted, or keep a secret and loyally honor a promise? Will we prioritize individual needs to significantly help a few or communal needs to support many adequately? Will we be just, fair, and equal in our relationships, or will we be compassionate and merciful based on each circumstance? Will we prioritize the present or the future?

We would do well to remember our role models. They weren't primitive people but refined humans doing their best to navigate a complex world ethically. And while civilization may have changed in form, it hasn't changed in substance, and humans haven't changed much at all.

Doing the right thing is hard enough, but you must first identify the right thing, which is far more complex. It gets to the core of our mission in life, and we must take strength from the stories of our greats – this is the way it's always been, and we must persevere all the same.

Quite tellingly, we read this story on Rosh Hashana. Sure, we read it in part to recall the great merit of our ancestors, and perhaps that is a complete reason.

But maybe it can also remind us that the greats also struggled, and struggles are the precursor of greatness.

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli



## TorahRedux

***PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.