

Vayera 2022

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 – 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 – 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:

רוּן – 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.



TorahRedux

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.

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', בְּאֵלֶיךָ מִמְרָא; וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּפֶתַח-הַהֶקֶל, 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!

וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא, וַהֲנִה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָא, וַיָּרַץ לִקְרֹאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, אֲרָצָה – 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 our love for God is how much we love others, which is why even welcoming God is subordinate to hospitality. Avraham calls the men his masters, and ask them not to leave – אֲדֹנָי, אִם-נָא מְצִאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶל-נְאֻ תַעֲבֹר, מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ – but this also reads as the moment Avraham asked God to wait – it’s one of God’s names!

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.

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

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 – ותשא אֶת-קִלְעָהּ 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 הַנְּעִר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִר בְּאֶשֶׁר עָם – 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 הַנְּעִר.

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 – בפֶּשַׁע הוּא נֶשֶׂם.

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 – הקדוש ברוך הוא 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 – יקראוהו באמת, לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת. It is not beyond any of us to ask for help and truly mean it – יקראוהו 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.

Love's Truest Language

3 minute read | Straightforward

When we think of Mount Sinai, we think of Divine Revelation and all that it means. But apart from the obvious upheaval in spiritual terms, the Torah also describes a great upheaval in physical terms.

In Tanach, whenever there is a theophany, some manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, there is an upending of the natural order. Moshe saw a burning bush that wasn't consumed; the Jews were led through the desert by pillars of fiery cloud. Sinai itself is characterized by fire from the sky, along with loud booms, thunder, and lightning, and the whole mountain quaked, enveloped in a haze of dark cloud and smoke. Our Sages even suggest that when people heard God's Word emerge from the darkness, they died for an instant.

This imagery demonstrates the absolute abnegation of the natural world, and rightly so!



Arguably, the ultimate purpose behind creation was to cultivate a conduit that could receive the Torah; all of existence culminated at that moment at Sinai, and creation achieved its intended purpose when God reached into the universe to give the Torah to humanity, forming an intimate bond between Creator and creation. It follows that the imagery is stark and unnatural; this is the most extraordinary and supernatural event in human experience!

But there's one part that doesn't fit at all.

Among all the intimidating and scary goings-on, there was something else that happened at Mount Sinai too. The little mountain in the desert burst into bloom, with beautiful plants and fragrant flowers sprawling up the hills and into the cloud, so tantalizing that the Jews actually had to be instructed to restrain their animals from grazing the lush greenery!

But why were there flowers on Mount Sinai at all?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that the flowers demonstrate something that darkness, earthquakes, fire, thunder, and lightning do not. Those things all demonstrate God's power, but flowers illustrate God's love.

There is another famous mountain in our tradition, Mount Moriah, where Avraham and Yitzchak famously stood together, the mountain on which the two Temples stood and where a third will stand once more. This famous mountain was also associated with flowers; the Zohar suggests that the mountain was named Moriah after the fragrant myrrh that grew there.

The legendary mountain is not named for the heroic acts and great deeds that took place there; it's not the Mountain of the Akeida, the Mountain of Commitment and Faith, or the Mountain of Sacrifice. It's named for the sweet-smelling plants that grew there!

There is an entire genre of romance that hugely impacts how many of us conceptualize love and relationships; a grand gesture is usually the crescendo of a great love story. Yet, as R' Shlomo Farhi teaches, a grand gesture or great sacrifice cannot define a relationship because it is only ever an anomaly.

Over time, love is communicated through a multitude of little things, not any particular one-time thing. What defines the quality of a relationship isn't the great deeds here and there; it's the small gestures, the consistent, subtle, and thoughtful acts that shape how a couple connects and interacts. These small gestures send big signals about who we are, what we care about, and why we do what we do.

It's called Mount Moriah because God wanted it to smell nice for all the great heroes and future pilgrims who would one day make their way there. It was wholly unnecessary, completely irrelevant, and entirely beside the main point of anything of consequence, but that's why it matters so much. The



great epic of Avraham’s ordeal is not impacted even slightly by the fact that God made it smell nice, but God did it anyway.

The flowers on the mountains are the most trivial detail, with nothing whatsoever to do with the tremendous meaning and significance of the events that took place at Sinai or Moriah. Still, those flowers say more than any commotion, and that’s the part that we remember. To this day, when we celebrate the Torah we got at Sinai, we don’t commemorate the darkness by turning out the lights, nor the earthquakes by shaking the tables; Shavuot is the festival of flowers! For centuries, it has been a near-universal custom to decorate our homes and shul with beautiful flower arrangements.

A waiter will give you whatever you asked for, but a lover will give you everything they can. It’s not about doing what you need to do; it’s about doing all you could do. That slight change in orientation elevates small and insignificant gestures into the most meaningful and loving relationship-affirming rituals.

Are you giving all you could to the ones you love?

God Needs Partners

3 minute read | Straightforward

Avraham was a powerful icon whose legacy has reverberated across the ages. The way the Torah sums up his life, you would think he had it all:

בְּכַל יָמָיו אַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וְה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם בְּכָל אֲבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וְה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם בְּכָל – Avraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Avraham with everything. (24:1)

The Torah characterizes his death similarly:

וַיָּגֹעַ וַיָּנַח אֲבְרָהָם בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּי – Then Avraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an elderly man full of years; and he was gathered to his people. (25:8)

Along the same vein, Rashi notes that the Torah describes the years of Sarah’s life as equally good and full of life as well – שָׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה –

These serene descriptions have one flaw, however. They’re just not true! Let’s recap.

God promised Avraham and Sarah land and children – yet they had to fight tooth and nail to get anywhere! They were told to leave everything they had ever known for some unknown foreign land, but as soon as they’d arrived, they were forced to leave because of a devastating famine. Then, on their travels, Sarah was twice targeted by despotic leaders with unwanted sexual advances; and Avraham had to endanger himself to protect his family. They waited desperately for decades to have a child;



then, when the child finally arrived, it caused bitter strife in the family between Sarah and Hagar, resulting in Avraham sending Hagar and Ishmael from home. And after all that, Avraham was asked to murder his precious child, the one he had waited so long for.

One way or another, when we think of God's great promises of children and land, the reality fell far short of what Avraham and Sarah might have expected.

So why does the Torah sum up their lives as full of satisfaction and fulfillment?

Maybe the question is better than the answer.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that happiness does not and should not mean that we have everything we want or everything we believe we are due. Happiness can exist even when life falls short of our expectations. As one thinker put it, if you can't enjoy a cup of coffee, you won't enjoy a yacht.

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz notes that Avraham's life is the origin story for the Jewish people, and it doesn't go how we might expect. Avraham's story seems trivial – it's about his business ventures, travels, and family disputes. It's so ordinary!

But suppose our stories were about magical demigods riding flying unicorns wielding miraculous lightning bolts to vanquish their enemies and save the world from the clutches of evil. In that case, they couldn't be more silly or less relevant. Avraham's story matters precisely because it is so ordinary. It teaches us that God's grand mission for us comes without fanfare, with no red carpet and no grand celebration. Avraham is our heroic role model because the work God would have us do is in the mundane things of everyday living. It's in making a living, marrying off a child, and living in harmony. The plain and mundane can be celebrated and sacred.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos teaches that it is not for us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. It's not your job to do everything from start to finish, but we have a duty to do all we can to pave the way before passing the baton on to the next person or generation.

As only R' Jonathan Sacks can put it, God is waiting for us to act. We need God, and God needs us.

God could promise Avraham the land, but Avraham still had to buy his first field. God could promise Avraham countless descendants, but Avraham still had to identify a suitable partner for his son. God can promise, but humans still have to act.

Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone.

He did not need to see the entire land in Jewish hands, nor did he need to see the Jewish People become numerous. He had begun, and he had perfect confidence that his descendants would continue. Avraham and Sarah were able to die at peace not only because of their faith in God but also because of their faith, trust, and hope that others would finish what they had started.



Avraham had taken those first steps and was satisfied. It was enough for Avraham and Sarah, and it must be enough for us.

Just do your best, and hope for the rest.

Onward

4 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 back 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-נִצְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו – Avraham returned to his stewards, and they got up and left together... (22:19)

וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן-סוּף, וַיֵּצְאוּ 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 וּסְעוּ לְכֶם – 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 – וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ / וַיֵּסַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף / רַב-לָכֶם שָׁבֹת, בְּהָר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ וַיֵּסְעוּ לָכֶם –

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 momentous achievements, and the most incredible successes, the Torah simply notes that once you get there, you can't stay long, and 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 the place 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 true to life as well; 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 great 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 the boring and dull moments, we may well find ourselves thirsty with nothing to drink. But this, too, as the Izhbitzer teaches, is part of the process of growth. 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 important 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 on 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.



TorahRedux

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 itself, moving and changing, with concomitant ups and downs. When living things don’t move, they quickly atrophy, stagnate, wither, and before long, they die. Living things must move and push to grow healthy and strong. You can fall down 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 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 individual 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, perhaps 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 | Straightforward

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 away understanding 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, the way we interpret the story up until the reversal matters.

To be sure, there is a diverse spectrum of legitimate discourse; we should evaluate their relative standing with regard to the values they teach. 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 truly and simply desired to obey God and sacrifice 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 was willing to murder his son, it destroys the entire notion of his great sacrifice! More pointedly, if Avraham was all too willing to murder his son, it destroys Avraham as any sort of role model, and it would be perverse to teach children that this is what greatness looks like.

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 and simply 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:

ויאמר קחנא את־בְּנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר־אֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ... בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק... וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדָיו וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לִשְׁחֹט אֶת־בְּנֹו
“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 out that God never commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son; God only requests it – “Please” – קח-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 – וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרְחוֹק. 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 whole life, and yet here he was, about to destroy his life’s work and snuff out his family legacy. He felt alienated and distanced from God – וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרְחוֹק.

At the story’s dramatic crescendo, the Torah uses remarkable imagery to characterize what took place. Avraham does not simply pick up the knife; he “forces his hand” – וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלָה. 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 עֲצָמוֹתַי 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, who runs after guests to invite them in, and who hurries to feed them. In this story, he is in stark contrast with his energetic fervent self because he faces the greatest challenge of his life, and it is antithetical to 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 just 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 exact 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 greatly help a few or communal needs to adequately help many? 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?



TorahRedux

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

Doing the right thing is plenty hard enough; but you first have to identify what the right thing truly is, which is far harder. 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 perhaps it can also remind us that the greats also had their struggles with no clean choices.

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. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

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

Neli

PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!

PPS - Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.

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.