

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 23: Ethical issues in Tanach 1 - The Akeidah I

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This section of our series on ethics aims to explore the events and laws in the Torah which seem to conflict with our own default moral assumptions. This is certainly not an exhaustive study, but will focus on

questions that are commonly asked.

The story of *Akeidat Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac) is one of the most perplexing episodes in the Torah. God commanded Avraham to take his son Yitzchak, travel to Mount Moriah and offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice. Just as Avraham is about to kill his son, an angel calls out to stop him, explaining that God now knows that Avraham truly fears Him. Looking up, Avraham then sees a ram caught in the thicket and offers it to God in Yitzchak's place (Bereishit ch. 21).

There are so many questions regarding this episode and, unsurprisingly, much ink has been spilled expounding and explaining its details, by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars. But for all these explanations, God's command appears to go against the most natural, self-evident moral truth. Why would the 'True Judge' and moral lawgiver demand such an act and then withdraw the command at the last moment?

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855) explains in his book *Fear and Trembling* that Avraham epitomised the 'knight of faith' – the man who subjugated his moral conscience in light of Divine command, however immoral it might have appeared. The message of the Akeidah, according to Kierkegaard, is therefore that faith means submitting to God's will by subduing our natural sense of morality as the ultimate act in the service of God.

Yet this is not the Jewish view. Kierkegaard's explanation ignores the authenticity of natural morality discussed in last week's article and fails to deal with the difficulty of understanding the command itself. Not only did Avraham and Sarah

have to wait until the twilight years of their lives for a child, God had promised Avraham and Sarah that their progeny would be built through Yitzchak (ibid. 21:12). God's own covenant and every hope for the future was wrapped up in Yitzchak; how then could God appear to renege on His word?

Unlike Kierkegaard, the Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (d. 1993) proposes that Avraham did not surrender his natural moral conscience. Rather, he had complete faith and trust in God who is moral, that any command He gives is also moral. He could not have understood how this was the case and how things would turn out, but it is clear that Avraham's trust in God was vindicated. His faith was not in the suppression of his conscience, but in resisting the temptation to use his intellect to rationalise God's command; instead he accepted that God must know best (*Abraham's Journey* pp. 189 -190).

This also answers our previous question, for God's command had to be an act so seemingly immoral, that it would eliminate every possibility of Avraham employing logic, reason or natural moral arguments before complying. Unlike Adam and Chavah (Eve) who disobeyed God and surrendered to reason, Avraham willingly submitted to what seemed to be totally illogical. Looked at in this light, the *Akeidah* teaches us to live with questions. We will continue to draw out important moral lessons from it in the next part.

