

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 24: Ethical issues in Tanach 2 - *The Akeidah II*

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



The previous article began to discuss the moral and ethical issues related to the story of *Akeidat Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac). Having assured Avraham that his progeny would continue through Yitzchak, God's

command to Avraham to offer Yitzchak up as a sacrifice seemed to defy logic. The fact that Avraham agreed without question, only for God to intervene at the last moment, seems at odds with God as the epitome of absolute morality, and of Avraham as the epitome of a loving father.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (d. 1993) notes in his famous work *The Lonely Man of Faith* that: "The man of faith, animated by his great experience, is able to reach a point at which not only his logic of the mind but even his logic of the heart and of the will, everything — even his own "I" awareness — has to give in to an 'absurd' commitment". In other words, it was the very fact that God's command made no sense that made this Avraham's greatest test.

We often find ourselves trying to understand the reasons behind God's commandments. Often when a child is asked to do something, they want to know "why?": "Why do I have to go to school?" "Why do I have to wear my coat?" "Why can't I stay up and play?" Children may well view their parents' rules and commands as absurd or unjust. No child, or adult for that matter, wants to feel controlled, or that their freedom is curtailed and autonomy denied. Yet parents know precisely why their children need to go to school (in order to learn), wear their coat (lest they feel cold) or go to bed (because they will be tired and cranky otherwise). But the child genuinely believes they know best.

However, as children mature, they begin to understand the purpose and intentions behind their parents' demands. This is analogous to the relationship we have with God, our Divine Parent. As God's children (see Devarim 14:1),

our spiritual maturity requires us to develop a desire to want to perform God's mitzvot (commandments) even though we cannot always understand the reasons behind them, even when we consider them to be unfair or unjust.

The Mishnah states that in total Avraham faced ten tests, including leaving his homeland, circumcision and the *Akeidah* (Pirkei Avot 5:3). Israeli engineer and author, Rabbi Mois Navon explains that: "These experiences provided Avraham with the grist to grind out his faith — learning to accept the absurd — step by step" (*Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 17, p.244). Returning to Rabbi Soloveitchik's point, faith doesn't mean suspending reason and submitting to God. Rather, Avraham 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's 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).

Our life mission is to develop a mature awareness and relationship with God and nurture our faith through our own tests and challenges. In the next part we will focus on the deeper meaning and purpose of Brit Milah (circumcision) and how this particular test formed Avraham's covenant with God.

