

The Torah portion  
**Vayera** (Genesis 18:1-  
 22:24) is read on  
 Shabbat, October 30

## Abraham's Binding Contract

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**A**TTEMPTS TO UNDERSTAND ABRAHAM'S BLIND willingness to sacrifice Isaac have produced several camps around this most troubling of Torah stories. All generally assume God's test of faith was of the pass/fail variety, and that Abraham either passed, misunderstood or, in more modern readings, failed — all by way of imparting a larger lesson to humanity.

But perhaps the *Akedah* (the Binding of Isaac) was not that kind of test at all. What if, at the end of Abraham's life, on the eve of passing on his "legacy," God was simply seeking to define for him what that legacy would be? The midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 55:1) points out that the word *nisah* (tested) could also derive from *nes*, or flag, and explains the *Akedah* as "...a flag as on a ship... for adornment" or perhaps a label for identification.

What's more, this same midrash envisions a scenario of very high stakes: This is in fact not Abraham's first defining moment, but his tenth, and so crucial is it that all the others depended on it, retroactively. "Had he not accepted [the *Akedah*] upon himself," says Rabbi Hanin, "he would have lost everything..." (56:11).

The hasidic master the Ishbitzer Rebbe (R. Mordechai Yoseph Lainer, 1800-1854) explains the midrash thus: "...Therefore, [Abraham] had the trial of the *Akedah*, so that he should begin to evaluate himself and... the preceding trials..." (*Mei Hashiloah*, translation by Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg). In other words, it served to provide Abraham with perspective, so that he could clarify (for himself) the meaning of his life to that point.

There was much to clarify. The rich Biblical narrative reveals four distinct sides of Abraham's persona, bracketed by his leaving Ur and the binding of Isaac. These facets vie for ascendancy as his story unfolds, and often create conflict within and around him.

There is Abraham the Individual, with personal needs, ego concerns and survival instincts. There is Abraham the Family Man, the husband and father, with private concerns at home. There is Global Abraham — Abraham, Inc. — founder of the God Corporation, spiritual guide to thousands of followers, kingmaker, warrior, peace-broker and world power. And, of course, the basis for it all is Abraham, Man of God, the very first believer, the prophet who dedicated his life to spreading the message. God is One.

Seen through this lens, the trials of Abraham's life become not tests in the traditional sense of pass/fail, but instead a series of

Divine "personality inventories" through which Abraham chooses his path, by preferring one or more of his faces over the others. Each trial produces a victorious facet of Abraham, which is then either confirmed or called into question by the next major event.

For example, the Biblical account is structured so that the action

cuts back and forth between Abraham's home life and his growing world fame. As the latter grows, the former is subsumed, to the extent that eventually, when he does venture an opinion on how to raise his son, Abraham is more or less told by God that home matters are no longer his domain (Genesis 21:12).

The *Akedah*, then, transpires more or less naturally as a culmination of Abraham's life: His son has been brought up on the altar of his life's work. In fact, it is from God that we first hear that Abraham "loves" Isaac, something that is glaringly absent from the narrative until the youth is almost lost forever. Moreover, the stilted verbal exchange between Abraham and Isaac during this episode marks the first — and last — conversation recorded between the two.

The event preceding the *Akedah* is Abraham's treaty with Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, which Rashbam (R. Shmuel B. Meir, 1085-1174) sees as a demonstration of a lack of faith in God, the reprimand for which was the terror of the *Akedah*. Following the above model, it is as if God is saying to Abraham: "You have sacrificed your family for the global sanctification of my name, but have you also sacrificed your faith? Let's see which Abraham emerges ascendant now."

So when at the conclusion of this most defining of episodes God pronounces Abraham a "Fearer of God," He is naming him for posterity: "This is who you are, this is the face you are choosing — global power, yes, but at the bottom of it all is the primary fear of God that you revealed to civilization... you have not forgotten where it began — and this is your legacy."

The blessing "Abraham the God-Fearing" receives on the spot remains the same as always — he is to father a great, powerful nation. But the curse of celebrities — alienated, wounded children — this, too, is his: Modern scholars highlight the fact that father and son famously climbed the mountain together; the Torah narrative indicates that Abraham returned home alone. ●

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 the primary fear of God