

Fathers and Sons, Struggles and Faith:
R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Genesis 22

The Written Torah is to be to the Oral Torah in the relation of short notes on a full and extensive lecture on any scientific subject. For the student who has heard the whole lecture, short notes are quite sufficient to bring back afresh to his mind at any time the whole subject of the lecture. For him, a word, an added mark of interrogation, or exclamation, a dot, the underlining of a word etc. etc., is often quite sufficient to recall to his mind a whole series of thoughts, a remark etc. For those who had not heard the lecture from the Master, such notes would be completely useless. If they were to try to reconstruct the scientific contents of the lecture literally from such notes they would of necessity make many errors. (Hirsch on Exodus 21:2)

V. 1. אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים. These words introduce a crisis, a reversal of all that went before. Abraham had already proclaimed God as אֱלֹהִים ... in Isaac the seed of the future is to be carried on ... so that Isaac's promised future had already struck roots in the contemporary present — and now comes the behest to break up all that has happened hitherto!

נִסָּה, related to נָסַע, moving on, נָסַח, flinging away, נָשָׂא to raise up, all three having the concept of bringing something to a further or higher position. In the same way נִסָּה regarding physical or moral forces: to test, i.e. to give it such tasks to do which, up till now, it has not proved its ability to accomplish. Hence every test is a step forward, is a strengthening of powers which exist already but which have not yet been proved in this further or higher task. A rope which has already stood the strain of fifty pounds is put to the test as soon as it is given fifty-one pounds to bear, but moral and spiritual forces are thereby strengthened and raised.

V. 2. נָא, please take, do take, I know full well what I am asking of you, I know how your whole inner self must struggle against it; it is your son I am demanding, your only one, and one to whom your whole soul clings, it is Isaac to whom the whole meaning of your life is attached.

לֶךְ לְךָ, with such a task, calling him to isolation, attaching himself only to God, did Abraham's life begin, with the same, but with greatly added intensity does it reach its culmination.

V. 3. "He took his two lads with him, and Isaac his son". The order is not without significance. He told Isaac as late as possible. This וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ does not yet refer to the journey. Starting on the journey only follows: וַיִּקַּם וַיֵּלֶךְ. But before he woke Isaac up, he got his people ready and saddled the ass. He wanted to spare Isaac having to make his resolution for as long as possible and wanted to avoid being alone with him.

Isaac was no longer a child, he was an independent man of 37 years of age. So that the greatness of his soul in this whole affair ranks equally with that of Abraham. Isaac had not received the behest himself, he only knew it through the mouth of his father ...so here the first Jewish son is ready to sacrifice himself for a tradition which he only knew through his father. Here the seed was sown for the devotion of the later generations to the traditions of their forbears... [Isaac makes his commitment] not on the strength of some convincing miracle, but on his firm

conviction of the proven character of his father. Our devotion to the traditions of our forbears also rests on their characters.

There are no passages in the whole Midrash which are more touching than those which place in the mouth of the son all the doubts which could well be reckoned to have made Abraham and Isaac waver on the hard road they were traversing. In those three days not much seems to have been said, but what an infinite amount must have been felt and thought. Our verse seems to indicate that Abraham first woke his people up and kept them with him, to barricade himself against being overcome by his feelings, and to have avoided being alone with Isaac.

V. 4. Not “he lifted his eyes on the third day and saw the place,” but, on the third that he lifted up his eyes he saw the place. *נשא עין* is always an intentional looking up and looking around. The whole time he had been looking around but had seen nothing to indicate that here was the place of which God had spoken. He had always dreaded to see it, until finally on the third day he did see it.

V. 5. *שבו לכם*: stay here for yourselves, that which is about to follow is not for you. For they would not have allowed it without interfering, would not have understood it. Here at the foot of Moriah is the parting between *זרע אברהם* (seed of Abraham) and *בן נח* (the children of Noah/the rest of humanity.) Only a breast in which the *תורה* awakens an immediate *הנני*, like Abraham, is able to give itself up to the Will of God, angel-like, with complete renunciation of its own comprehension of it, is able, angel-like, *יכסה פניו וגו'* to cover up eye and foot, not to see whither it leads, not to see where one is going, only cheerfully and courageously to use one's powers to soar upward to fulfil the Will of God. This stage ... fighting down all the objections raised by one's senses, of one's own free-will covering eyes and feet with one's wings, of one's own will using all one's power of upward soaring in the service of God — this stage beckons only to those who follow the ways Father Abraham had illuminated for them. Up till Moriah they could go together, *בני נח* are also children of God, but only to the foot of the Mount of God, not up to the heights.

But it is significant that, for that which he has in mind to do, he uses the term *השתחויה* ... that word alone in Abraham's mouth would demolish ... all that people, entrapped by their ignorance, ascribe to “the bloodthirsty cult of offerings,” dragging the Jewish Temple and the Jewish conception of God in the dust, and babble about “the narrow-mindedness of our forefathers, who imagined that God finds joy in the smoking blood of an expiring animal, and try to obtain atonement by that,” and talk of “the progress that the destruction of the Temple has brought us inasmuch as it has freed us for all time from such bloodthirsty offerings and still more bloodthirsty ideas.” *נשתחוה* is what Abraham says his intention is in bringing his offering. Not the animal, he himself does he offer, his life, his forces, his eye, his breast, his hand, his foot, his whole living self does he lay symbolically by the animal on the Altar of God, *נשתחוה*, himself does he throw completely down before God, by his offerings. The Jew is *שתי ידיו על הקרבן*, lays himself with all his strength on his offering; for it is he himself which [is] an offering, henceforth to let his whole being be fuel to keep the fires of godliness burning on earth.

V. 6. *וילכו שניהם יחדיו*. This refrain occurs twice again. Abraham and Isaac, the father and the son, the one to bring the offering, the other to be the offering wending the hard way upward together

in complete, unswerving, harmonious unity, such is the picture of the example that is to point the way for all fathers and sons, for every old and young generation of the House of Abraham, the path they are to tread *together*.

V. 8. “All we have to do is to bring the wood, the fire and the knife, we have only to be ready for any offering; what He will choose, what will happen will only happen because it is the Will of God: the answer to your question we will leave to God”. And with that Abraham had told him everything which he had to know, which he needed to know. “We have to build the altar and leave it to God’s Insight to choose the offering which in His Insight is the right one,” — and they went on together.

V. 9. It is by no means usual for the offering to be killed on the altar. It seems that Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son in such a way that, once he had performed the great act, he would not have anything further to do, and so wished to sacrifice his son directly on the stack of wood so that the flames would at once consume the body of his child.

V. 11. Unlike the *הנני* above in V. 1, where it followed immediately at the first call, here he had to be called twice, for he was completely absorbed in carrying out the dread command of his God, and had ear for nothing else. It seems to be significant that here God sends an angel to deliver the message whereas elsewhere in Abraham’s life God Himself speaks to him. To tell him to stop an angel was quite sufficient. Herein, too, we are shown the depth of the struggle which Abraham had to overcome. Had an angel brought him the message to kill his son, he would simply not have believed it. It was so much out of any connection with, so directly contrary to, everything which he knew of God in general, and in particular to what God had revealed to him concerning Isaac. But to tell him not to sacrifice his son, a message through an angel sufficed; for, for that, and to explain the whole demand as a test, which had been proved by the readiness to accept it, for that there was no necessity for an extraordinary revelation, that fitted in harmoniously with everything else that Abraham learnt to know of God.

But we stress this quite specially because one who calls himself “a pathfinder of the science of Judaism” (Abraham Geiger I.L.), in raving madness has dared to raise his lying pen also against this, the very loftiest summit of spirituality reached, not only in Jewish, but in all events which show human greatness. He turns this, as he does so many others, into its very opposite, and says that Abraham’s greatness lay not in his being ready to obey the voice of His God, and sacrifice his son but his obeying the voice of the angel telling him not to do so, and his real greatness lay in his coming to his senses in time, and realizing that God finds no pleasure in human sacrifices. Just by this did Abraham become the greatest reformer of his time, and he was the first to abolish human sacrifices and substitute animal offerings for them. And then we naturally have surpassed the spirit of Abraham and proved ourselves to be on a still higher level inasmuch as we have abolished sacrifices altogether!

And on the “Akeida Yitchack”, Jewish Judaism looks enthusiastically still today, as the exemplary highest peak of the fear of God. Of course then that same “pathfinder of the science of Judaism”, with his twisted mind, finds no better name for this fear of God which uses the freedom of will and intelligence of human beings in submitting them to the insight and will of the Highest intelligence and Love than — doglike obedience.

V. 17. וירש זרעך את שער אויביו. If here it is indicated that his descendants will also have enemies ... Israel will have fights, but finally the gates of his enemies will fall to his heritage. This can hardly refer to a military conquest. Military victories were never Israel's calling. But it seems to have to be taken in the same sense ... that the ultimate development of the world will fall as the heritage of the righteous, all other powers and influences will have disappeared and only what is morally right will prevail ... Ultimately, the שער, the forum, i.e. the social and political formation of even those nations who have fought against the principles of Israel, will come to be a heritage for Israel, in Israel and through Israel they will obtain the blessing and happiness for which they have striven in vain in all other directions.

V. 18. תנ"ך. שכר/reward for the good deeds of the righteous, hardly ever occurs in עקב. A righteous man has no loss in service of God, even the biggest sacrifice that he might make, would be to him in itself the biggest gain; hence שכר (related to סגר and סכר, to close up blanks, to fill up holes, empty spaces), compensation does not exist for him, as he recognizes no loss. Were he to hope for compensation he would not be the צדיק. The blessing that does accrue from his deeds comes to him עקב, literally “on the heel” of his deeds. It is not that which he had “in view” when he did the deed, it comes to him “unsought for”. He only wants to do his duty.

V. 19. וילכו יחדיו, all together, Abraham, Isaac and the attendants... Exceedingly characteristic and significant for the whole spirit of the frame of mind, which was to begin with Abraham and Isaac, does it now say here — after they had achieved the great, yea, the greatest loftiest height that a human being can reach, they returned to their attendants, and all of them — Abraham, Isaac and the men — went *together*, יחדיו, to Beer Sheba. In all other circles of humanity, after such a soaring into the proximity of God, after such elevation above everything earthly, an Abraham and an Isaac would have been so full of “I, myself”, or of the “Divine”, that they would have been lost for ordinary earthly life, and for “ordinary” human beings. Elsewhere such “standing near to God” — even if only presumed or imaginary — begets such pride that one proudly looks down on other people as “common mortals”, and avoids contact with them. Totally different from that is the spirit that should be inherited from the example of Abraham and Isaac. Just after they had achieved the very loftiest deed that could be made on earth, they return to the attendants they had left at the foot of Moriah, and go יחדיו with them, feel themselves no whit higher than anybody else. To the true son of Abraham ... the higher he stands spiritually, intellectually or morally, the less superior does he feel, the less is he conscious of his own greatness.

Rightly indeed do our sages ז"ל waver as to whom to award the palm of superiority, whether to ענוה or to חסידות. ענוה is, after all, the only virtue of which a man can only be unconscious of possessing. He who knows he is an ענו is already no ענו; is filled with the worst kind of pride and conceit. He is always saying to himself of himself, that he has every right to be proud and is still so little proud! Abraham and Isaac, returned from the summit of Moriah as if they had done nothing special at all.