



THE STEP BEYOND SELF

A CRUCIAL TURNING POINT IN JEWISH HISTORY IS DESCRIBED IN THIS week's Sedra¹. This is the *Akedah*, the "Binding of Isaac", in which Abraham was called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice of bringing his son as an offering to G-d. Isaac was not a child, but a mature man. Nonetheless he too showed himself completely willing to give his life in order to fulfil G-d's Will.

There have been many examples in the past and also in the present of people giving up their lives in order to achieve a certain goal for themselves (albeit in heaven, whether imagined or real) or for their family or their people. In some cases sacrifice of one's life can actually be an extreme form of aggrandisement of self, or a mode of committing a horrific crime.

The case of Abraham and Isaac is different: it was a step of surrender of self. The sacrifice of Isaac would have meant the cancellation of everything that Abraham had spent his life trying to achieve. Let us consider this in context.

Since the time of Noah and the Flood, the world had gradually again sunk into a morass of idol worship and ugly practices. G-d the Creator was totally forgotten. Then Abraham came on the scene. He reached the conclusion that there must be one Master of all existence. Soon he began to teach others. Eventually, guided by G-d, Abraham embarked on his life's mission - to bring awareness

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of the Creator back into the world. He did this through manifesting the quality of *Chesed*, Kindness. He and his wife Sarah - who, like her husband, was an inspiring teacher² - gathered around them loyal adherents who even followed them when they made the journey to the Land of Canaan.

However, a serious problem was the fact that Abraham needed a successor. Sarah was beautiful and wise, but she had not borne a child through all their years of marriage. Abraham did not feel that even his closest disciples, like his servant Eliezer, were fitting as successors in the task to reveal Monotheism to the world. He yearned for a son³. Sarah asked him to take her maidservant Hagar as a concubine, and Ishmael was born. Then G-d told him that Sarah herself would miraculously give birth to a child at the age of ninety, and that this son, Isaac, rather than Ishmael, would be Abraham's successor. Through Isaac a sacred nation, the Jewish people, would come into being. They would dwell in the Land of Israel and reveal knowledge of G-d to all humanity.

Suddenly, when Isaac was grown up, and Ishmael had long before been sent away, Abraham received the Divine call to transcend his self, his quality of Kindness, and his future. To go to a distant mountain alone with his son and offer him up to G-d. No-one would see this: it would be a private event, abrogating the life-long work of a great religious leader. G-d's own promises to Abraham were here being reduced to nought!

Abraham made the step which goes beyond self. Infinite G-d rules all, and is unlimited. As finite human beings, we cannot understand G-d. Abraham was ready to obey - and in fact, that was sufficient. Isaac was not offered up. Instead a ram was offered - and consequently on the Jewish New Year a ram's horn is blown, reminding us of this event.

The effect of Abraham's step beyond Self was to transmit to us, his descendants, a similar ability to go beyond fashion, convention, and ordinary understanding in our path through history, and through life, dedicated to G-d. Abraham's actions, described in the Sedra, helped ensure the existence and continued flowering of our people for all generations⁴.

1. Genesis chs.18-22. 2. See Rashi to Gen.12:5. 3. See Gen. 15:2-4. 4. See the discussion of the Akedah in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.20, pp.73-78.

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SEDRA VAYERA

CHILDREN OR CLONES

"Humph" David said as he looked at the pile of papers for the tenth time.

"Every one tells me how smart Dad is," David said sorrowfully to his mother, "and my brain can't seem to put together these numbers for my maths homework".

"Yes darling," his mother said sympathetically.

"I wish" David said "that I was able to import some of Dad's brain into my head and then I would be able to do this homework".

"Hmm" his mother said.

"Why am I different?" David half demanded, banging his fist on the kitchen table. "Why can't I just be the same as Dad? He could do this homework in ten seconds!"

He put his head down on his arms. "Even Abraham and Isaac in the Torah portion were same" he sniffled in a muffled voice through his sleeve.

"Yes dear" his mother said as she listened, trying to be encouraging.

"Abraham was a big leader and was the first Jew" David continued through his sleeve. "Isaac was the same, following in his footsteps, because he must have had the same talents and brains and was able to be successful like his Dad".

"It's actually not quite so simple," his mother said.

"Why?" David asked, curious enough to lift up his head.

"Well" his mother said, sitting down next to him, "the Sages tell us that Abraham and Isaac actually had very different qualities".

David hadn't heard about this before and was interested.

"Abraham represents the quality of Kindness," she said. "That is why we see him pleading with G-d to spare the wicked people of Sodom. He also travelled a lot, going from his birth place in the East to Israel, then going to Egypt, meeting lots of people and teaching them all about Hashem, drawing awareness of G-d down into the world".

"Yes," said David. "I learnt all that in school".

"But Isaac was different" his mother continued. "He wasn't able to travel outside the Holy Land of Israel, because he had been offered to G-d and was especially holy. He expresses the quality of reaching up towards holiness."

"So, what did he do?" asked David, curious to know.

"The Torah tells us that Isaac dug deep wells in the ground to find water," his mother said. "This means he would dig deep into himself and others to find their own special qualities, their point of holiness, so that they could reach up and connect with G-d."

"So you mean his style was different from that of Abraham," said David.

"That's right. A child is not a clone. You have to be yourself. And if you try hard, I'm sure you will succeed".

David reached again for the maths papers. They already looked a bit easier...

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