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Parshat Vayera: "Vayar et Hamakom Me'rachok": Seeing A Distant God

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Please note that this week's piece is longer than usual in order to treat a subject that is more complicated than usual.

The focal point of this week's *parsha*, the *Akeidah*, begins with echoes from last week's, with another commanded journey, another *lech lecha*:

"לך-לך אל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה"
"Go to the land of Moriah" (Genesis 22:2)

Like Avraham's sojourns toward Canaan, this journey will also separate him from his family and re-orient his spiritual development. It too will establish a template for faithfulness for generations to come.

Let us begin at the very beginning:

"וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:"
"And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Avraham, and said to him: 'Avraham'; and he said: 'Here I am.'" (Genesis 22:1)

God calls out to Avraham and he responds with a single word: "*hineni*." "I am here." I am completely yours--completely open, available, obedient, willing. It matters not what the content of the command is. Avraham is ready before he even learns what he must be ready for.

"וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אַהַבְתָּ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לךְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים
אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:"
"And [God] said: 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains that I will point out to you.'" (Genesis 22:2)

The command to sacrifice is issued and it is harrowing--emotionally, ethically, and religiously. The tendency of the divine voice to speak in ways that fundamentally violate intuitive or received human truths is something that we all must wrestle with, and thinkers throughout the ages have done just that. But the *Akeidah*, I believe, surfaced an even more specific and more thorny spiritual challenge.

The words, "קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אַהַבְתָּ אֶת-יִצְחָק" ("take your son...Yitzchak") presented Avraham with an absolute contradiction not just between his moral intuitions and the Godly command, but between God's word and God's word. As the *midrash* in Breishit Rabba (56:8) reminds us, in the chapter that immediately precedes our own, mere (literary) moments before God asked Avraham to sacrifice his son, God issued a promise to Avraham regarding that same son:

"... כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע"
"... [I]t is through Yitzchak that offspring will be continued for you." (Genesis 21:12)

Yitzchak will be your future, says God. Yitzchak is destined to live. He will be the seed from which his father's legacy will grow. Yet now, one small scene later, that very child who embodies the covenantal

future is the one who is slated to die. The God who just secured Avraham's legacy in perpetuity now asks him to cut it off entirely. Yitzchak, the emblem of eternity, must be sacrificed.

The heavy, heavy question that Avraham had to answer for himself was: Now what? How can sense be made of this contradiction? How can the promise of Yitzchak's life possibly be squared with the dictate demanding his death? Put more broadly: When it looks like the covenant has been broken, when it appears that the end of sacred history has arrived, can Avraham then trust in God? Can he affirm the covenant when the covenant seems ruthlessly undone? Can he continue to uphold God's guarantee even over and against God's own word?

Avraham had to live inside of this absurd conundrum of believing in God's promise and heeding God's command. When the two seemed to negate each other so painfully, he nevertheless had to find a way to hold onto both. This, I believe, was the real test of the *Akeidah*. Could Avraham find a way forward in the midst of such oppressive contradiction? The answer was yes. Through the trial of the *Akeidah*, Avraham found a way to trust in God despite God. He affirmed--through great personal exertion and at great price--that God would ultimately fulfill God's life-affirming promise even in the face of a world and a command that undermined it completely.

The text bears witness to this in several subtle ways, but I will describe just one. After three days of travel, Avraham and his small entourage arrive on the edge of the designated location for the sacrifice.

"בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחוֹק:"

Avraham lifts up his eyes and sees the place in the distance (Genesis 22:4). And what did he see? Rashi states:

"וַיִּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם. רָאָה עָנָן קָשׁוּר עַל הַהָר:"
 "[Avraham] spotted a cloud on top of a mountain."

This, presumably, indicated to him either the uniqueness of that specific mountain, Mount Moriah, as a site for divine worship. Or, presaging the *ananei ha-kavod*, the clouds of glory, that would come to represent the presence of the *Shechina*, Avraham understood that God was to be found there.

I would like to offer a different interpretation of this Rashi, or of this image. What Avraham understood upon seeing the cloud was the essential cloudiness of his relationship with God. He "saw" that the charge of the *Akeidah*--with all of its horror and confusion--was precisely about reckoning with unclarity, with paradox, with absurdity, with a God who contradicts and undermines Godself, with promises that seem broken, covenants that seem shattered. Avraham came to understand at this moment that to approach God, to have an ongoing and live spiritual life, would require a difficult (and maybe continuous) encounter with cloudiness. As would be said of Moshe at Sinai generations later, in Exodus 20:18:

". . . וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל-הָעֶרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים"

Moshe, the prophet of prophets, "entered into the fog, where God was." Avraham, forefather of faith, found God there too.

"*Vayar et hamakom merachok*," says the verse (Genesis 22:4). Avraham not only saw the mountain from afar. He saw *HaMakom*--God, The Place (*Makom*)--at a distance. In the words of the chassidic rebbe, Reb Elazar HaKohen of Poltusk:

"וירא את המקום מרחוק--המקום, השכינה, מקומו של עולם--ה' התרחק ממנו..."
 "[Avraham] saw the place in the distance"--the Place, the *Shechina*, the sanctuary of the world. God was distant from him."

Or in the words of the *Sfat Emet*, Reb Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger:
 "...היינו שהקב"ה נסתר ממנו..."
 "The Holy One hid from him."

These chassidic insights are used by their authors for a slightly different purpose than my own, but they stand as powerful literary interpretations of a verse that is absolutely central to Avraham's theological trial. Through the *Akeidah*, I believe, Avraham learned to contend with God at a distance. He learned to hold the promise of redemption together with a cursed reality. He learned to see, through clouds of uncertainty and confusion, the workings of a God who does not make sense; who does not always appear to follow through on commitments; who does not provide easy paths, but who asks us to climb mountain after mountain after mountain. Through the *Akeidah*, Avraham modeled a spiritual life in relationship with *HaMakom merachok*, a God who so often feels so very far away.

How did he do this? What way forward did he provide? How did he contend with the distant God? He asserted presence.

After setting out on his journey, Avraham does not speak to anyone—not to Sarah to tell her of his plans, not to Yitzchak to explain his intentions, and not to God to accept or resist the challenge. In fact the first time that we hear his voice, post-command, is when he turns to his accompanying servants.

"וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ-לִכֶּם פֹּה עִם-הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱר גֵּלְכָה עִד-כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁבַּח אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:"
 "Avraham said to his lads, 'You stay here and I and the *naar* [Yitzchak] will travel on to worship, and then we will return to you' (Genesis 22:5).

This is a strange statement, to say the least. "*Nashuva aleichem*"?! **We** will return to you?! En route to slaughtering his son, how could he possibly have made this claim? Was it wishful thinking? A lie to protect himself, his secret, or his son? Or might he actually have believed, *despite God's command* to the contrary, that he and Yitzchak would in fact return?

Rashi calls this moment a *nevuah*, a prophecy. The Gemara in Moed Katan 18a states:

"דאמר רבי יוחנן: מנין שברית כרותה לשפתים? שנאמר (בראשית כ"ב) ויאמר אברהם אל נעריו שבו לכם פה עם החמור ונשתחוה ונשובה אליכם ואיסייעא מלתא דהדור תרוייהו."
 "How do we know that covenants can be made with the lips? [From these very words of Avraham's.] The words came true and [Avraham and Yitzchak] both came back."

Both of these sources indicate that Avraham *created* a new reality through this speech-act. But I beg to differ. I think that Avraham *reflected* reality as he understood it.

This seemingly minor moment in the story of the *Akeidah* was in fact a major fulfillment of the task of the trial itself. Avraham here asserts, in defiance of God, that he trusts in God, that he will continue to believe in the absurd possibility of Yitzchak as his future even as he walks him to his demise. . . because somehow, some way, God must stay true to God's redemptive promise. Avraham was willing to go along

with the motions of Yitzchak's sacrifice precisely because he trusted in Yitzchak's survival. In this small exchange with his servants, he gives voice to that harrowing paradox.

Avraham was, of course, right to take the gamble that he did, according to the Torah. Just before he could lay a hand on his beloved son, he is halted.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהֵי מְלֶאךְ יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם אֲבִרְהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל־תַּעֲשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי אֶתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרְאֵ אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנוֹךְ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ
מִמֶּנִּי:

"An angel of God called to Avraham from on high and said, 'Avraham, Avraham.' And he replied, 'I am here.' And [the angel] said: 'Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him; for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing as you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'" (Genesis 22:11-12)

An angel appears to stay Avraham's hand and in so doing to confirm what he knew all along: that Yitzchak would alas live and so would the covenant. To this divine voice, Avraham offers the response that mirrors his original stance, before the treacherous, compromising command was issued: *hineni*. I am here. Still. In spite of it all.

Divine commendation follows. Avraham has seemingly passed the test. And then we are told:

וַיִּשָּׂא אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵ וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחַר נֶאֱחַז בְּסִבְךָ בְּקֶרְנָיו
וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲבִרְהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַחַת בְּנוֹ:

"Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw there in a thicket a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son." (Genesis 22:13)

A ram appears, entangled in a thicket, and Avraham takes action immediately. He swiftly sacrifices the animal.

Our story comes to a close with language that echoes where it began. The journey up the mountain opened with an act of seeing:

וַיִּשָּׂא אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק
"Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place at a distance. (Genesis 22:4)

And it concludes with this act of seeing:

וַיִּשָּׂא אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵ וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחַר נֶאֱחַז בְּסִבְךָ בְּקֶרְנָיו
"Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw there in a thicket a ram caught by its horns."

At the start of the climb, Avraham learns to contend with God at a distance. But at its peak, he must still reckon with a world characterized by entanglement. The trial does not undo the challenge of living in a clouded spiritual universe. It bolsters and rewards those who do.

Rabbi Yehudah Meir Shapira of Lublin accordingly asks: How did Avraham know that the ram was really God's intended proxy for Yitzchak? He answers:

כנראה שאברהם היה בטוח שהאיל מוקדש לעולה תחת בנו בראותו אותו 'נאחז בסבך'. מכיוון שראה שיש כאן תסבוכת ומעצור, הבין שזה מן השמיים, דבר מצוה. כי מעשה שטן הוא חד וחלק.

Avraham was sure that the ram was intended to be sacrificed in place of his son by virtue of the fact that it was caught in a thicket. When he saw that there was complexity and obstruction, he understood that it was heaven-sent, that it was an object of *mitzvah*. Things sent from the devil--i.e. ungodly things--are clear and uncomplicated.

In other words, the heavenly imperative is *always* complicated and challenging. The life of faith requires one to wrestle constantly with paradox and with unclarity, with entanglement and paralysis. Avraham's ability to discern that, and to live meaningfully and decisively in the face of it, was a mark of his greatness and the lasting contribution of his trial.

The ordeal of the *Akeidah* ultimately teaches Avraham, and us by extension, how to contend with a murky reality that so often flies in the face of covenantal promises. It asserts that, at the end of the day, the covenant really does stand. The divine relationship abides and affirms life and legacy and continuity. "*Ki b'Yitzchak yikara lecha zera*" really is the ultimate redemptive promise, even as "*kach et bincha*" might be the urgent, present, experienced, and not very pretty reality. The angelic intervention/divine retraction does not alleviate the paradox entirely though. It rewards persistence in the face of it. Through the whole trial of the *Akeidah*, we thus discover, together with Avraham, that to truly see God in the world, we must learn how to reckon with *HaMakom merachok* (God in the distance) and with all that keeps us stuck in the thicket, "*b'svach karneinu*."



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