

Parshat Vayeria

An Emotional Response to Akeidat Yitzchak?

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This Shabbat, parshat Vayeria, marks two years since the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh. I learned of the horror from our shul security guard and quickly realized that the attack had occurred at the childhood synagogue of a dear friend. I was overcome by emotion at the thought that her family might have been present. It was a tortuously long Shabbat waiting to learn more. When I finally reached my friend after Shabbat and she confirmed that she and her family were safe, I was again overcome by emotion.

My memories of that Shabbat continue to revolve around those two emotionally fraught moments: Learning of the possible traumatic loss of dear ones and the intense relief upon learning of their survival. I have also become aware of an uncomfortable dissonance between this experience and the Torah's expression of Avraham's experience of the Akeidat Yitzchak.

Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love..., and offer him there as a burnt offering. (Bereishit 22:2) This is the iconic and dreadful command to Avraham that initiated the Akeidah.

One might have expected terror, panic, and tears from Avraham, however the next verse describes his response as one of action:

Avraham awoke in the morning, saddled his donkey and took with him two servants and his son Isaac.

Where is the dread, the sorrow, or any emotional expression whatsoever?

Similarly, when Avraham is commanded to spare his child, he responds with action: *Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.* (Bereishit 22:23)

Rather than tears of relief, we learn simply that Avraham complied with the new command.

It is possible that Avraham experienced a torrent of emotions that are not reported in the terse narrative. However, it is noteworthy that once a year, Jewish tradition subtly compels us to confront the issue of Avraham's emotionless response, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. On this day, Avraham's seemingly emotionless response is juxtaposed to the powerful emotional moments embedded in the first day Torah reading and both Haftorot.

Day one features the expulsion of Hagar and Yishma'el. Avraham is pained at the prospect, and Hagar expresses pain as well upon abandoning her son in the wilderness: *And she sat from afar, and raised her voice and wept* (Bereishit 21:16).

Hagar's story is followed by the Haftorah of Channah's painful struggle to conceive: *And she was in bitterness of soul and prayed to Hashem, and wept sorely* (Shmu'el I 1:10).

The second day Haftorah is similarly emotionally charged with the cry of Rachel: *A cry is heard in Ramah— Wailing, bitter weeping— Rachel crying for her children* (Yiremiyah 31:15).

All four of these readings emphasize parents (or would-be parents) reacting to something deeply painful regarding their children. Three respond with intense emotion while Avraham is comparatively stoic. Why does Avraham respond so differently?

Perhaps that the difference is rooted in the presence or absence of agency. Hagar, Hannah, and Rachel were powerless to save their children by means other than prayer. Where action was impossible, emotional expression prevailed. Avraham possessed a greater degree of agency and could choose to sacrifice his son or not.

However, action and emotion are not mutually exclusive. The Torah could have portrayed Avraham taking action amidst grief or relief.

The Talmud Yerushalmi offers an explanation that acknowledges Avraham's emotive self while also explaining his stoicism at the Akeidah.

*Rav Beivai Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Avraham said before God: 'Master of the universe, it is well known to You that at the time that You asked me to bring Yitzchak, my son, up to You, I had what to respond and I could have said: Yesterday You told me 'Through Yitzchak shall you will gain posterity.' Now You say 'Bring him up as a burned offering.' But, heaven forbid, I did not do that! **I suppressed my feelings and I did your will.** (Yerushalmi, Ta'anit 2:4')*

Emotional suppression may explain how Avraham could bring his son to the brink of death. However, the question remains as to why the text indicates no sense of relief when Avraham is commanded to release Yitzchak. Surely this was a moment for tears?

Rabbi Burton Visotzky addresses this in his work *The Genesis of Ethics*.

How does a father raise his hand and put a cleaver against his son's throat? ...

One can almost see the flat affect of the depressive as he walks, zombielike, up the mountain. It takes the angel more than once to catch his attention. And when it's over and Abraham has won the greatest prize of all, he stumbles down the mountainside, not even noticing that Isaac has been left behind. Abraham dwells in Beer Sheva far from Isaac, far from Sarah who is in Hebron, far from Ishmael and Hagar in Egypt. In the end, Abraham is close only to God."

Challenging circumstances sometimes require us to dampen our emotions. It can be too overwhelming to surface and express powerful fears and anxieties and so sometimes we choose to disengage emotionally. The ramifications may be borne by our loved ones, especially our children.

Eight months of pandemic have cast us into difficult situations, and I believe this is especially true of the children in our lives. Missed birthday parties, graduations, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and summer camp experiences are but a few examples of *their* losses. The increasing challenge for adults as the months drag on is to sustain feelings of empathy and understanding of such losses for our youth. It may have been easier to commiserate during the initial weeks of COVID when our agency was limited significantly and it was all so new. Months later, some of us are likely experiencing empathy fatigue or emotional suppression.

God willing, we are moving towards better times, but as long as the pandemic endures, may the emotive examples of Hagar, Hannah, and Rachel remain in our hearts. May we be able to strengthen our reserves of empathy and patience, and be ever mindful of the ongoing sacrifices borne by our youth.



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