In this Issue

- **Rav Asher Weiss on the Parsha** by *Rav Asher Weiss*
- **Covenant & Conversation** by *Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*
- **Mayanot** by *Rabbi Noson Weisz*
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by *Rabbi Ari Kahn*



As a Son and a Servant

> *An angel of Hashem called to him from Heaven and said, "Avraham, Avraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me."*[1]

The Midrash describes Avraham's feelings as he prepared a knife to slaughter his beloved son as a *korban* to Hashem:

He stretched out his hand to grasp the knife, while tears streamed from his eyes and fell into the eyes of Yitzchak, with the compassion of a father for his son. Nonetheless, his heart was filled with joy to do the will of his Creator.[2]

The angels gathered above him in groups, and cried, "*Roads are desolate, wayfarer has ceased [to travel]. He has annulled the covenant, and despised the cities*. *He does not consider the man*."[3] "Does He have no desire for Jerusalem and the *Beis HaMikdash* that He had planned to give to Yitzchak's children as their inheritance?" they asked. "*He does not consider the man.*" "If the merit of Avraham did not stand, then no creature can stand before Him."

We find here a poignant juxtaposition of conflicting emotions. On one hand, Avraham wept over the imminent loss of his precious son, whom he had hoped would carry on his legacy. On the other hand, he rejoiced over the opportunity to fulfill Hashem's command. How can one heart carry the burden of these two contrary emotions?

The Rambam describes the importance of serving Hashem with love: He who serves Hashem with love toils in Torah and mitzvot, and walks the pathways of wisdom, not for the sake of any personal benefit; not for fear of punishment, nor for hope of reward. He does what is true because it is true, and his reward consequently follows. This is a very lofty level, which many scholars fail to achieve. It was the path walked by Avraham Avinu, whom God called His beloved, since he served God purely out of love. This is the level toward which we must aspire, as God commanded Moshe, "And you shall love the Lord, your God." If one's love for God is strong, he will fulfill all the mitzvot for the sake of this love.[4]

The Zohar states that we must relate to God both as His servant and His son.[5] A servant stands in awe of his master, and would never dare question his master's will. A son loves his father with all his heart and soul, and rejoices to fulfill his father's will, with no thought of his own benefit. Nevertheless, he may ask a respectful question and expect to receive a loving explanation.

In every aspect of our service of God there must be a delicate balance between love and awe; between the desire to draw close to Hashem, and the fear of overstepping the boundaries of servitude. We must be servants and children of Hashem.

God presented Avraham with a test that would try both aspects of his being at once. "*Take your only son, whom you love.*" At a time when Avraham's fatherly love was at its peak, he would be forced to show total, unquestioning obedience to Hashem's command — as unfathomable as it seemed. Thereby, he would prove his loyalty to the extent that God personally testified, "*For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me*."

The Midrash relates that after the Binding of Isaac, Avraham began to wonder what was the meaning of it all. First, Gpd promised him that Yitzchak would carry on his lineage. Then, God ordered him to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice. Finally, God ordered him to withhold his hand, and spare Yitzchak's life. God then explained that He had only intended for Yitzchak to be raised upon the altar, but He had never intended for him to be brought as an offering.[6]

Why did Avraham wait until after the *Akeidah* to question God's command? Why did he not ask these questions before taking his knife in hand to slaughter his son?

As long as Avraham had a responsibility to fulfill, he served God in the capacity of a dedicated servant. No questions or challenges could be brooked. Hashem commanded him to bring Yitzchak as an offering, and Avraham hastened to comply, paying no heed to any misgivings.

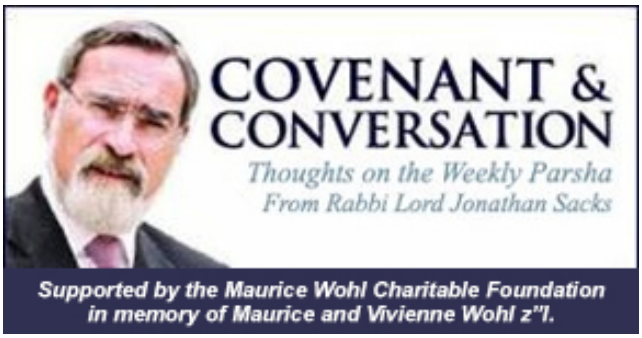
After Avraham was told to spare Yitzchak, he no longer had any obligation to fulfill. He now assumed the role of a loving son, who was welcome to ask and understand the depth of his Father's wisdom.

Remember for our sake, Hashem, our God, the covenant, the kindness, and the oath that You swore to Avraham Avinu on Har HaMoriah. Let the memory of the *Akeidah* appear before You, when Avraham Avinu bound his son Yitzchak on the *Mizbei'ach*, and conquered his compassion to fulfill Your will with all his heart. So too, may Your compassion conquer Your anger toward us, and in Your great benevolence, withdraw Your fury from Your nation, Your city, Your land, and Your inheritance.[7]

---

1. Bereishis 22:11-12.
2. Bereishis Rabbah 56.
3. Yeshayahu 33:8.
4. Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 10:2.
5. Zohar, Parashas Behar.
6. Bereishis Rabbah 56:8.
7. From Rosh Hashanah Mussaf prayers.

Reproduced from Rav Asher Weiss on the Parashah ***by Rabbi Asher Weiss with permission of the copyright holders, ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, Ltd.***



On Leadership: Answering the Call

The early history of humanity as told in the Torah is a series of disappointments. God gives human beings freedom, which they then misuse. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Cain murders Abel. Within a relatively short time the world before the Flood has become dominated by violence. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth. God creates order. Man creates chaos. Even after the Flood humanity, in the form of the builders of Babel, is guilty of hubris, thinking they can build a tower whose top "reaches heaven."

Humans fail to respond to God, which is where Abraham enters the picture. We are not quite sure, at the beginning, what it is that Abraham is summoned to. We know he is commanded to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and travel "to the land I will show you," but what he is to do there, we do not know. On this the Torah is silent. What is Abraham's mission? What makes him special? What makes him, not simply a good man in a bad age, as was Noah, but a leader and the father of a nation of leaders?

To decode the mystery we have to recall what the Torah has been signalling prior to this point. I suggested in previous essays that a, perhaps the, key theme is a failure of responsibility. Adam and Eve lack *personal* responsibility. Adam says, "It wasn't me; it was the woman." Eve says, "It wasn't me, it was the serpent." It is as if they deny being the author of their own acts – as if they do not understand either freedom or the responsibility it entails.

Cain does not deny personal responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me. It was Abel's fault for provoking me." Instead he denies *moral* responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah fails the test of *collective* responsibility. He is a man of virtue in an age of vice, but he makes no impact on his contemporaries. He saves his family (and the animals) but no one else. According to the plain reading of the text, he does not even try.

Understand this and we understand Abraham. He exercises *personal* responsibility. A quarrel breaks out between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot. Seeing that this was no random occurrence but the result of their having too many cattle to be able to graze together, Abraham immediately proposes a solution:

> *Abram said to Lot, "Let there not be a quarrel between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Gen. 13: 8-9)*

Note that Abraham passes no judgment. He does not ask whose fault the argument was. He does not ask who will gain from any particular outcome. He gives Lot the choice. He sees the problem and acts.

In the next chapter we are told about a local war, as a result of which Lot is among the people taken captive. Immediately Abraham gathers a force, pursues the invaders, rescues Lot and with him all the other captives, whom he returns safely to their homes, refusing to take any of the spoils of victory that he is offered by the grateful king of Sodom.

This is a strange passage – not the image of Abraham the nomadic shepherd we see elsewhere. Its presence is best understood in the context of the story of Cain. Abraham shows he *is* his brother's (or brother's son's) keeper. He immediately understands the nature of *moral* responsibility. Despite the fact that Lot had chosen to live where he did with its attendant risks, Abraham did not say, "His safety is his responsibility not mine."

Then, in this week's parsha, comes the great moment at which for the first time a human being challenges God himself. God is about to pass judgment on Sodom. Abraham, fearing that this will mean that the city will be destroyed, says:

> *"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with*

> *the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"*

This is a remarkable speech. *By what right does a mere mortal challenge God himself?*

The short answer is that God himself signalled that he should. Listen carefully to the text:

> *Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him" ... Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."*

Those words, "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"* are a clear hint that God wants Abraham to respond, otherwise why would He have said them?

The story of Abraham can only be understood against the backdrop of the story of Noah. There too, God told Noah in advance that he is about to bring punishment to the world.

> *So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."*

Noah did not protest. To the contrary, we are told three times that Noah "did as God commanded him." Noah accepted the verdict. Abraham challenged it. Abraham understood the third principle: *collective* responsibility.

The people of Sodom were not his brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond what he did in rescuing Lot. He prayed on their behalf because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne:

> *No man is an island,*
> *Entire of itself ...*
> *Any man's death diminishes me,*
> *For I am involved in mankind.*[1]

But a question remains. *Why* did God call on Abraham to challenge Him? Was there anything Abraham knew that God didn't know? The idea is absurd. The answer is surely this: Abraham was to become the role model and initiator of a new faith, one that would not defend the human status quo but challenge it.

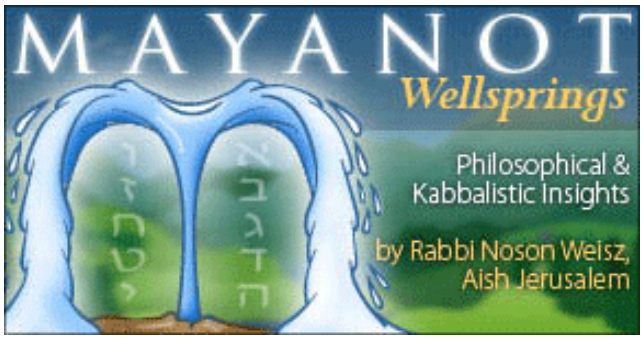
Abraham had to have the courage to challenge God if his descendants were to challenge human rulers, as Moses and the prophets did. Jews do not accept the world that is. They challenge it in the name of the world that ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world's first religion of protest – a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it.

Abraham was not a conventional leader. He did not rule a nation. There was as yet no nation for him to lead. But he was the role model of leadership as Judaism understands it. He took responsibility. He acted; he didn't wait for others to act. Of Noah, the Torah says, "he walked *with* God." But to Abraham, God himself said, "Walk *before* me," (Gen. 17: 1), meaning: be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

NOTES

1 John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1623).



The Art of Giving: To Be or Not To Be the Jewish Way

On the third day following his circumcision at age 99, God pays Abraham a sickbed visit. The Talmud (Sotah, 14a) points to this visit as proof of the obligation to visit the sick incumbent on all Jews as a facet of our general Torah obligation to emulate God. God had no business to conduct with Abraham, no commandments to deliver; He simply came to pay him a visit to cheer him up and make him feel better.

We can all appreciate that a visit from God is no ordinary experience. God does not go around visiting **us,** even when we are sick. Such a visit is akin to being transported to Paradise or *Olam Haba*, "the World to Come." The Talmud (Brochot 17a) describes the World to Come as a place where the righteous sit and bask in the Joy of God's Presence. A visit from God surely places its recipient in the identical position.

Yet, how does Abraham react to being singled out for such an honor? He tells God to please wait while he offers hospitality to three strangers he observes in the distance. From this we learn that "offering hospitality to strangers is greater than communication with God" (Talmud, Shabbos, 127a). Indeed, Abraham's behavior during this incident teaches us the enormous importance of the obligation of offering hospitality to strangers (Ibid.). From God's behavior we learn the obligation to visit the sick, whereas Abraham's behavior teaches us the importance of offering hospitality.

The Illogic of the Story

But isn't there something seriously faulty behind the logic of this story? As important as it may be, offering hospitality to strangers is only one of the commandments of the Torah. The object of observing all the Torah commandments is to reach the World to Come in order to bask in the joy of God's presence. The Mishna (Avos 4:21) compares the next world to a palace and this world to a waiting room outside the palace door; the king into whose presence we seek to be admitted lives on the other side of the door.

The rest of us are in this world - in the waiting room - keeping ourselves busy observing the commandments, hoping to become worthy enough to be awarded an audience with the king. Unlike ourselves Abraham did not have to wait until after death to be offered entry; he was granted permission to enter the palace and enjoy an audience with the Presence while he was still alive. Yet he spurned the admission and elected to remain outside in the waiting room observing the commandment to offer hospitality whose purpose is to render him worthy of admittance. Does this make any sense?

God's Mysterious Behavior

The story gets even more perplexing. Our Sages tell us that the three strangers who appeared simultaneously with God's visit were really angels. Rashi (Genesis 18:1) explains that because Abraham was sick, God made the day especially hot to discourage wayfarers so that Abraham would not wear himself out extending hospitality to guests. But when God saw that the lack of guests only caused Abraham mental anguish, He sent three angels

in human form so that Abraham would have the opportunity of offering hospitality after all.

Strangely enough, God Himself chose precisely the same moment to visit, thus forcing Abraham to choose between greeting Him and offering hospitality to the angelic guests. It is difficult to escape the feeling that the entire incident actually constitutes a test. It seems that Abraham was expected to figure out the right answer; he should keep God waiting and give priority to caring for his guests. But what was the point of such a test? Moreover, lacking a precedent to follow, how was Abraham supposed to figure out that it was proper spiritual manners to request God to wait while he went to attend to his guests?

The Reciprocity Principle

Let us begin our attempt to deal with these questions by studying a passage of Talmud concerning the story of the hospitality Abraham offered the angels (Baba Mezia, 86b). By carefully analyzing and comparing the story of Abraham's hospitality to the way God cared for the Jewish people in the desert following the Exodus, the Talmud discovers an astonishing parallel - God took care of Abraham's children in precisely the same fashion as Abraham took care of his angelic guests. The implication is clear: the two incidents are related through some sort of reciprocity principle. God's treatment of the Children of Israel in the desert is apparently some kind of reward for Abraham's treatment of His angels:

> "*Abraham ran to the cattle, and selected a good tender calf.*" *[Genesis 18:7]*
> "*A wind went forth from God and blew quail from the sea.*" *(Numbers 11:31)*
>
> "*He took cream and milk and the calf he had prepared and placed these before them.*" *(Genesis 18:8)*
> "*God said to Moses: Behold! I shall rain down for you food from heaven.*" *(Exodus 16:4)*
>
> "*He stood over them beneath the tree and they ate.*" *(Genesis 18:8)*
> "*Behold! I shall stand before you by the rock in Horeb.*" *(Exodus 17:6)*
>
> "*Abraham walked with them to escort them.*" *(Genesis 18:16)*
> "*God went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way.*" *(Exodus 13:21)*
>
> "*Let some water be brought and wash your feet...*" *(Genesis 18:4)*
> "*You shall strike the rock and water will come forth from it.*" *(Exodus 17:6)*

The Talmud emphasizes that this reciprocal relationship between the incidents is not only apparent in the similarity of the services provided, but also in the manner of their provision. The services that Abraham performed for God's angels with his own two hands were reciprocated by benefits that God bestowed on the Jewish people personally; whereas the services that Abraham delegated, God also delegated. God relates to us human beings in precisely the same fashion as we relate to each other. He gives as we do.

The Paradigm of the Worlds

Let us comprehend this reciprocity principle within the context of the following assumption. Abraham's hospitality towards the angels can be compared to our Divine service in this world, while God's treatment of the Jewish people in the desert is a useful paradigm of how the Next World operates. The correlation developed in the Talmud between the two events also parallels the relationship between the two worlds.

The World to Come is a place in which we anticipate conducting our entire existence in

the receiving mode. While such an existence might appear to be somewhat parasitic at first glance, this is not really so. Being offered life in the receiving mode in the World to Come is no more than just compensation for spending our lives in this world entirely in the giving mode [as far as our Divine service is concerned]. The Talmud (Kiddushin, 39b) informs us that there is absolutely no reward for the performance of Mitzvoth in this world. Yet adherence to Mitzvoth takes concentration and effort and often requires a great deal of self-sacrifice. In broad terms, in this World we give and God receives, whereas in the next World the roles are reversed; God gives and we receive.

It All Depends on the Way You Look at It

But this role reversal is more complex than it seems at first glance. Technically, as we receive no reward for the effort we invest in our Divine service in this world we all function as pure givers here, but emotionally and psychologically our acts of self-sacrifice in the performance of Mitzvoth can assume other aspects. We can relate to our acts of self-sacrifice as people relate to their investments; they may take some time to mature, but they will eventually provide enormous returns. The person who performs Mitzvoth with this attitude may be engaged in the activity of giving, but he actually gives nothing **away**. His primary focus remains on receiving, not giving.

On the other hand, we can regard the performance of Mitzvoth as an opportunity to do something astonishing that is almost beyond imagination. God is Omnipotent by definition. It is axiomatic that He needs nothing, and that no one can do anything for Him. Yet, in this physical world, we puny humans are in the incredible position of being able to offer God a service that He genuinely needs. Spiritually speaking, it is this wonderful aspect of our existence in this vale of tears that compensates for all the angst we suffer here.

God created the Universe with great ingenuity. He figured out a way to establish a created reality that requires the addition of our puny inputs to His own Omnipotence to function smoothly. The Torah teaches that the purpose of creation was to provide man with an opportunity to earn his reward in the World to Come by exercising his free will in this World. It is only our voluntary involvement in Divine service and our free will performance of Mitzvoth that enables God to shower us with the rewards of the World to Come. The Torah also teaches that it was solely for the sake of acquiring the opportunity of showering us with these rewards that God created the universe. It therefore turns out that God needs our help to succeed in His creation enterprise.

The Etrog Story

There is a well-known story concerning the Gaon of Vilna that brilliantly highlights this point. The Gaon was left without a suitable etrog one year on the eve of the Succoth holiday. The only etrog in the area was in the possession of a simple Jew who refused to sell it for money but was willing to give the etrog to the Gaon provided that it would be he who received the reward for the performance of the mitzvah in the World to Come.

The story goes that never did the Gaon take as much joy from performing the mitzvah of the waving of the four species as he did that year. He was in the position of offering God the opportunity to provide reward for the performance of a mitzvah without personally benefiting in any way. He was finally able to do a mitzvah totally for God without the possibility of any ulterior motive muddying the purity of his Divine Service.

How Can You Tell

How is it possible to distinguish between the person who serves God for the benefits he will obtain, and functions only as a receiver, and the person who acts out of a genuine desire to help God to succeed in His design for creation and is really a giver? This question opens an aperture through which we can obtain a glimpse of the idea behind the Binding of Isaac.

In what is possibly the best-known incident in the lives of the patriarchs, God decides to test Abraham, and tells him to sacrifice his son Isaac. As God obviously never intended to allow Abraham to go through with the actual sacrifice, and as God has no need of outer demonstrations of dedication in order to see into a person's heart, what was the point of the test?

In terms of the thesis we have been developing we can surmise that God wanted to demonstrate the purity and unselfishness underlying all of Abraham's acts of Divine service. For if Abraham were serving God out of self interest, in order to derive benefits for himself, he may in general have served God just as intensely and with the same degree of dedication in order to increase the size of his reward but he would never have carried out the command to sacrifice his son Isaac. It is quite obvious that Abraham would have cheerfully traded his share in the World to Come or any other conceivable benefit he was in line for to save Isaac's life.

Because Abraham's service to God was a gift he offered God with no strings attached ? when it was God's will to withdraw the son that God had sent - Abraham did not question it. Abraham was as ready to give His son to God as He was ready to give Him anything else. His focus was on giving himself to God not on receiving the benefits God had to offer **him**.

Hospitality Reconsidered

We are now ready to return to the question of how Abraham was supposed to figure out that "hospitality to strangers is greater than speaking with God." The key to the answer is in this idea of giving to God versus receiving from God. When I offer hospitality to the stranger, I am by definition giving to God, whereas when I enjoy a visit from God, I function as a pure receiver. Someone whose Divine Service is preformed out of the pure desire to give could not have any trouble reaching the right answer. God knew that Abraham was a pure giver and was therefore confident that he could figure it out.

The Maharal explains why this idea of giving to God is especially prominent in the Mitzvah of hospitality. Every stranger who needs hospitality is a human being who was created in God's image. When he is forced by circumstances to wander around neglected, without access to food or shelter, this state of affairs constitutes a desecration of the Divine image. It's as though God Himself had nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat.

Giving Versus Receiving

The wandering angels cared for by Abraham represent the quintessence of this idea. If human beings are cast in God's image, how much more so must His angels be considered a reflection of this image. The appearance of the angels was a presentation of God's image in a state of need. A finer opportunity to express the desire to give to God couldn't be imagined. Abraham's desire was to give to God, not to receive from God. So he told God to wait and ran off to take care of the guests.

Just as the three angels in human form sent by God were strangers in an unfriendly [to them] physical world, Abraham's children following the Exodus were strangers in the hostile environment of the desert. Putting human beings in the desert where the basic amenities of life are unavailable is the precise equivalent to placing angels in the physical world, where spiritual sustenance is absent. Both parties

were trapped in a hostile environment. In each case survival depended on hospitality.

As Abraham jumped to surrender his taste of the World to Come in order to provide hospitality to God's angels, prompted by his eagerness to give rather than receive, God could do no less than provide the same sort of hospitality when Abraham's children were thrust helpless into the desert.

Reciprocity Revisited

These images provide us the perfect window through which we can glimpse the spiritual connection between our own world and the World to Come. The common perception of the World to Come as a sort of magical resort in the sky to which you gain admittance in return for loyal service is erroneous. It is not a world in which rewards are distributed; it is a place constructed out of the energy that human beings gave **away** in the context of their Divine service. It isn't a place where you live in the receiving mode after all; it is a place where you live inside the world fashioned out of the energy of your own benevolence.

Whatever Abraham did for the angels personally, God was able to do personally for his children, but whatever he delegated, God was also forced to delegate. God only returns what we give Him, except that He returns it in Godly fashion. The servant of God provides God with the opportunity to translate his service to God into Divine coin, which can then be returned to him. He is a giver rather than a receiver, because he offers God the ability to give him in return, an ability whose exercise is God's greatest desire.

Our world pursues self-fulfillment, in the erroneous belief that nothing higher is available. Abraham was experiencing the ultimate in self-fulfillment - communion with God - and yet he voluntarily abandoned it. He was looking for a way not to fulfill himself, but the very opposite. He was looking for a way to give his very self to God. In the entire universe only human beings are capable of making the choice to give themselves away.

When man gives himself to God, God's response is to give Himself to man. The World to Come is the place where the two givers get together and celebrate the love they have developed by giving everything they had away to each other.



Father and Son

One of the most dramatic episodes in the entire Torah, and certainly in the Book of Genesis, is the *Akaida* -- the binding of Isaac. From the moment Abraham receives the directive from God, until the angel appears and frees him from his horrific mission, the tension is palpable.

The *Akaida* has enchanted and haunted generations of readers, Jewish and non-Jewish[1] alike. While the "story" certainly makes for a good read, we are aware that there are numerous levels on which we can read the text, multiple lessons to be extrapolated.

On a literary level and on a Midrashic level, the story stands by itself; no parallels are needed to explain or embellish the ideas contained within it. There is, however, a textual and Midrashic theme which links the *Akaida* with the revelation at Sinai, an idea which needs to be understood and explored.

The suggestion of such a relationship with the revelation should not surprise us, for the *Akaida* was itself a "revelation" of sorts.

For example, at Sinai, the people saw the sounds:

> *And all the people saw the thunder ... (Exodus 20:15)*

At the *Akaida* there was also an element of Abraham seeing that which was said:[2]

> *And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham." And he said, "Behold, here I am." And He 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 which I will tell you." (Genesis 22:1-2)*

God says that he will tell him the location of the execution; nevertheless, after three days, Abraham and Isaac see that which is said:

> *On the third day ... and saw the place afar off. What did he see? He saw a cloud enveloping the mountain, and said: "It appears that that is the place where the Holy One, blessed be He, told me to sacrifice my son." He [Abraham] then said to him [Isaac]: "Isaac, my son, do you see what I see?" "Yes," he replied. Said he to his two servants: "Do you see what I see?" "No," they answered. Since you do not see it, [he told them] "Abide here..." (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LVI:1,2)*

This cloud seen by Abraham and Isaac reminds us of the cloud which hovered over the mountain at Sinai:

> *And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud; so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. (Exodus 19:16)*

At Sinai, the people saw a cloud on the third day, the beginning of the revelation. But the connection is somewhat deeper than merely being revelatory.[3]

To Test and to Uplift

The text of the *Akaida* begins with a decree:

> *And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham ... (Genesis 22:1)*

Here we are told that God "tested" Abraham; the Hebrew word is *nisah.* This word also appears in the aftermath of the revelation. The people are afraid of the awesomeness of the experience, and recoil:

> *And all the people saw the thunder, and the lightning, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away. And they said to Moses, "Speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." And Moses said to the people, "Fear not; for God has come to test you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that you sin not." (Exodus 20:15-17)*

In both of these cases the Torah utilizes a double entendre. The word *nisah* can mean both to "test" and to "uplift." God desires to uplift Abraham and the Jewish people respectively by these "tests," each of which

are singular experiences in the lives of the forefathers and the nation.

Furthermore, the successful conclusion of the *Akaida* takes place when the angel declares that Abraham's "fear of God" has been established.

> *And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham"; and he said, "Here am I". And he said, "Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me. (Genesis 22:11-12)*

These word are echoed in the text cited above in the aftermath of the revelation:

> *...for God has come to test you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that you sin not. (Exodus 20:17)*

The Shofar

Based on these observations alone one can build the case for some type of relationship between these two sections. The backdrop of the revelation was the shofar:

> *And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud; so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the lower part of the mount. And Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount trembled greatly. And when the voice of the shofar sounded long, and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice. (Exodus 19:16-19)*

The source of the shofar is, of course, the *Akaida*. The ram which was ensnared in the bushes provided the Jewish people with the shofar:

> *Rabbi Abbahu said: "Why do we blow on a ram's horn? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Sound before Me a ram's horn so that I may remember on your behalf the binding of Isaac the son of Abraham, and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.'" (Rosh Hashana 16a)*[4]

Rashi explains that the sound of the shofar heard at Sinai comes from the shofar of the ram of Isaac.[5] The Ramban refers to a mystical secret: The sound which was heard at Sinai was actually "the awe of Isaac."[6]

If the shofar of Isaac, or the awe of Isaac, is such an integral part of the revelation, we understand why the *Akaida* must be seen as some type of precursor to the events at Sinai.[7] In fact, some sources see these events so closely related that they place the *Akaida* at Sinai!

> *Another exposition of the text: And the lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. This wilderness (Sinai) was called by six names: Mount of God, Mount Bashan, Mount Gavnunim, Mount Moriah, Mount Horev, Mount Sinai. (Midrash Rabbah - Bamidbar I:8)*[8]

The area which we generally call Sinai is here called Moriah; the place God sent Abraham, which is usually identified with Jerusalem, is

called in the Torah "Moriah."

The Talmud discusses the meaning of the word Moriah:

> *What is [the meaning of] "Mount Moriah"? With regard to this there is a difference of opinion between Rabbi Levi ben Hama and Rabbi Hanina. [One says]: "Because from this mountain instruction went forth unto Israel." And the other says: "Because it is the mountain whence fear came upon the heathen." (Talmud - Ta'anith 16a[9])*

In the comments of Tosafot,[10] the idea of instruction coming forth presents two possible understandings:

1. Jerusalem, the place from which the law was taught, as the Prophet said, "From Zion shall Torah spring forth" (Yeshayahu Chapter 2).
2. The original source of instruction: Sinai.[11] There is a Midrash that makes an even more radical suggestion: Sinai was once part of Moriah (in Jerusalem):

And where did Sinai come from? Rav Yossi said, "From Mount Moriah it was separated (ripped?) like challah, which was separated from the dough. From the place where Isaac our Forefather was bound. God said, since Isaac their Forefather was bound there, it is an appropriate place for his children to receive the Torah." (Midrash Tehilim 68:9 Buber edition)[12]

Here we see, in the clearest possible terms, the link between the *Akaida* and revelation. The locale of the two is inexorably linked. The *Akaida* provided the conceptual prototype for the revelation. Understanding the *Akaida* can shed light on the revelation and understanding the revelation can shed light on the *Akaida*.

The Link to Eden

The Ramchal[13] teaches that the major aspect of the revelation, receiving the Torah, was the distilling of good from the compound of good and evil which resulted from eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The fall of man at the very dawn of history was caused by the combination of forces, which are good and evil. Standing at Sinai, hearing, seeing the word of God, broke that spell. The clarity with which the people saw the words left them without doubts concerning their collective and individual agenda.

The idea of the *Akaida* is of a person or persons so dedicated to God that personal considerations are not factored into decisions. For that individual, God is not the most important thing in life, God is the only thing in life. God is life. That person is no longer controlled by good and evil; good has been extricated from the insidious mixture.[14]

> *And God sat and saw the father binding with all his heart, and the son being bound with all his heart, and the angels were screaming and crying. (Pirkei D'Rebi Eliezer chapter 30/31)*

If we extend the idea, we will recall that eating from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil brought death into the world. The Gemara teaches that when the Jews stood at Mount Sinai they were "cured" of the metaphysical venom with which the serpent of old had infected them.[15]

Our Sages teach us that at Sinai the entire nation perished. The awe was apparently too great and the people could not sustain such a level of spirituality. Afterward God sprinkled dew upon them and the entire nation was resurrected.

> *Rabbi Joshua ben Levi also said: "At every word which went forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, the souls of Israel departed, for it is said, My soul went forth when he spoke. But since their souls departed at the first word, how could they receive the second word? He brought down the dew with which He will resurrect the dead and revived them." (Shabbat 88b)*

This return to life is a symbol of a spiritual rebirth: The purity lost in Eden is regained. The nation is now cleansed from all evil, radiant and virginal.

The theme of resurrection is also present at the *Akaida*, in a general sense. Isaac, bound to the altar, with the blade quickly making its way to his jugular, is saved from the brink of death at the last second. Isaac has "one foot in the grave," a knife at his throat. He is all but dead when the epiphany brings the message that Isaac may live.

The Midrash goes even further, opining that Isaac did, in fact, die on the altar!

> *Rav Yehuda said, "When the sword got to his neck Isaac's soul departed. When he heard the sound from between the cherubs, saying 'Do not lift your hand...,' his soul returned. He stood on his feet and ... said 'Blessed be thou God who revives the dead.'"(Pirkei D'Rrebi Eliezer chapter 30/31)*

Just as the nation perished at Sinai and are brought back to life, so does Isaac die, and return to life.

The Haftorah

This theme of resurrection is also the major theme of the Haftorah:

> *And when Elisha came into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed. He went in therefore, and closed the door upon the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child became warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. (2 Kings 4:32-35)*

The opportunity lost at the dawn of history is "fixed" at the revelation. The *Akaida* serves as the conduit of this divine benevolence, introducing the human ability to change one's fate, to worship God completely and wholeheartedly.

Inter-Generational Bond

Why is the *Akaida* such a watershed? Why does this event stand out from all the deeds of the partriachs?

The Torah has no trace of communication between Adam and his descendants. Whatever he saw or experienced in that celestial garden remains a mystery. Neither does Noah engage in dialogue with his children. The only time we see him speaking to them is when he curses his son. In contradistinction, Abraham takes Isaac into his world. The Torah stresses that the two "walk together".

> *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife. And both of them walked together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, "My father;" and he said, "Here am I, my*

> *son." And he said, "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." And both of them walked together. (Genesis 22:6-8)*

They were on the same path, the same "wavelength", possessing a common destiny.

Perhaps this is the lesson of the *Akaida*: There was no generation gap between the two. They shared a common goal and path. In the words of the Midrash:

> *'And both of them walked together:' one to bind and the other to be bound, one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered. (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis LVI:3) At all events, "God will provide himself the lamb, son; and if not, thou art for a burnt-offering, my son." And both of them walked together: one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered. (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 54:4)*

Abraham and Isaac formed the first inter-generational bond, a living lesson in continuity. Sinai, too, is a place that binds all generations of the Jewish People together. All souls stood at Sinai and took part in the theophony. The root of the Sinai experience was at the *Akaida*, where the first two generations of our people, Abraham and Isaac, become bound together in their love of God.

The Ariz"al teaches (Sefer Halikuttim page 63) that the response to Isaac's query regarding the object which would be slaughtered is instructive: *God will provide himself the lamb for the offering, my son.* In Hebrew, the first letter of each word spells *Hevel*, i.e. Abel, drawing a clear line between Adam's failure to engage the next generation in dialogue and Abraham's succeess. This sets the stage for Sinai, where all Jewish people are linked for eternity by a common mission, a common destiny.

> *And both of them walked together.*

---

1. Kierkagaard's "Fear and Trembling" has become a classic in general philosophy, and his term "Leap of the faith" has entered the lexicon of religious and non -religious alike.
2. The Racanati obliquely makes this reference in his comments on Parshat Yitro.
3. The "third day" is noted in the Midrash as one of the parallels between the episodes. See Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 56:1
4. See the comments in the Midrash where this idea is both redemptive and eschatological: Midrash Rabbah - Bereishit 56:9
   "And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him (*ahar*) a ram. What does *ahar* mean? Said Rabbi Judan: 'After all that happened, Israel still fall into the clutches of sin and [in consequence] become the victims of persecution; yet they will be ultimately redeemed by the ram's horn, as it says, And the Lord God will blow the horn.(Zecharia 9:14)." Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon interpreted: 'At the end of [after] all generations Israel will fall into the clutches of sin and be the victims of persecution; yet eventually they will be redeemed by the ram's horn, as it says, And the Lord God will blow the horn.' Rabbi Hanina ben Rabbi Isaac said: 'Throughout the year Israel are in sin's clutches and led astray by their troubles, but on Rosh HaShana they take the shofar and blow on it, and eventually they will be redeemed by the ram's horn, as it says, And the Lord God will blow the horn.' Rabbi Abba ben Rabbi Pappi and Rabbi Joshua of Siknin in Rabbi Levi's name said: 'Because the Patriarch Abraham saw the ram extricate himself from one thicket and go and become entangled in another, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Thus will your children be entangled in countries, changing from Babylon to Mede, from Mede to Greece, and from Greece to Edom; yet they will eventually be redeemed by the ram's horn, as it is written, And the Lord God will blow the horn ... the Lord of hosts will defend them. (Zecharia 9:14 f.)."
5. This idea is based on the Midrash in Perki D'Rebi Eliezer chapter 30 or 31 depending on the edition.
6. The term used for revelation is often "Mipi Hag'vura, which is the mystical appellation of Isaac. The fear which the people experienced at Sinai is connected to the fear which Isaac experienced when he found that he had unknowingly given the blessing to Jacob. See Ramban Sh'mot 19:13, and notes by Chavel.

7. There are many other connections, between Sinai and the Akaida, space does not permit a listing of all of them. Though I will mention one more, the servants of Abraham remain at the foot of the mountain, reminiscent of the hierarchy at Sinai.
8. See also Otzar Midrashim by Eisenstien page 162.
9. The Midrash echoes this idea. See Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 55:7
10. Tosafot s.v. "Har"
11. See the explanation of the Chatam Sofer, in Responsa Chatam Sofer Yoreh Dayeh section 235. Also see the explanation of the Chatam Sofer in the name of his revered teacher Rav Natan Adler in section 233, that when Abraham sets out on his journey it says the land of Moriah, not the Mount Moriah, because the mountain did not exist yet. Abraham Korman in Haavot Vihashvatim develops an entire thesis based on this idea, that volcanic activity formed the mountain during the three days of Abraham's sojourn.
12. The Midrash continues to state that in the future Sinai will return to Moriah in Jerusalem.
13. See Maamar Hachochma, and see Siftie Chaim volume 3 page 57.
14. Abraham achieves this level when he is prepared to sacrifice his beloved son. Isaac strives for this level when he asks his father to tie him down, explaining that "the soul is strong but the body is weak".(Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 56:8)
Another comment: Rabbi Isaac said, "When Abraham wished to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said to him: 'Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve thee, whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice; therefore bind me very firmly. Forthwith, he bound Isaac. Can one bind a(n unwilling) thirty-seven years old man?"
15. Shabbat 146a