October 30-31, 2026 כ׳ חשון תשפ״ז

Candlelighting: 5:45 PM

Parashat Vayera וירא – Genesis 18:1-22:24
Stone – p 78 Hertz – p 63 Etz Hayim – p 99

Haftarah – Second Kings 4:1-37 מלכים ב
Stone – p 1134 Hertz – p 76 Etz Hayim – p 123

Kiddush is sponsored by the congregation

Shabbat ends: 6:44

TRADITIONAL CONGREGATION

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WEEKDAY AND *SHABBAT* SERVICES

Tuesday - 6:00 PM
Shabbat - 9:30 AM

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We welcome new members!
If you or someone you know would like to receive membership information,
please contact our office at 314-576-5230
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On This Week's Torah Portion - Vayera

It is the hardest passage of all, one that seems to defy understanding. Abraham and Sarah have waited years for a child. God has promised them repeatedly that they would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the seashore. They wait. No child comes.

Sarah, in deep despair, suggests that Abraham should have a child by her handmaid Hagar. He does. Ishmael is born. Yet God tells Abraham: This is not the one. By now Sarah is old, post-menopausal, unable by natural means to have a child.

Angels come and again promise a child. Sarah laughs. But a year later Isaac is born. Sarah's joy is almost heart-breaking: Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; all those who hear will laugh with me." Then she said, "Who would have told Abraham, 'Sarah will nurse children'? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." Gen. 21:6-7

Then come the fateful words: "Take your son, your only one, the one whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah. There, offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you." Gen. 22:2

The rest of the story is familiar. Abraham takes Isaac. Together they journey for three days to the mountain. Abraham builds an altar, gathers wood, binds his son and lifts the knife. At that momentThe angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens, "Abraham! Abraham!" He said, "Here I am." "Do not lift your hand against the boy; do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God: for you have not withheld from Me your son, your only one." Gen. 22:11-12

The trial is over. It is the climax of Abraham's life, the supreme test of faith, a key moment in Jewish memory and self-definition. But it is deeply troubling. Why did God so nearly take away what He had given? Why did He put these two aged parents – Abraham and Sarah – through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged God on the fate of Sodom, saying, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" not protest this cruel act against an innocent child?

The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators - classical and modern - is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of God by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

The Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a powerful book about it, Fear and Trembling, in which he coined such ideas as the "teleological suspension of the ethical" – the love of God that may lead us to do things that would otherwise be considered morally wrong – and "faith in the absurd" – Abraham trusted God to make the impossible possible. He believed he would lose Isaac but still keep him. For Kierkegaard, faith transcends reason.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw the Binding as demonstrating that we must not expect always to be victorious. Sometimes we must experience defeat. "God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most."

All these interpretations are surely correct. They are part of our tradition. I want, however, to offer a quite different reading, for one reason. Throughout Tanach, the gravest sin is child sacrifice. The Torah and the prophets consistently regard it with horror. It is what pagans do. This is Jeremiah on the subject: "They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal - something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind." Jer. 19:5

And this is Micah: "Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Micah 6:7

It is what Mesha, King of Moab, does to get the gods to grant him victory over the Israelites: When the King of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the King of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land." 2 Kings 3:26-27

How can the Torah regard as Abraham's supreme achievement that he was willing to do what the worst of idolaters do? The fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son would seem to make him – in terms of Tanach considered as a whole – no better than Baal or Molech worshippers or the pagan king of Moab. This cannot be the only possible interpretation.

There is an alternative way of looking at the trial. To do so we must consider an overriding theme of the Torah as a whole. Let us assemble the evidence.

First principle: God owns the land of Israel. That is why He can command the return of property to its original owners in the Jubilee year: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine. You are merely migrants and tenants to Me." Lev. 25:23

Second principle: God owns the Children of Israel, since He redeemed them from slavery. That is what the Israelites mean when they sang, at the Red Sea: "Until Your people crossed, Lord, until the people You acquired [am zu kanita] crossed over." Ex. 15:16

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Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves: "For the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out from Egypt: they cannot be sold as slaves." Lev. 25:42

Third principle: God is the ultimate owner of all that exists. That is why we must make a blessing over anything we enjoy: Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without first reciting a blessing is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and it is also written, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!" There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other, after a blessing has been said. Brachot 35a

All things belong to God, and we must acknowledge this before we make use of anything. That is what a blessing is: acknowledging that all we enjoy is from God.

This is the jurisprudential basis of the whole of Jewish law. God rules by right, not by might. God created the universe; therefore God is the ultimate owner of the universe. The legal term for this is "eminent domain." Therefore, God has the right to prescribe the conditions under which we may benefit from the universe. It is to establish this legal fact – not to tell us about the physics and cosmology of the Big Bang – that the Torah begins with the story of Creation.

This carries a special depth and resonance for the Jewish people since in their case God is not just – as He is for all humankind – Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is also, for Jews, the God of history, who redeemed them from slavery and gave them a land that originally belonged to someone else, the "seven nations." God is Sovereign of the universe, but in a special sense He is Israel's only ultimate King, and the sole source of their laws. That is the significance of the book of Exodus. The key narratives of the Torah are there to teach us that God is the ultimate Owner of all.

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman Empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. They were not legal personalities in themselves. Under the Roman principle of patria potestas a father could do whatever he wished with his child, including putting him to death. Infanticide was well known in antiquity (and in fact it has even been defended in our time by the Harvard philosopher Peter Singer, in the case of severely handicapped children). That, for example is how the story of Oedipus begins, with his father Laius leaving him to die.

It is this principle that underlies the entire practice of child sacrifice, which was widespread throughout the pagan world. The Torah is horrified by child sacrifice, which it sees as the worst of all sins. It therefore seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. God does. We are merely their guardians on God's behalf.

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented – even unintelligible – in the ancient world. That is what the story of the Binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to God. All children belong to God. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, "You have not withheld from Me your son, your only one."

The Binding of Isaac is a polemic against, and a rejection of, the principle of patria potestas, the idea universal to all pagan cultures that children are the property of their parents.

Seen in this light, the Binding of Isaac is now consistent with the other foundational narratives of the Torah, namely the creation of the universe and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rest of the narrative also makes sense. God had to show Abraham and Sarah that their child was not naturally theirs, because his birth was not natural at all. It took place after Sarah could no longer conceive.

The story of the first Jewish child establishes a principle that applies to all Jewish children. God creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals.

The Torah ultimately seeks to abolish all relationships of dominance and submission. That is why it dislikes slavery and makes it, within Israel, a temporary condition rather than a permanent fate. That is why it seeks to protect children from parents who are overbearing or worse.

Abraham, we argued in last week's study, was chosen to be the role model - for all time - of what it is to be a parent. We now see that the Binding of Isaac is the consummation of that story. A parent is one who knows that they do not own their child.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs zt"l

on the 6th anniversary of his passing

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Berger Memorial Chapel

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PRAYER

Be wise not only in words, but in deeds;
mere knowledge is not the goal, action is.

Know the God of your ancestors, and serve Him by your deeds.

Let not your wisdom exceed your deeds,
lest you be like a tree with many branches but few roots.

If the thoughts of your heart be pure,
it is likely that the works of your hand will be also.

Accustom yourself to do good;
before long it will become your greatest pleasure.

Though it is not incumbent upon you to complete the work,
you are also not free to desist from doing all you can.

Judge people by their deeds, and you will not be led to false judgment.
Say little and do much, for you are judged by your deeds.

If you are wise and rich,
let your good deeds reveal your wisdom and your wealth.

Honor people for what they are;
but honor them more for what they do.

Honor people not for their possessions,
but honor them for what use they make of them.

Happy are they who are rich in good deeds,
for they shall be honored in life
and be remembered long afterwards for their goodness.
(Selected From The Talmud)

THOUGHT FOR THE MOMENT OF SILENCE

Some people miss the message because they are too busy checking the spelling.
Maynard C. Carney