

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

You Want Me to Take My Son and Do WHAT?!

2025 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Chessed – Kindness. It's what Abraham was all about.

Our Sages tell us that Abraham's tent was open on all sides so he could see potential guests coming from any direction.

This week's Torah Portion opens with an elderly, infirm (recovering from his Bris) Abraham running to complete strangers, waiting on them hand and foot. (See "Not now G-d, I'm Busy...I'll Talk to You Later") He felt it was always important to perform acts of kindness for all of G-d's children, even if they are, as they appeared to be, idol worshippers.

Chessed, kindness, was Abraham's hallmark. That's one of the things he was well-known for.

And that's what makes the following Commandment so shocking:

And it happened after these words that G-d tested Abraham... "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love – Isaac – and ... bring him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains..." (Genesis, 22:1-2)

So Abraham, perhaps one of the kindest men on G-d's earth, has now been instructed to take his beloved son, the heir for whom he prayed for so many years, whom G-d had promised him that he would transmit Abraham's teachings to the next generation, and tie this young man on an altar and bring him as a human sacrifice????!!

What kind of a commandment is this? How could G-d make such a request? It undermines everything Abraham stands for!! It undermines everything that we are told that G-d expects of us!!

So what is going on?

Yes, Abraham was a kind man. That was exactly the point!

Let's look again at how the Torah introduces this event:

And it happened after these words that G-d tested Abraham...

These words... WHAT words?

Rashi tells us in his commentary about two discussions: one between G-d and the Accusing Angel, and one between Isaac and his older brother Ishmael.

The Accusing Angel maintained that Abraham was an ingrate; he had never brought a sacrifice to thank G-d for His kindness. G-d responded that Abraham did everything for his beloved son, but if G-d would ask him to sacrifice that beloved son he would willingly do so.

Ishmael bragged to his younger brother that he, Ishmael, was more dedicated to G-d than Isaac was. After all, he had willingly submitted to circumcision when he was 13 years old when the Mitzvah was first given. Isaac, on the other hand, who was born later, had his Bris on the eighth day of his life, when he had no say in the matter.

Issac responded that if G-d would ask him to sacrifice himself, he would do so.

So now G-d was administering this “test.” (It is strange that G-d sees a need for a test. Doesn’t He know that Abraham and Isaac will pass the test? When You are G-d, aren’t You supposed to know these things???? More about this later.)

Why would G-d ask them to do something that flies in the face of everything we stand for?

I think that is exactly the point.

There are 613 Commandments in the Torah. Some we understand; some we don’t. Some we enjoy; some we don’t.

There are plenty of people who will attend some semblance of a Passover Seder because it is enjoyable and culturally significant. But getting down to the nitty-gritty of cleaning and Koshering their homes for Passover is something which is not significant to them.

Some people love to pray, but can’t wrap their minds around Sabbath observance. Some people love the intellectual stimulation of studying Torah, but aren’t particularly into OBSERVING the Torah’s rules. EVERYBODY loves chicken soup with Matzah balls and gefilte fish and challah ... but some love them even if they are made with non-Kosher ingredients, served in a KOSHER **STYLE** restaurant. (I remember a Bris I did many years ago during Passover. The family wouldn’t serve bread, but they did serve non-Kosher salami and cheese. “It doesn’t have to be strictly Kosher; we just don’t want to do anything that’s not traditional.”)

All of this begs the following question: WHOM are you doing this for? Are you doing it because you enjoy it? Or are you doing it because that is what your Creator expects of you?

THIS was the test of Abraham. Sure, he epitomized kindness. A 100-year-old man recovering from urological surgery (i.e., his Bris) is running around, performing acts of hospitality for three strangers who just “happened” to walk by. He treated them with kindness and respect. But did he do it for G-d? Maybe he was just, by nature, a kind person... Atheists can be nice too!

Maybe Abraham was such a kind person because these Mitzvahs come easily to him. But what would he do if G-d gave him a command that went against his nature?

The ultimate test of this kind man would be to challenge him to do something cruel! Tell him to do something that contradicts everything G-d ever told him.

G-d had told him that his offspring who would someday teach Torah to the world would be the children of Isaac. Now He is telling him to kill Isaac! KILL Isaac??!! Abraham knew that one of the Seven Commandments given to the entire human race (See “How to be an Orthodox Jewish Gentile”) is the prohibition against murder!

Would he do it?

Isaac spoke to Abraham his father...and he said, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?” And Abraham said, “G-d will see the lamb for Himself, my son.” And the two of them went together. (Verses 7 and 8)

“... the lamb for Himself, my son.” The lamb = my son. Isaac understood. “And the two of them went together. They both walked TOGETHER, in unity of purpose, to fulfil the Word of G-d. Isaac even asked his father to tie his legs, so he wouldn’t involuntarily kick.

They didn’t fully understand it, but they knew that this was what G-d wanted. So they went to do what G-d wanted.

In the end G-d showed what He REALLY wanted.

“Abraham! Abraham! ... Don’t do anything to him, for now I know that you are G-d-fearing, and you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (verses 11 and 12)

“...now I know that you are G-d-fearing...”

NOW You know? You didn’t know before? Aren’t you G-d?? Don’t You know these things??

Of course G-d knew. But others didn’t necessarily know. Maybe even Abraham didn’t know! Without this test, maybe you and I wouldn’t know!

Every year on Rosh Hashanah we remind G-d and ourselves what Abraham was willing to do for G-d, and of G-d’s promise to reward Abraham’s children for his and their dedication.

This act of sacrifice by our ancestors shows us what we have in our spiritual DNA. Throughout our history our people have been willing to make great sacrifices in order to serve G-d.

Sometimes we were called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. Sometimes, such as during the Spanish Inquisition, Jews have been offered a pleasant life if only they would simply give up their religion and embrace another. They chose the alternative.

One of the recently-released hostages told how his captors in Gaza pressured him to convert to Islam. He refused. Another was told to set off an explosive as Israeli soldiers would come in to save him. He refused. They told him that if he refused, they would kill him. His response: “So kill me!”

We pray to G-d to save us from having to make such gut-wrenching decisions. Not all decisions call for great sacrifice. But we still have decisions, and occasional sacrifices, to make.

Our Sages tell us that the more difficult it is to do a particular Mitzvah, the greater the reward.

There are 613 Mitzvahs. We are required to do all of them that apply to us. Some are harder than others.

A woman once asked me for advice on the challenges of fulfilling a particular Mitzvah under difficult circumstances. After I advised her, she said, “You know, I do this Mitzvah because I’m supposed to, but it’s a real pain in the [Expletive Deleted]!”

On the one hand, I was dismayed that she didn’t appreciate the beauty that this special Mitzvah brings to her and her family. On the other hand, I was impressed that despite the difficulties, despite the frustrations, she was willing to do that which G-d required of her. I have no doubt that she will be blessed for her efforts.

What Mitzvahs should we be working on?

I learned an important lesson when I was having rehab after surgery. Some of the rehab exercises were easier than others. It became clear that the ones that were the most important to emphasize were the ones that were hardest to do!

Is there a Mitzvah that you enjoy? Great! Keep doing it. Is there a Mitzvah that you don’t enjoy? Great! Do it anyway!

Abraham and Isaac teach us the importance of stepping out of our comfort zone and doing what we’d rather avoid. The reward for that difficult decision is something that we – their children – continue to receive today.

Is it hard? Yes. But who knows what great rewards our children and future descendants will receive when we work hard at serving G-d, even when it’s difficult?

Ya gotta fake it till ya make it!

Have a great Shabbos.

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