

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

GENESIS 22-23

CHAPTER 22 - The Offering of Isaac

We now come to the final test – the mountaintop of Abraham’s transformational journey:

And it happened after these things, God put Abraham to the test and said to him: Abraham! “Here I am!” he replied. Then God said: Take your son Isaac, your only one¹, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.

Isaac’s uniqueness was ratified by God when he identified Isaac as Abraham’s only (unique) son. According to the accepted chronology, Isaac was thirty-seven.²

In this Torah reading, one word stands out. We encounter it here; we encounter it again when Isaac turns to his father and asks him where the sacrificial offering is; and we encounter it at the top of the mountain, when the angel of God stops Abraham and tells him not to strike his son. The word is *Hineni*. ...‘Here I Am’

The word, “*hineni*,” reflects a total readiness to do God’s bidding. In each usage the word implies more than mere physical presence. It means that: ‘I am here with all of my being – physically, mentally and spiritually, ready to do whatever my God calls me to do.’

We are looking at Abraham’s development in faith. Isaac was the fulfilment of God’s promise, now he is being asked to lay him on the altar of sacrifice. Through his repeated testing and God’s constant faithfulness, he was ready to step out into the most difficult challenge of his life.

In contrast to the deep grief Abraham felt at the expulsion of his son Ishmael, here, no mention is made of any emotional anguish – no question as to why or how the LORD could make such a request? Nor, as we know from NT scripture, did he have any doubt that God would fulfil his promise of a multitude of descendants through his son, Isaac. Abraham’s subsequent actions are spelled out in seven steps in verse 3: 1) Abraham rose early next morning; 2) He saddled his donkey; 3) He took two of his young men; 4) He took Isaac, his son; 5) He split the wood for the burnt offering; 6) He arose; 7) He set out for the place of which God had told him.

After such explicit preparation the text falls silent, recording nothing about the three day journey, and then: *On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.*

On the third day – We saw the significance of the number three in the last study. This invariably points us to divine completion, ‘life’, and the Messiah to come.

(He) lifted up his eyes and saw – when we see this phrase, it indicates that the man is perceiving something beyond what the natural eyes can see. The Hebrew verbs translated “lifted”, and “saw” can both have literal or figurative applications.

¹ From the viewpoint of uniqueness, Isaac was his only son.

² Sarah was 90 at his birth, and 127 when she died,

The place – This “place” is none other than what will become the Temple Mount.³ We will encounter this *place* again when Jacob stops for the night and has a dream.

afar off – remote, far, distant, literally or figuratively, in space or time

Indeed, as soon as Abraham ‘lifted his eyes and saw’, he said to his young men: *“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”*

Q. What do you think Abraham ‘saw’, and why did it trigger his separation from the ‘young men’?

So Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two walked on together⁴. Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. “Father!” he said. “Here I am,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

Pause here and discuss the many significant details in these verses.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he bound his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered. “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the angel. “Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold from me your son, your only one.”

The doubling of Abraham’s name makes the call emphatic – again “Here I am!”

DISCUSS the contrast between the “Here I am” in verse 1 and it’s usage here.

Abraham looked up and behold, behind him a single ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen. (Yahweh-yireh – yireh means to see, behold, have vision)

Neither Abraham nor we the readers could see how and when the ram got there; he simply was there, and had been from the very beginning. In Jewish sources, this ram is considered a creature of great importance and is included in the list of the things created at twilight at the end of the 6th day of Creation – the Lamb, who from the creation of the world, was destined for sacrifice. “I heard from behind the Heavenly Veil these words: ‘Not Isaac, but the ram predestined for the burnt offering.’” The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world replaces, on the altar, the one whom Father Himself has called His son and firstborn.⁵

Without a single complaint Isaac walked together with his father in perfect obedience and trust. “He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and ... he opened not his mouth.”⁶ This is known in Jewish parlance as the *Akeidah*, meaning “binding”, and is considered the supreme example of self-sacrifice in obedience to God’s will.

³ 2 Chr 3:1 “Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, . . .”

⁴ ‘Together’ – Heb. word *echad* meaning “one”. They walked as one.

⁵ Julia Blum, <http://jewishstudies.eteacherbiblical.com/feast-of-trumpets/>

⁶ Is. 53:7

Interestingly, Jewish Midrash states: This not only called for faith from Abraham, but also from Isaac. It is believed that Isaac's soul left him and subsequently returned. Not only do we see here a foreshadowing of the death of the Messiah as a holocaust offering on a wooden cross, but also a foreshadowing of his resurrection.

The Akedah became, in Jewish thought, the supreme example of self-sacrifice in obedience to God's will and the symbol of Jewish martyrdom throughout the ages. Moreover, this story was assigned to be read at every Rosh HaShanah. (Traditional congregations read the story of Abraham's expulsion of Hagar on the first day and this one on the second.)

Returning to our Genesis passage - read and discuss Genesis 22:15-19 – The Abrahamic Covenant. Abraham has received such blessings before, but never before has God said: *"your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies"*, or *"because you have obeyed my voice"*. (DISCUSS)

Abraham and his 'young men' return to Beersheva and live there, but there is no mention of Isaac returning with them.

Abraham in the New Testament

John 8:56 - *Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."*

Hebrews 11:17-19 - *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, In Isaac your descendants shall be called. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

James 2:20-24 ... *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

Chapter 22 finishes with a return to Abraham's family lineage where we are introduced to Rebekah, who will become the bride of Isaac. "The Torah records the birth of Rebecca before the death of Sarah in line with the tradition that a righteous person is not taken from the world until his or her successor has been born."⁷ As for Isaac, according to scripture, he never sees his mother again.

CHAPTER 23 "The Life of Sarah"

After the final test of Abraham, the Torah now turns its focus to Sarah, albeit, her death. In the Jewish Chumash this Torah portion is titled: *Chayei Sarah*, "The Life of Sarah". The rabbis taught that "the righteous are called living even after death, while the wicked are called dead even in life." (John 11:25 comes to mind) And so "Sarah, meaning "princess", the righteous mother of Israel, still lives because her example continues to inspire acts of goodness among her descendants."

The second lesson that the rabbis took from verse one can only be perceived in the original Hebrew. The English translation tells us that Sarah lived to the age of 127, but the Hebrew informs us that "the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years." Why this strange choice of language? Each one of these ages -- 100, 20, 7 -- has something unique about it. The 7-year-old has innocence; the 20-year-old has strength and beauty; the 100-year-old has wisdom. The secret of the greatness of Sarah was that throughout her entire life she was 100 and 20 and 7. She

⁷ *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition, f/n p.106

was always as innocent as a 7-year-old, with the strength, determination and idealism of a 20-year-old, and always possessed the wisdom of a 100-year-old. 'Part of Sarah's greatness was that, despite her breathtaking beauty as an adult, all who saw her recognized her purity and innocence.'⁸

Abraham represents 'faith', and Sarah 'grace'. It is impossible to separate them. Faith that does not rest on God's grace is valueless: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* (Eph. 2:8-9)

There is another interesting nuance in the text of verse 2: The Hebrew word translated 'bewailed' or 'mourned' is written with a diminished (smaller) central letter, suggesting that the extent of Abraham's grief was infinite, the full measure of his pain concealed in his heart.

READ verses 3-19 –Abraham begins by saying '*I am a stranger and a sojourner with you...*' He was a nomad living in the Land which was promised to him. Compare with Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17:16: "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

The Hittites acknowledge his position among them, saying, '*You are a prince of God among us*' and offer the choice of their own sepulchres in which to bury Sarah – but Abraham knows he must own the land where she is buried. He had encamped at various times at the "trees of Mamre", just east of Hebron⁹ and he knew that this was the land he must purchase to bury Sarah – the "princess of all mankind".

Thus begins a negotiated settlement to purchase the cave of Machpelah within the field. The negotiations follow a typical Middle East procedure, where they negotiate slowly with all the right moves. '*Abraham rose up and bowed himself to the people of the land*'. They offer to give it to him, (not really expecting him to take it for nothing); Abraham says: '*hear me, I will give you what is worth*'; The owner, Ephron, comes up with a deliberately high price¹⁰, no doubt expecting Abraham to haggle, as is the Middle East custom, but Abraham weighs out 400 shekels of silver in the presence of the audience of witnesses. And so Abraham comes into possession of the cave, the field and *all the trees that were in the field*. Sarah's grave site— where Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah will also be buried—represents the chosen people's first permanent legal foothold in the land of Canaan.

Q. Why was Abraham willing to pay virtually any price for this field and cave?

So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within all the surrounding borders, were deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of the sons of Heth.¹¹

We should recall here, Genesis 13:18: *After Abraham parted from Lot and the LORD told him to raise his eyes and look north south east & west – all the land you see I will give you ... Abram moved his tent and came and dwelled in the plains of Mamre in Hebron and there he built an altar to the LORD.* So we see that the significance of Hebron begins very early. Legend has it that Adam and Eve are also buried there!

The treasure of Abraham, the Patriarch of Israel, representing *grace*, was buried in a field in Hebron – a field for which the Father of our faith was prepared to pay any price. Meditate on this as you read Matthew 13:44, 52.

⁸ Ibid, p.107

⁹ Hebron becomes a very significant Biblical city. It is the southern gateway to Jerusalem

¹⁰ About ten times what it was actually worth.

¹¹ Heth means "trembling", or to be broken, shattered, terrified.