

Mountains Beyond Mountains

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A timeless story is told of a boy in a small Jewish school. The class is about to read the story of the Binding of Yitzchak. The children are gathered around the teacher, eager to hear each word. As the teacher begins to tell the story, Moishe protests. He cries out: “But Avraham is going to kill him!” The teacher says softly: “But Moishe, you know the story. In the end, the angel comes and stops Avraham and saves Yitzchak’s life.” Moishe hesitates for a second and then says: “But what if, this time, the angel doesn’t come?”

What if, this time, the angel doesn’t come? The fear, we feel, is warranted. Every time we read the story we are confronted with our own fear. More than thirty centuries have passed and the Binding of Yitzchak (*Akedat Yitzchak*) still dumbfounds us. How could God command such a thing? How could Avraham go along with it? Even knowing how the story ends doesn’t make the telling any less charged, any less compelling or any less disturbing. Its succinctness, its lapidary power still has the ability to shock us to this day.

The knockout force of the story is in large part achieved through what is not expressed. Erich Auerbach, in his classic essay, *Mimesis* (1952), puts the matter starkly:

The Binding of Yitzchak is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath. The overwhelming suspense is present. There is an externalisation of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasised, what lies beneath is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by silence and the fragmentary speeches; the story remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'.

The Akedah is indeed ‘fraught with background’. We imagine the roiling thoughts Avraham must have had on his journey to the Land of Moriah. We imagine the scenery. Was it sunny that day? Was it warm? Did the birds sing on the way to Moriah? We imagine their conversation. What did Yitzchak say? What went through his head and heart as he ascended the mountain, teeth clenched, carrying the wood for his own burnt offering? How did Avraham respond? Did he attempt to present a reasoned defence? We imagine their glances, their familiarity with each other’s moods, the suppressed emotions, their growing sense of a shared fate. The Talmud states that Yitzchak was 37 years old at the time. Others, like the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37 – 100 CE), calculate his age to 22 years. Old enough and strong enough to stop his father had he wanted to, one assumes. This, and so many other aspects of the story, is not related in the text.

One way that our tradition has devised to make sense of what the text doesn’t say is through the medium of *midrash*. The midrash (from the Hebrew, *to seek out*) expresses the silences and fills in the background. An important function of midrash is captured eloquently by critic George Steiner, in his essay *Our Homeland, the Text* (1985):

The Torah is the pivot of the weave and cross-weave of reference, elucidation, hermeneutic debate which organise, which inform organically, the daily and the historical life of the community. The community can be defined as a concentric tradition of reading. By virtue of metaphoric, allegoric, esoteric explication and challenge, these secondary texts rescue the canon from the ebbing motion of past tense, from that which it would draw live meaning into inert or merely liturgical monumentality.

To rescue scripture 'from the ebbing motion of past tense' – this, according to Steiner, is the purpose of Jewish hermeneutics. That is why the process of midrashic interpretation never comes to an end. In order to make the text relevant to our time, a continuous process of reinterpretation is necessary. There is another reason as well. Midrash serves to humanise the word of scripture. Midrash tempers the terrifying word of God. Judaism is not a *pshat* (*literal*) religion. The Sages of the Talmud do not readily believe in literal, unchanging truths. They forever discuss and reinterpret and press the *pshat* to fit their particular *drash*. In the midrashic universe, no line of scripture is understood only in its plain meaning. Any utterance of God is subject to interpretation and revision, often in contradictory and mutually exclusive ways. This amounts to a complete subversion of the text. Perhaps that is why the Vatican banned and burnt the Talmud throughout the Middle Ages. The infamous *Index*, which classified the Talmud as a heretical work, was only abolished as having force of law in 1965 following the closure of Vatican II under Pope Paul VI.

It is therefore revealing to look at how the Church traditionally has understood the story of the Akedah. Although the Christian tradition is by no means monolithic, stark differences emerge. In the classical Christian tradition, like in so many other instances, the Akedah is thought to prefigure the resurrection narrative of the New Testament. In the New Testament Book of Hebrews, the Akedah is presented as the apotheosis of faith. There is no dilemma. There is no sense of terror. Instead, the text extols the obedience of Avraham: '*When God tested Avraham, faith led him to offer his son Yitzchak. Avraham, the one who received the promises from God, was willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice. God had said to him, 'Through Yitzchak your descendants will carry on your name.' Avraham believed that God could bring Yitzchak back from the dead*' (Hebrews 11:17-19). Avraham rises above human morality, through what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard calls 'the teleological suspension of the ethical'. In this way, Avraham is released from the dialectical tension of the trial and from the demands of humanly derived morality. Emotionally this is not fraught at all, as God has the power to resurrect Yitzchak from the dead.

In the Islamic tradition, the Akedah, referred to as *el-Dhabih* ('the Slaughtering'), is similarly presented as a model of obedience. The Koran (*Sura 37*) tells its own version of the Akedah. Here, Yishmael is the one to be sacrificed. *Aya* ('*passuk*') 103 states: '*Isallamu Ibrahim ila mishiat-Allah – And Ibrahim submitted to the will of Allah*' (Koran 37:103). This, it seems, is the key lesson of the Islamic Akedah: self-effacing obedience. The operative verb – *salamu* – from which the word Islam is derived, comes from the same root as *shalem* in Hebrew. Although this is often taken to connote *completeness* or *peace*, in this context the closest Hebrew cognate is *shilem* – to pay or to complete a transaction. The notion here is that God has given us life and we pay God back by giving up part of our moral freedom. God decrees and we submit.

In the Jewish tradition, from the Sages of the Talmud to Moishé in the classroom, the Akedah is less straightforward. It continues to trouble the reader, ethically and emotionally. This is not to suggest that the story is not troublesome to individual Christian and Muslim readers. Yet, in the Jewish tradition there is no relief from the terror of the story. There is no recourse. There is no ideal of submission and no denial of the reality of death. There are, of course, several sources that praise Avraham's determination and obedience. But equally many sources are at variance. Perhaps

‘Yircha dishvuata’ is Aramaic and it means ‘the seventh month’. However, it can also, at a stretch, be construed as meaning, ‘in the month of the oath of God’. This would be a stretch because ‘shvuata’ would need an *aleph* at the end to signify the name of God. But according to Talmudic custom, the word is here treated as a phonetic unit. Now what would be the content of such an oath? There is no explanation given. The paragraph also brings an admission that Yishmael is like an only son (*yachid*) to Avraham. And raises Avraham’s intuitive opposition to divine favouritism: *Vechi yesh techumim bemeayim leze ani ohev veleze ani ohev?* – *Are there different areas of love within a person?* And what to make of the ambiguous: *Lechavevo befanav* – *To show that He loved him*. In the Hebrew, this sentence can be read in multiple ways. Within the context of the paragraph, it seems to mean this: ‘To make Yitzchak more beloved in the eyes of Avraham.’ The effect of the last passage thus becomes more forceful. Avraham asks: *Ma aase lo?* – *What shall I do to him?* What shall I do to Yitzchak of whom You talk so fondly? Avraham does not ask the more obvious, neutral question: *Ma aase ito?* – *What shall I do with him?* The change of prepositions gives the dialogue an ominous feeling. And what is God’s answer? *Lech lecha el-eretz hamoriah ve-haaleho li sham le-olah* – *Go to the Land of Moriah and bring him up there as a burnt offering to me*. Note also the insertion in the original text by the Rabbis: *li* – *to Me*. This serves to make the *passuk* even stronger. However, what is implied by the term, *the Land of Moriah*?

Go to the Land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering. With explication of the term *the Land of Moriah*, a knot of sages have concerned themselves. We shall cite each one in turn. Rabbi Yannai said: “What is meant by *Moriah*? It is the place whence reverence and awe came forth into the world: *O God, You are awesome out of Your holy places* (Tehillim 68:36).” And Rabbi Chiya the Elder said: “It is the land whence instruction came forth: *For out of Zion shall come forth the law and the word of the Lord from Yerushalayim* (Yeshayahu 2:3).” Another explanation of *the Land of Moriah*: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: “It is the Land in which the righteous issue commands and directives to the Holy One, blessed be He, decreeing things which God then is compelled to do: And David said to God: *Let your hand, I pray You, O Lord my God, be against me and against my fathers but not against my people* (Divrei Hayamim I, 21:17).”

וְלֹדְ לֹדְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה. מֵהוּ אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה. חֲבִילָה שֶׁל חֲכָמִים כָּאֵן. נֹאמֵר כֹּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד. רַבִּי יֵנָאי אוֹמֵר: "מֵהוּ הַמֹּרְיָה? מִקוֹם שֶׁהַמֹּרָא וְהִירָאָה יוֹצֵאת לְעוֹלָם: "הֵימָנוּ נוֹרָא אֱלֹהִים מִמִּקְדָּשְׁךָ" (תְּהִלִּים ס"ח ל"ו). רַבִּי חִיָּיא הַגְּדוֹל אוֹמֵר: "אֶרֶץ שֶׁהוֹרָאָה יוֹצֵאת מִשָּׁם, שֵׁנֵאמַר: "כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וּדְבַר ה' מִירוּשָׁלַיִם" (יִשְׁעִיָּה ב' ג'). דְּבַר אַחֵר אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה: אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לׁוֹי: "הָאֶרֶץ שֶׁהַצְּדִיקִים מוֹרִים מִתּוֹכָהּ וְגוֹזְרִים עַל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְהוּא עוֹשֶׂה שֵׁנֵאמַר: "וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים תְּהִי נָא יָדְךָ בִּי וּבְבֵית אָבִי וּבַעֲמֶךָ לֹא לְמַגְפָּה" (דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים א' כ"א ט"ז).

The midrash gives three different interpretations of the phrase ‘the Land of Moriah’. Each is based on a different pun on the word Moriah. The use of a collective noun, *chavila shel chachamim* – *a knot of sages*, is humorous. The original midrashic text presented several more opinions, which have not been included in this essay. The third interpretation given here, presented in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, centres on the verb, *moreh*. It can mean ‘to teach’, as in the modern Hebrew word for teacher, *moreh*, but here it might be closer to the meaning ‘to guide’ (as in Maimonides’ famous work, *Moreh Nevuchim* – *the Guide for the Perplexed*). The striking notion here is of a God that takes guidance from humankind. Even more than that, the guidance is of such a nature that God is compelled to accept it. As we shall see, this is exactly what the Rabbis will claim that Avraham does in their reading of the story. At this point, however, Avraham neither argues nor issues decrees that God is forced to accept. He undertakes the inhuman task and sets out on his journey, in ‘fraught’ silence.

And Avraham arose early in the morning, saddled his donkey and took his two young men with him. Thereupon Avraham descended the mountains and approached the place God had chosen. He walked all the first day, walked all day long. When he saw nothing whatever, he retraced his steps and continued walking and retracing his steps until the third day. And why did God not cause him to see it on the first day? So that the nations of the earth should not say: He was so stunned that he did not realize where he was going and stumbled unto the place.

מיד וישכם אברהם בבקר ויחבש את־חמרו ויקח את־שני נעָריו אתו. וקורב ויורד, הלך ביום הראשון והלך כל היום, כיון שלא ראה כלום חזר לאחוריו עד יום שלישי. וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא את המקום מרחוק. ולמה לא ראה ביום הראשון? כדי שלא יהו אומות העולם אומרים בהול היה ולא היה יודע להיכן הולך.

Avraham arose early in the morning (adds the Midrash Tanchuma: ‘He wanted to get out before Sarah awoke’). And he descended: The Sages surmise that Avraham was in Hebron when God spoke to him. As Hebron is situated in the mountainous region known today as the Judean Heights (*Harei Yehudah*), they imagine Avraham descending before reaching his destination. The journey, however, is not straightforward. The midrash states that he locates the correct place but he does not see it. It seems he is not yet ready to arrive. What is it that he needs to do in order to see it (*mirachok* – from afar)? What process must he undergo? Why does God ask him to travel so far? A long journey would give Avraham ample time to refuse but is that the intended purpose of the journey? Is it to regret? Or to argue as Avraham did so passionately at Sodom? We cannot know. The feeling one is left with is that the journey is tortured and that the perception of the destination is far from obvious. In fact, as indicated below, the Sages suggest that it may have been the kind of place that only the select few were able to reach.

And Avraham said, Abide you here with the donkey. Avraham did not see the place on the first day, nor on the second day, but only on the third day, when he saw from afar a cloud clinging to a mountain. Avraham said to Yitzchak: “My son, do you see anything upon the mountain?” Yitzchak replied: “I see a cloud on the mountain, clinging to it.” Avraham then returned to the young men, saying: “Do you see anything?” They replied: “No.” So he said to them: “Since my donkey does not see it, and you don’t see it, *Abide you here with the donkey.*”

ויאמר אברהם אל־נעָריו שְׁבו־לָכֶם פה עם־הַחֲמוֹר. [אברהם] לא ראה לא ביום הראשון ולא ביום השני אלא ביום השלישי. ראה מרחוק ענן קשור על הר אחד. אמר ליצחק: “בני, רואה אתה מאומה על ההר?” אמר לו: “רואה אני על ההר ענן אחד קשור עליו.” ושאל לנערים ואמר להם: “רואים אתם מאומה?” אמרו לו לאו. אמר להם: “הואיל וחמורי אינו רואה אותה ואתם אינכם רואים: “שבו לכם פה עם החמור.”

What does it mean to be a *spiritual virtuoso*? According to sociologist Peter Berger, a spiritual virtuoso is a person who looks at things that everybody else looks at and sees them differently. Spiritual virtuosity is not a talent that allows one to see things that are not presented to common vision. Spiritual virtuosity means looking identically at the same things that other people see and see them to other levels. What spiritual virtuosity was needed to perceive this *meuma al hahar* – this strange apparition on the mountain? Avraham and his son seem to have an elevated consciousness at this point. Only they can truly perceive their destination. But how certain can we be that Yitzchak is at one with his father in the fulfilment of the great and terrible mission? A clue comes from Yitzchak seemingly innocent question to his father: *Hine haesh ve-haetzim veayeh haseh le-olah?* – *Here are the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?* Avraham’s answer seems ambiguous, *Elohim yireh-lo haseh* – *God will provide the lamb.*

And Avraham said, God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. While Yitzchak was walking with his father, what did Satan do? He came and placed himself on Yitzchak's right and said to him: "You hapless son of a hapless mother! How many fasts did your mother fast and how many prayers did your mother pray, until you came to her! And now this old fool, gone demented in his old age, is about to slaughter you!" Thereupon Yitzchak turned his face to his father, saying to him: "Father, see this man and hear what he is saying to me!" Avraham replied: "He came to dishearten you. *The Holy One, blessed be He, will watch over His lamb.*"

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלֶה בְּנִי. עִם שִׂיחָק מֵהֵלֶךְ עִם אָבִיו, מָה עָשָׂה הַשָּׂטָן? בָּא וְעָמַד לוֹ לִימִינוֹ שֶׁל יִצְחָק. אָמַר לוֹ: "הֲאֵל עֲלוֹב בְּנֵה שֶׁל עֲלוּבָה! כִּמָּה תַעֲנִיּוֹת נִתְעַנִּית אִמְךָ וְכִמָּה תַפִּילוֹת נִתְפַלְלָה עַד שֶׁלֹּא בָאתָ לָהּ; וְהִזְקֵן הַזֶּה נִשְׁתַּטָּה מִזְקֻנּוֹתָיו וְהוֹלֵךְ לְשׁוּחָטִים!" מִיַּד הַפֶּךְ יִצְחָק פָּנָיו אֶל אָבִיו, אָמַר לוֹ: "אָבִי, רֵאֵה מָה אָמַר לִי הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה?" אָמַר הוּא: "בָּא לִיצֵף לְךָ. הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יִרְאֶה לוֹ הַשֶּׁה."

Here the midrash reinterprets the original wording. Indeed, it completely subverts the intuitive meaning of the sentence. Instead of a reassuring answer to Yitzchak's question, the midrash offers a reading which is downright chilling: God will *preserve* the his lamb, Yitzchak, from danger. Yitzchak can be safe, Avraham seems to say, God will not let anything happen to him. This reading, which casually introduces *hasatan* ('the Accuser') into the imagined background of the story, reinterprets the verse: *Elohim yireh-lo haseh – God will provide the lamb* (or alternatively: *Elohim yireh; lo haseh – God will see; for Him is the lamb*). Instead of construing it as an answer intended to give comfort to Yitzchak, the Sages reads it thus: "Do not worry, my son, God will protect you and look after you so that you will be able to perform the holy act of sacrifice." In this way, the rigid determination of Avraham is laid bare. Nothing can stand in his way, not even the accusing angel. It is noteworthy that *hasatan* speaks the unambiguous and inconvenient, possibly devastating, truth. But the rigid determination is not Avraham's alone. The text goes on to state: *vayelchu shneihem yachdav – And the two of them went together.*

And the two of them went together. What is implied by together? That Yitzchak was not distressed by what his father had said to him. Even as the one rejoiced to make the offering, the other rejoiced to be made an offering of. Avraham rejoiced to bind his son as the sacrifice, and Yitzchak rejoiced to be bound as a sacrifice. Avraham rejoiced to cut the throat of his sacrifice, and Yitzchak rejoiced to have his throat cut.

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו. מָהוּ יַחְדָּו? מָהוּ יַחְדָּו? שֶׁלֹּא הֵיכָר בְּמָה שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ אָבִיו, אֲלֵא כִשֶׁם שֶׁזֶה הָיָה שִׂמְחָה לְקָרֵב כִּדְּזֶה הָיָה שִׂמְחָה לְיִקְרָב, אֲבֵרָהֶם שִׂמְחָה לְעֻקּוֹד וְיִצְחָק שִׂמְחָה לְעֻקּוֹד, אֲבֵרָהֶם שִׂמְחָה לְשׁוּחָט וְיִצְחָק שִׂמְחָה לְשׁוּחָט.

If Yitzchak was unclear about his fate, he now knows what is to come. From this point on, the text indicates, Yitzchak accepts the fate that awaits him. For better or for worse, the double inclusion of the *yachdav* (Bereishit 22:6 and 22:8) suggests that their hearts and minds were one. They knew the gravity of their act and the toll it would take. And they both rejoiced at the opportunity to show God their all-consuming allegiance. It is significant that when Avraham descends the mountains and carries on to Beersheva, father and son are pointedly not described as walking *yachdav – together*. In fact, following the Akedah, father and son never speak again. This seems to suggest that despite the willingness and the feeling of togetherness that the word *yachdav* is meant to denote, towards the end of the story that unity has been shattered. But for now, Yitzchak faithfully plays his part, as the next paragraph indicates.

They came to the place which God told him of and Avraham built an altar there. And why did not Yitzchak build with him? Because Avraham was taking care that no stone or pebble fall upon Yitzchak and make a mark upon him that would disqualify him as an offering. Avraham built the altar, arranged the pieces of wood, and bound Yitzchak upon it. When Avraham took the knife to cut his throat, Yitzchak said to him: Father, bind my hands and my feet, for the will to live is so strong, that when I see the knife coming towards me, I may move, which will disqualify me as an offering. His father bound Yitzchak as he had asked.

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְנוּ שָׁם אֹבֵדָהּ אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. ולמה לא בנה יצחק עמו? אלא אמר אברהם שלא יפול עליו אבן או צרור ויעשה בו מום ויפסל מן הקרבן. בנה את המזבח סידר את העצים ועקד את יצחק על גבו, נטל אברהם את המאכלת לשחטו, אמר לו יצחק: "אבא, אוסרני בידי וברגלי שהנפש חצופה היא שלא אראה המאכלת בא עלי ואקרטע ואיפסל מן הקרבן." כפתו אביו.

Is there not something chilling about the notion of an unblemished sacrificial lamb. It brings to mind the controlled horrors of the torture chamber. Is this what a hero of faith is supposed to do? To blindly accept to carry out the awful deed? It seems to run counter to the way of nature. Indeed this is the meaning of Yitzchak's words: *Hanefesh chatzufa hi – my soul is rebellious!* I have submitted, says Yitzchak, but my soul rebels. The word employed is the same as the modern word *chutzpah*, meaning irreverence or rebelliousness. Yitzchak seems to say: '*Osrani beyadai o-veraglai – Bind my hands and feet for my soul is a chutzpedike neshama!*' So Avraham binds him. This is the moment of truth. Avraham stretches forth his hand. He is ready to slaughter his son. What might Avraham's *neshama* tell him at that moment? Does it too rebel? Avraham is ready to perform the act. Time slows down. We await the next move.

The angel of the Lord called unto him from Heaven and said, Avraham, Avraham. As Avraham was about to put the knife to Yitzchak's throat, the angels came weeping and lamenting before the Holy One, blessed be He. And they said: You are breaking the covenant that you promised to Avraham, *But My covenant will I establish with Yitzchak* (Bereishit 17:21). Behold, at this moment the knife is at his throat. How much longer will you wait! Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Michael: "Why do you stand still? Do not let Avraham go on!" Michael began calling Avraham: *The angel of the Lord called unto him from Heaven, and said, Avraham, Avraham*".

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהֵי מְלָאךְ יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֹבֵדָהּ אֹבֵדָהּ. כיון שבא ליתן את המאכלת על צוארו באו המלאכים והיו בוכים ומצווחים לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. שנאמר: "הפר ברית ומפיר אתה! את הברית שאמרת לאברהם: "את בריתי אקים את יצחק" (בראשית י"ז כ"א). הרי המאכלת על צוארו עד אימתי אתה ממתין?" מיד אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למיכאל: "מה אתה עומד על תניחננו? התחיל מיכאל קורא אותו: "ויקרא אליו מלאך ה' מן השמים ויאמר אברהם אברהם".

Finally the voice of Heaven calls. And the voice calls Avraham's name twice. Rabbi Levi Lauer teaches: 'If God calls you once, consult psychiatric help. If God calls you twice, get ready for *radical redirection*.' God calls Yaakov twice before he goes down to Egypt (Bereishit 46:2). He calls Moshe twice at the Burning Bush (Shemot 3:4). Finally, He calls Shmuel the Prophet twice at the outset of his mission (I Shmuel 3:10). In all of these cases, the respondent is utterly unable to foresee the implications of their response. They don't yet know what they are responding to. Yet they say: *Hineni – I am here, existentially ready for whatever awaits me*. Also here, the angel calls to Avraham twice. So we could ask, what is the radical redirection that this command entails? What new phase of Avraham's life does this call herald? We must remember that, at the

beginning of the story, God called Avraham only once. This then is a momentous occasion. But what does it mean? The midrash states that Avraham is so intent on sacrificing his son that he is oblivious to the outside world. Avraham is so set on his mission that when the angel orders him not to lay his hand on Yitzchak, Avraham at first misunderstands him.

Lay not your hand upon the lad and do not do anything to him! Avraham asked: Then shall I strangle him? The angel replied: *And do not do anything to him!* Avraham said: The plain fact is that the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, told me to offer up my son, and yet you say, "Do not offer him up."

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנֶּעָר
וְאַל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה. אמר לו': "מה
אתה עושה! אל תשלח ידך אל הנער!"
אמר לו': "ואחנקנו?" ואמר: "ואל תעש
לו מאומה!" אמר לו אברהם: "חוץ מזו
ומזו הקדוש ברוך הוא אמר לי לקרב
בני ואתה אומר לא תקרבנו!"

According to this rabbinic re-articulation, the double prohibition (*Do not stretch you hand upon the lad* and *Do not do anything to him*) forms part of an unrecorded dialogue between God and Avraham. Why else the seemingly superfluous: *Do not do anything to him*? When earlier God tells Avraham, *Lech lecha el-eretz hamoria vehaleho sham leolah – Get yourself to the land of Moriah and bring your son up there as a burnt offering*, Avraham responds, *Hineni*. God Then when the voice calls out from Heaven and says, *Al tishlach yadcha el-hanaar; don't stretch your hand upon the lad – ve-al taas lo meuma; and don't do anything to him*, Avraham, says: *Hineni*. And the key to the Akedah is that the second *Hineni* is victorious over the first *Hineni*.

It seems that Avraham at this point is faced with a terrible dilemma. This was a crisis of faith for Avraham. Which voice should he listen to? God had told him to sacrifice his son and now a voice from Heaven, an angel's voice, tells him not to. Which call should he heed? And what does Avraham's inner voice say? Avraham was ready to slaughter his son. He had girded himself, ready for that moment of proof of his complete trust in God. A trust that God would revoke the evil decree? A trust that God would ultimately act for the good? Was this not the moment he had waited for all his life? Avraham was coiled up like a spring at that moment. He was ready. And then comes the angel and tells him not. Instead of a grand display of faith he was faced with a dilemma. And it is precisely then that the anti-climactic point finally arrives: the angel's voice call out to Avraham and says, *Al tishlach yadcha el-hanaar – Do not lay your hand upon the lad*. And at the crucial moment, Avraham has the inner strength to yield to the angel. And what does Avraham do? Caught in the horns of a terrible dilemma, between two equal and opposite forces, Avraham chooses a third way. He looks up and sees a ram caught in the thicket. And he offers the ram up instead of his son.

For now I know that you are a God-fearing man. Avraham having asked God: Why did you do this to me? God answered: Because I wished to make you known in the world and that not without good reason I have chosen you from among all nations: *For now I have made known that you are a God-fearing man.*

כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה.
אמר לו אברהם: "למה עשית לי כך?"
אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: "שהייתי
מבקש לידועך בעולם שלא על חנם
בחרתי בך מכל האומות" כי עתה
ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה."

The midrash states that is in this act, the midrash says, that Avraham shows his true greatness. The rabbinic reinterpretation of the passage is achieved by a rearrangement of the vowels of the three-letter stem. The verb *yadati – I know* is changed to the passive causative, *hophal*-form of *yodati –*

I have made known. But which act does the midrash refer to? Is it Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son? Or is it precisely Avraham's creative solution to God's double bind? The midrash is not explicit on this point. But the thrust of the midrashic reading suggests that the word *ve-ata* – *and now* refers to Avraham's act of self-restraint. God is then presented as saying: It is because of *Avraham's humanity* that I want to make him a model of faith in the world. And this is the crux: It is the act of *not sacrificing* on the part of Avraham that we are meant to emulate. It is Avraham's sanity and restraint that we are asked to live up to. The courage not to sacrifice, to contain the urge to show his ultimate allegiance in the midst of contradictory commands and ambiguous emotions was what distinguished Avraham. This was his great merit and the reason he was chosen from among the nations of the world to be the founder of ethical monotheism.

Yet there is a cost in all of this. The acts cannot be undone. Although Avraham may be rightly praised for his clarity of vision, he is still allowed to be angry. Avraham's anger at God is justified, just as Yitzchak's anger at Avraham is. Yitzchak rightfully feels abandoned by his father, just as Avraham feels wronged by God. As mentioned above, father and son never speak again after the Akedah. In fact, there is no direct speech recorded in the Bible after the Akedah between God and Avraham either. Avraham had to reach deep into himself in order to access the strength he needed to finally arrive at the correct decision. How Avraham's anger manifests itself is again described by the midrashic retelling. Here, at last, is Avraham's *chutzpedike neshama*.

And Avraham named that place, the Lord will see. According to Rabbi Yirmiyah, Avraham said: Master of the Universe! You knew full well that I could have answered You when You commanded me to sacrifice Yitzchak. If I had challenged You, You would have been left without an answer in return. For my challenge would have been this: "Yesterday You told me, *In Yitzchak will be called your seed* (Bereishit 21:12), and now You command me to cut Yitzchak's throat!" But I did not voice this answer. Instead I acted like a man who is dumb and deaf: *But I am as a deaf man, I hear not: and I am as a dumb man who does not open his mouth* (Tehillim 38:14). Now each year on this day, when the children of Yitzchak will stand in judgement before You on this day, no matter how many accusers bring charges against them, You must listen to them in silence and give no heed to the accusers, just as I kept silent and gave You no answer. *And Avraham named that place: May the Lord take note, this day on the mount, which is seen by God.*

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא
יְהוָה יִרְאֶה. א"ר ירמיה, אמר לו: רבונו
של עולם! גלוי היה לפניך שהיה לי מה
להשיבך כשאמרת לי לקרב את יצחק.
אילו השבתי אותך לא היה לך מה
להשיבני. שהייתי אומר לך אתמול
אמרת לי כי "ביצחק יקרא לך זרע"
(בראשית כ"א י"ב). ועכשיו אתה אומר
לי לשחטו ולא השבתי אותך אלא
עשיתי עצמי כאלם וכחרש: "ואני
כחרש לא אשמע וכאלם לא יפתח
פיו" (תהלים ל"ח י"ד). כשהיו בניו של
יצחק נידונים לפניך ביום זה ואפילו
יש להם כמה קטיגורים מקטרגים
אותם כשם שדממתי ולא השיבותיך
כך אתה לא תשים להם. "ויקרא
אברהם את שם המקום ההוא ה'
יראה, אשר יאמר היום וגומר".

Instead of unleashing the terrible, pent-up power of the spring of religious fanaticism, Avraham speaks. He names the place. He gives a descriptive name, a narrative to the event: This is the place where (and here, it seems, *habocheh yivchar* - *take your pick*): 'God is seen', 'God will see', 'God will be seen', 'God has been seen'. In the end, it is less important what the name signifies. What matters is that instead of violence, Avraham offered conversation. Instead of the sacrifice of his son, Avraham writes a midrash in his life. Like the ram, Avraham untangles into words. Avraham's true greatness, then, lay in finding a way to disarm that inner wound-up coil and not let it rupture into an act of destruction. The parallel is unmistakable: Avraham did what Moshe did not do when he struck the rock. Avraham spoke and through speaking found a substitute for

violence.

But not only that. Avraham then asks, indeed, he commands, God to act as the defence counsel (*sanegor*, from the Greek) of all the descendants of Yitzchak, for eternity. When the accusers (*kategorim*) multiply around them and they stand in judgement, the descendants will sound a ram's horn in defence (*hashofar sanegoret*) and God will then be reminded of His promise to be merciful towards them. And thus the midrash completes the circle. What, after all, was the distinguishing aspect the Land of Moriah? It was the place where the righteous issue decrees to God. And Avraham's lesson for God was to let His desire for Mercy take precedence over His desire for strict Justice.

The midrash imagines the last words spoken to Avraham as forming part of a remarkable dialogue.

By Myself have I sworn, says the Lord. In reply to Avraham's prayer the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Yes, I shall take note of what happened on this day." Avraham said to God: "Swear unto me." And God swore at once: *By Myself have I sworn, says the Lord.*

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־יְהוָה ... עֵקֶב
אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקִלִּי. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא: "וְכַךְ אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה." אָמַר לוֹ
אֲבִרְהָם: "הַשְּׁבַע לִּי" מִיד: "בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי
נְאֻם ה'."

Intriguingly, there here is in fact an additional place in the Hebrew Bible where someone is called twice. It occurs when God is called twice. In Shemot 34:6, God instructs Moshe how to perform the order of prayer. He is told to say: *Adonai, Adonai, El rahum vechanun – Lord, Lord, God merciful and gracious.* These are the precisely the words that Jews to this day use every Rosh Hashanah. The thirteen *middot* ('attributes'), which this phrase introduces, are intended to remind God of His mercy and kindness and inspire Him to move from the seat of judgment to the seat of mercy. An indication of the power of this formula is the fact that it is omitted if Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, as is, of course, the blowing of the shofar; because on Shabbat God is already all mercy. The formula charges God with energy – it is as if it says: 'God! Get ready for radical redirection!' Comments the Talmudic authority Rabbi Yochanan: 'Were this not written in the text, it would be impossible for us even to say it' (Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 17b).

We can now fully appreciate the oblique entry-point of the midrash:

Thus *in the seventh month*, Rabbi Brachiya taught: "In the month of God's oath (*beyircha dishvuata*)".

הוּי בַחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי אָמַר רַבִּי בְרַכְיָה:
בִּירְחָא דְשְׁבוּעָתָא.

Finally we are in a position to understand the meaning of the teaching of Rabbi Brachiya. Note by the way that the Aramaic for 'month of God' has received the missing *aleph* at the end. This is the oath that God swore to Avraham in the land of Moriah: To protect the descendants of Yitzchak forever. Protect them against what? Against themselves and against God Himself!

Through the trauma of the Akedah, we are given an important lesson about the difference between obedience and worship. Avraham showed that he was able to control the impulse towards fundamentalism. For that reason, he was given a promise of protection by God for all eternity. The lesson of the Akedah is that we must never let our faith become an idol. The Akedah demarcates the limits of obedience. God wants to teach Avraham, and by extension us, that there is a point beyond which worship becomes *avodah zara*, an act of idolatry. That point is reached when we

reach out for the slaughter-knife to sacrifice something dear to us, ostensibly in the name of God. A command to sacrifice human life on the altar of faith can never be an expression of an authentic religion. We have to remain human beings who make human choices and lives with human dilemmas. Avraham was truly triumphant only when he showed that he was able to hold back his desire for total, all-consuming worship, and accept the still small voice of the angel that said, *Al tishlach yadcha el-hanaar – Do not raise your hand against the lad.*

Writes Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) in his commentary on the Torah, the *Ohel Torah*:

Lay not your hand upon the lad and do not do anything to him! For now I know that you are a God fearing man. For Avraham to stretch forth his hand and not slaughter his son was the greater challenge. It required more strength and more courage than would the act of slaughter. God Himself had told him to sacrifice his son. Avraham responded to this command immediately and without delay. When the Holy One then told him, “Do not lay your hand upon the lad”, this was a greater challenge for Avraham than the first challenge. It was a greater challenge as it caused him turmoil, hesitation, and he struggled with it. It is precisely then that Avraham showed that he was a God-fearing man and it was in this greater challenge that he revealed his true greatness.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעָר ... כִּי עֲתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה. משיכת יד אברהם אבינו ע"ה שלא לשחטו היה אצלו עבודה גדולה ביותר שאת ועוז מעבודת השחיטה שהיה מוכן אליה תיכף ומיד בשמעו הדיבור מהש"ת. מזה נראה שהדיבור האחרון שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא "אל תשלח ירך על הנער" היה אצל אברהם אבינו ע"ה עבודה גדולה יותר מהשחיטה, שהרי היה לו ישוב הדעת ומתינות וגם ויכוח על זה, אם כן בזה דייקא נתברר כי ירא אלהים הוא שבעבודה היותר גדולה נתברר האדם יותר.

Says the Kotzker Rebbe, Avraham was tested twice. The first test was to bring Yitzchak up on the altar. The second test was to take him down. According to the Kotzker Rebbe, the second test was the harder. Not only was it harder but it showed more than anything the God-fearing nature of Avraham. To be a spiritual virtuoso, the Kotzker Rebbe seems to be saying, does not mean to be an automaton. It does not mean to robot-like submit to the will of God. It is precisely when one has doubts and when one argues with oneself and God, when one is unsure and hesitant, that one is most God-fearing, that one is most human.

A *pshat* proof for this reading can be perhaps be found through a careful reading of the concluding line of the story. *Vehitbarchu bezarcha kol goyei ha-aretz ekev asher shamata be-koli – And through your children all the nations of the world shall be blessed, because you hearkened to My voice* (Bereishit 22:18). The descendents of Yitzchak, meaning all monotheistic faiths, which includes over half the world's population today, shall be blessed and in turn the whole world, because at the crucial moment, Avraham, in the midst of turmoil and struggle, listened to the voice of the angel (*ekev asher shamata bekoli – because you hearkened to My voice*).

When religion commands you to kill people in the name of God, it is not a true religion, it is *avoda zara*, an act of idol worship. When the mission itself becomes so important and so forceful that it doesn't allow any doubt or reflection, that is not worship at all but blind submission. It is precisely in the doubt and the struggle, not in certainty and not in submission, where God is found. To answer Moishe's question at the outset of the story: The angel will come this time too. We just have to learn to listen to its voice.

Epilogue

What happens to Yitzchak? The text does not say. Not even the midrash dares to say. The next thing we hear of Yitzchak is that he marries and raises a family. The path that leads up to Moriah is not the same that leads down. The long journey to the land of Moriah and the painful ascent up the mountain has changed Yitzchak. He now realises that not everything in life is what it seems. Yet Yitzchak does not lose hope. Perhaps it is his name, *Yitzchak – the one who laughs*, that holds him back from despair. Yitzchak survives. Where Avraham builds altars, Yitzchak digs wells. And there is something truly great about a person who digs wells. The act of digging a well is an act of optimism.