

What is Proper Sacrifice to God?

By Ariel B Tzadok

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In Genesis 22, we read an extraordinary narrative where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his grown son Isaac on an altar as a burnt offering. This bizarre narrative is almost always misunderstood out of its original context. Before, I address this original context, let us first digress to discuss sacrifice in general.

Think about this. What are you willing to sacrifice to God? If you are religious, then this is an important question. Religion always teaches that we have to be willing to sacrifice everything to God, and at any given moment. The more religious one is, the louder one's proclamation of willingness to surrender all to God.

Religious beliefs, and religious commitments are very fickle things. It is easy for one to proclaim belief in something, and then when it comes time to "put one's money where one's mouth is" we find all too many who come up short. Yes, it is easy to talk, but often a lot harder to act. Such is religious fickleness.

So, let's put the theory to the test. Let's say, for argument's sake, that God reveals Himself to us today. For argument's sake, let say that the revelation is real, and undeniable. We all know that it is really God. Without any explanation, or offering any reason, God commands a group of His followers, and self-proclaimed true believers, to sacrifice to Him something that they truly love. Let's not think that one's true love is another person, like a family member or child. Too many people surrender others to death all the time. One does not need God for this.

Today's most precious attachments is usually not to one's loved ones, but more so to one's wealth, and/or one's prestige. We do live in a very narcissistic era, so this should not be surprising. How many people today are willing to sacrifice to God their self-respect, their economic comfort, and their political/social clout? Even if it is really God doing the asking, I do not believe that long-lists of the faithful will be lining up to offer these self sacrifices. Like I said, we do live in very narcissistic times, and people often worship themselves, alongside their Creator.

Self sacrifice means giving up of something very dear to oneself. We do not find a lack of people willing to surrender their lives for those things which they hold dear. We only need look at the brave example of the men and women serving in their respective country's armed forces. Each soldier knows that at any time they may be ordered into harm's way.

Nevertheless, they go. More than this, parents send their children into military service, knowing the dangers therein.

Every parent who has ever lost a child serving in the military, while terribly mourning their loss, is also proud of their child's sacrifice. Only on rare occasion does a parent regret their child's decision. Sacrifice of life is not unheard of these days. It is rather common.

Sacrifice of life, or the life of a loved one, for religious reasons, is also nothing new. We see this so prolifically today with certain religious "extremist" groups who readily self sacrifice themselves in order to murder others. We see the parents of these young suiciders readily encouraging their children to die for their cause. This type of sacrifice is something very foreign for us to understand, nevertheless, it exists and is a widespread reality that we all must deal with.

Sacrifice of life is nothing new, and nothing extraordinary. This is the fact, especially when it comes to religious beliefs. With this being said, and so well documented, let us turn to the Biblical story of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac, the famous Akeda, and review this story to reveal its true intent and meaning.

As the story reveals, God tells Abraham to take his son, and to offer him as a sacrifice on the altar. Like above, we accept that this message was truly from God, and no other. It was not a psychotic delusion, nor was it the work of the devil. It is really God, period. Now, let us discuss how this command might have been received in Abraham's mind, historically, and psychologically speaking.

In Abraham's day, as it was for hundreds of years after him, there existed religious practices that regularly sacrificed their children to their God. The Torah, clearly and specifically, condemns Molekh worship, where young infants were burned alive, cast into the flames by willing parents, believing this to be a good practice in worshiping their deity. While I do not claim to be an expert in ancient Semitic theology, I do not see much of a difference between murdering one's child by throwing him into flames, or slitting his throat as a sacrifice, and then burning his body as an offering.

God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. Abraham is not culturally blind. He knows that Molekh worship is practiced all around him. We would assume that he found it appalling, disgusting, and evil. But this is not the first time that God command Abraham to imitate a practice widely known to be observed by "idol worshipers."

Years before, God commanded Abram to circumcise himself. Certainly Abraham recognized circumcision as the widely practiced ritual of Egypt, Ethiopia and others. God said that circumcision would serve as a unique sign between Abraham's house and God. God did not say how the sign of circumcision in the flesh of House Abraham would in appearance be

different from the many other nations who already practiced circumcision. How unique was a sign that was not so unique remains an unresolved question.

Now again God command's Abraham to perform an act, which is Abraham's mind must have been associated with surrounding Molekh worship. Yet, Abraham followed God to accept upon himself what was then an Egyptian practice (circumcision), so here too Abraham obeys God to follow what must have appeared to be similar to a Molekh practice. After all, when God speaks, we listen, and obey. Right?

Now, let us delve deeper into this Biblical scenario to reveal some of its deeper intent.

There is a vital, essential, important point to remember about the entire Bible. Our Sages have emphatically taught that Torah speaks in the language of man. This means that the narratives in the Torah are meant to serve as archetypes for many different layers of interpretation. The surface level is only taken literally when that superficial reading is the most logical, and obviously natural course of events.

No one should ever interpret Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as a message that we should be willing to sacrifice our lives or especially the lives of others all in the so-called service of God. The message of the Binding of Isaac has absolutely nothing to do with our willingness to sacrifice human life. Indeed, any such literal interpretation of the story contradicts its foundational meaning.

Abraham was tested to perform a religious activity that was then known, and widespread. Thank God, we have no such activities today. Therefore, to interpret this narrative literally fails to understand its underlying message. You see, if Abraham and Isaac lived in another century, God would never have challenged them with this specific test. This test only made sense, and was only applicable in its time, and day. This example only made sense against the backdrop of Molekh worship 4000 years ago. It makes absolutely no sense today!

Now, let's take this scenario into modern times. Let us say, for example that God contacts someone today, and again demands that the person sacrifice their child to God as a burnt offering. Let us again, for arguments sake say that this message undoubtedly comes from God, and that this undeniable message even comes in the presence of thousands or even millions of people. So, here is the scenario. God speaks and commands you to take your beloved child and to there and then, in front of the world (let's say that FOX and CNN are covering the story live), slice your child's throat, and to cast his dead body into the flames, as an offering to God. So now, what do you do? WHAT DO YOU DO??

Well, I don't know what you would do, but let me tell you what I would do!

I would welcome the opportunity to be publicly commanded by God to sacrifice my own child in cold blood, and to offer his body as a burnt offering. I would relish the chance to loudly and boldly tell God, "No!" And more than that, I would then proceed to rebuke God for even asking for such a display. I would continue by condemning such a display as inhuman, and in total violation of the Torah that He Himself gave to Israel. I would say to God, "Shame on You, for even asking."

Now, the Almighty might huff and puff and strike me down with a Divine thunderbolt, casting my blasphemous soul into eternal torment in the fires and brimstone of Hell. If indeed, that were to be the case, I would still not regret my decision for an instant. But, I don't think that is how God would respond at all. We really do need to separate religious fantasy from spiritual realities.

God is not a human being that He should be considered a fool. God has no need for wrath, human sacrifice, testings, or trials. God would respond like the Creator of the universe, and we already have a record (however midrashic/legendary) of what this is.

The Talmud records a very interesting legend about an argument between the Sages over a specific topic of Torah law. The details of the argument are not relevant to our discussion, but the progression of the argument is. Rabbi Eliezer argued successfully that the proper Law should be a certain way, while the majority opinion, represented by Rabbi Joshua dissented.

In Torah law, in the case of debate or disagreement, the majority rules. Not willing to accept the majority's decision, Rabbi Eliezer calls upon the forces of nature, and even upon Heaven itself to speak up on his behalf. A Heavenly voice cries out for all to hear saying, "Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer when the Law is clearly like he says?"

This Divine proclamation should have been the end of the story, but no, it certainly was not. Rabbi Joshua spoke up, and quoted the Torah verse, "The Law is not in Heaven." It is we who decide what the Law is, based upon what we think here on Earth! Heaven has no say in the matter. End of story, and the law was passed in accordance to Rabbi Joshua.

The story does not end there. Days later one of the Sages who witnessed this extraordinary event happened to receive a revelation of the immortal prophet Elijah. Desperately curious, the Sage asked Elijah how did God respond when Rabbi Joshua pretty much told Him to mind his own business, and used God's own Torah to prove his point! Elijah responded, and revealed this profound lesson. "God laughed," he said. God said, "My sons are right, they have defeated even Me."

This profound point is so important that the psychologist Erich Fromm calls this Torah's greatest lesson of freedom. God has taught humanity to be free. The highest level of

freedom is to be free of God Himself. And that is exactly the way that God wants it! God wants us, his children, to grow up, and to take personal responsibility for our lives and our world. And this is what we are supposed to do! This same exact lesson is even echoed, in deeply veiled metaphorical terms, in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Now, you can understand my response to God's hypothetically calling for me today to make a sacrifice like He commanded Abraham 4000 years ago. God would expect no other answer from me today. My saying no, and my chastising Heaven for even asking such an appalling thing is exactly what God would want from me, or from any of us today!

God gave all of us human beings brains in our heads, and we are meant to use them. 4000 years ago Abraham was challenged within the context of the religion of his day. What God asked of Abraham 4000 years ago made sense 4000 years ago. It does not make sense today, and nor should it!

Torah speaks the language of man. 4000 years ago Torah spoke in the language of 4000 years ago. Today we must bring the Torah into the 21st century in order to understand it properly for our times. This is why Torah Law (Halakha) is an even-flowing, ever-changing stream, that responds to the surrounding times. Trying to understand the Torah today as it was 4000 years ago, (or even 400 years ago), is like trying to push a square peg into a round hole. It simply will not fit, and it is not meant to do so!

A sacrifice to God today should never even be considered to be one of flesh and blood. No parent should send their child off to die for God, either literally, or even metaphorically.

Today, the great sacrifice, like the essential sacrifice for both Abraham and Isaac, is the sacrifice of ignorance, and a surrender to higher logic, and rational thought, regardless of how one feels about it.

Today, we sacrifice to Heaven, our feelings and personal desires, and we surrender to the Truth of what we know to be wise, proper and correct. God's Name is Truth, therefore God is Truth, and Truth is God.

Truth is what we worship, and to this we surrender, and sacrifice our ignorance. This is what both Abraham and Isaac did. They did what made sense to them a long long time ago, in a culture very very far away. The details of their sacrifice are subjective to their times. The universal message underlying the details is what is archetypal, and objective. This is the lesson that we need to learn, and to apply.

True surrender to God means having to say no to religion, and no to God Himself, if and when the demands of such are immoral, unjust, or otherwise wrong. Rabbi Joshua understood this message, and God Himself concurred!

This is our message. We sacrifice to God our dependence on God. And we surrender to the fact that we are responsible for our own fate, and we take the responsibility to safeguard, defend and protect this world that God has given us, and we make the best of what we've got! This is what God wants from us, and in this God is proud of us.

If God were to test us today, we have to have the wisdom, and the courage to answer God back as He rightfully deserves, and as He so much wants to hear from us.

God takes pride in that He created humanity. We, therefore, have to take pride in our humanity and never miss an opportunity to act humanely! This is what God wants of us. This, more than anything else, is what pleases Heaven! This is the true message of the Akedat Yitzhak (Binding of Isaac).