



# Why Does the Akeida Take Center Stage?

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In the *Zichronot* section of *Mussaf* on Rosh Hashanah, we call on G-d to remember the merit of our ancestors as He judges us for our shortcomings. A key event in the *Zichronot* section is the famous story of the *Akeida*, the binding of Yitzchak. The *Akeida* appears in several of the High Holiday prayers, and is highlighted as the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Why does this event take center stage in our *tefillot* at this time of year?

The *Akeida* story is controversial, and many classical and contemporary commentators question Avraham's behavior. Why did he not challenge G-d's commandment? Avraham's appeal to G-d to spare even the few righteous of the city of Sedom proves that he was not afraid to challenge G-d's decisions. Why did he not fight for his son?

Rashi praises Avraham for the enthusiasm and excitement with which he seemingly set off to perform G-d's command. Personally, I struggle with Rashi's reading as it makes Avraham seem super-human. What normal father could embark on a mission to slaughter his only son without any hesitation?! And so I would like to suggest an alternative reading of the *Akeida* which can shed light on the centrality of this story in our liturgy.

The Midrash records a conversation between Avraham and the angel Samael on his way to the site of the *Akeida*: "And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham, his father, and said: My father' (Bereishit 22:7). Samael went to our father Avraham and said: 'Old man, old

man! Have you lost your mind [lit. have you lost your heart]? You are going to slay a son given to you at the age of a hundred!' 'Even this I do,' replied he... [Samael said:] 'Tomorrow He will say to you, "You are guilty of murder, you murdered your son!" He replied: 'Still I go.'" (Bereishit Rabba 56:4)

Nechama Leibowitz explains that dialogue is a symbolic representation of Avraham's internal struggle: "The voice of the tempter in the guise of an old man is none other than the promptings of Avraham's own heart during those three momentous days. One by one doubts assail him - the voice of the tempter."

The Midrash hints that Avraham did not set out enthusiastically in the fulfillment of G-d's command, but rather was filled with inner turmoil. He was a deeply devoted servant of G-d, but also a father with immense love for his only son. Rav Yehuda Amital points out that this tension is expressed in one of our best known *selichot*: "He who answered Avraham Avinu at the Mountain of Moriya, He should answer us." While ascending the mountain, the location intended for the slaughter of his son, Avraham cried out to G-d, begging for a reversal of the decree. But at the very same time, he continued to prepare to sacrifice his beloved son, in subservience to G-d's decree.

This narrative portrays our struggle, on one hand as Jews and as *ovdei Hashem*, and yet as humans. What do we do when we do not understand a commandment? How should we react when we cannot relate to a particular *mitzvah* that we are obligated to

perform? The *Akeidah* teaches us that serving G-d is not always meant to be clear-cut or easy. Even though as humans we question, we doubt and sometimes we don't understand, but we still do. We must always seek out answers, grapple with interpretations, strive for explanations. But even when our solutions are unsatisfactory, as believing Jews, we commit to this struggle because it is a commitment to G-d.

During the *Yamim Noraim*, we reaffirm our dedication to G-d, declaring His Kingship over the world and us His nation. A nation of humans, doing our best to fulfill the Divine laws. Sometimes we fail and fall, but on Rosh Hashanah, we declare to G-d that we are getting up and trying again because we are committed to Him. This was Avraham's message and is still ours today.



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