

PARASHAH NINETEEN

Genesis 22:1–24; Isaiah 33:7–22; Matt 27:27–66

Notes by Tim Hegg

The God Who Sees

Genesis 22 presents the famous story of the binding of Isaac and is thus known as the *Akeidah* (“binding”) in Jewish literature. It stands at once as both a story of unparalleled triumph in the patriarchal narratives, as well as a revelation of the mysterious workings of God in the unfolding of the covenant promises. Here we see the reality of what Paul affirms: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33).

The chapter begins with the stark notice that “God tested Abraham” (וַיִּסָּוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת אַבְרָהָם). This testing is said to occur “after these things,” by which we understand “after the events previously narrated.” The Sages reckon that Abraham had been tested nine times previously (though they are not agreed exactly as to what constituted these nine testings) and that this final test was the tenth and therefore the complete attestation of Abraham’s faith and faithfulness. Thus, after the many testings through which Abraham had come, and shown himself faithful, God gave him one final and ultimate test: a test that centered on the core covenant issue of the promised son.

The word “tested” (נִסָּה, *nissah*) has the same consonants as the word “banner” (נֵס, *neis*), and some of the Midrashim understood the meaning to be: “And God exalted Abraham” in the sense of a banner that flies above an army or ship for identification. God exalted him by giving him a test which proved his utter faithfulness.

But while this test did, in fact, extol the faith of Abraham, it should not be diminished in terms of its severity: it was a most heart-wrenching test. One is left speechless when asked to explain how God could command Abraham to do something that was, in every way, contrary to the ways of righteousness. Human sacrifice is a demonic aberration of genuine worship. To suggest that God Himself enjoys the sadistic murder of one’s own children is abhorrent. At the very beginning of this story, therefore, we are met with seemingly unresolved contradictions: the God of justice and righteousness appears to command His covenant partner, Abraham, to act in the most unrighteous ways. He asks him to sacrifice his own son.

Yet what is even more alarming is that Abraham does not protest. After receiving the command from God, the narrative continues without pause (v. 3): “So Abraham rose early in the morning” The midrash, sensing this lack of Abraham’s protest, interprets the giving of the initial command in typical rabbinic fashion. Why did God give various descriptions of the son Abraham was to offer up? The explanation of the midrash is that each additional description was given to answer one of Abraham’s unrecorded questions. The midrash postulates that the conversation went like this: “Take now your son,” and Abraham answered, “I have two sons, of which one are You speaking?” And God replied, “Your only son.” Abraham said, “each of my sons is the only son of his mother.” So God continued, “the son whom you love.” To which Abraham replied, “I love them both.” Then God made the choice explicit: “take Isaac.”

It is actually the very initial response of Abraham that sets an important structural note for our portion. At the opening of the chapter God calls Abraham by name, and Abraham responds, “here am I,” (הִנְנִי, *hineini*). We will find two more *hineini*’s in our text, one in v. 7, in response to his son Isaac, and another in v. 11, when God calls to Abraham to spare Isaac. Abraham had learned to listen, both to God and to his fellow man (in this case, his son Isaac). His ability to listen and respond in obedience was the mark of his faithfulness. He had learned to respond to the Lord with “here I am,” meaning “I’m ready to listen and obey,” and this stood him in good stead when God announced His plan of mercy and grace to spare Isaac. The test prepared Abraham to receive God’s gift of grace.

We may derive a general principle of application from this: God may well bring us into times

of testing in order to teach us how to receive His mercy and grace. If we learn to say “here am I” in response to His testing, we will also be keenly alert to hear His voice of mercy in the midst of that testing. Trials give us greater sensitivity to the voice of God. In the comfortable affluence of life we may forget that everything we enjoy is actually a direct gift from the Almighty. But in times of trial, when we long for a respite from the aching and turmoil, we are attuned to hear even the softest bidding of our Master.

So Abraham arises early in the morning (v. 3), prepares the donkey, splits the wood, chooses two of his servants to accompany them, and sets out for the place to which God had promised to direct him. Like the first test given to him by God while still in Ur of the Chaldees, so here God tells him to go without telling him of his final destination. Abraham would have to keep his spiritual ears open to gain constant direction from God as he went. He knew that he was heading to Moriah, but he did not know the exact mountain upon which the ordeal would take place. The specific location would be something God would reveal in time.

But put yourself in Abraham’s place: would you have been able to sleep knowing what was to happen in the morning? Apparently Abraham’s faith in regard to the outcome of the test was already in motion: he sleeps but arises early to begin his trip of obedience. And he saddles the donkey himself, a job that would have normally been the duty of a servant. This demonstrates his own zeal to perform the task that God had given him. May we, like Abraham, be ready and zealous to perform the duties of our Master, regardless of the cost to us personally.

Moriah is taken by the Sages to be Jerusalem. All that is specifically mentioned in our text is that it was three days journey from Beersheva, and apparently well known by Abraham. One difficulty is that the name in the Hebrew has the article (“the Moriah”), and in Hebrew, the article is not often not attached to proper nouns. It is for this reason that the versions as well as some of the Sages relate Moriah to either the Hebrew word “to see” (*ra’ah*) or “to fear” (*yirah*). The only other time the word Moriah appears in the Bible is at 2Chron 3:1–

Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

Likewise, in v. 14 of our text, the place is referred to as “the mount of the Lord,” and this same phrase is used elsewhere to describe Mt. Zion (Is 2:3; 30:29; Mic 4:2; Zech 8:3; Ps 24:3). Regardless of the exact derivation of the name Moriah, we may conclude that the place where Abraham bound Isaac in anticipation of offering him up as a burnt offering to God was the same place where the Temple would eventually be built, and where the sacrifices would be offered upon the altar. Isaac is taken to the very place where the city of Jerusalem would one day witness the sacrifice of another Son.

The text tells us that Abraham took two of his young men with him. The midrash suggests that these two were Eliezar, Abraham’s trusted servant, and Ishmael, his son through Hagar. The text itself, of course, gives us no such indication who they were. The servants were most likely chosen to help carry provisions for the journey, and to strengthen their number as they travelled, making them less vulnerable to wayside thieves and thugs.

It was on the third day that Abraham saw his destination, the land of Moriah. The days of travel, which afforded Abraham much time for thinking, had not changed his resolve. He was intent upon obedience even in the face of unexplainable contradictions. God had been faithful to maintain the covenant—He would remain faithful. This was Abraham’s perspective.

While still some distance from the mount of sacrifice, Abraham instructs his servants to remain there, and that he and Isaac would continue on to the place of worship. The Sages teach that Abraham saw the *Shekinah* resting upon the mountain, and that this therefore identified the chosen place.

But listen to what Abraham tells his two servants: his words are filled with the hope of resur-

rection: “I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and we will return to you.” “We will return to you!” Didn’t Abraham expect to sacrifice Isaac? How then could he expect that Isaac would return? Was he just keeping his servants “in the dark” about what he planned to do, expecting to give some other explanation when, in fact, he returned alone? Or did he honestly expect that Isaac *would* return with him?

The author of Hebrews (in 11:17–19) interpreted the passage with this latter view in mind: Abraham believed that God would resurrect Isaac from the dead!

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 is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

Here we are given an insight into the faith of Abraham. He must have reasoned, that even though the command of God to offer up his own son was beyond reason, yet obeying God was not optional. God would maintain His promise of the covenant (which required that Isaac live) by overcoming the inevitable death that would result by obeying His commandment to sacrifice him. In short, Abraham believed in the resurrection power of God as the means by which the dilemma would be resolved.

It is this very same faith that Paul writes of when he expresses his own desire to live by faith:

...that I may know Him [Messiah] and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (Phil 3:10)

What is the “power of His resurrection?” It is the power of God to overcome all obstacles in establishing the fullness of His covenant promises—in procuring for Himself a chosen people, redeeming them from the power of sin and its penalty of death, and enabling them to live in righteousness.

This was the faith of Abraham! He had his eye upon the power of God Who alone is able to raise the dead, to overcome the inevitable effects of sin. It is this very faith that Abraham lives out as he obeys God in the face of life’s most difficult challenges. And it is this same faith to which He calls us—a faith grounded in the affirmation of God’s ability to accomplish the impossible.

So Abraham and Isaac make the last leg of the journey together. The Sages put Isaac’s age at 37, calculating that Sarah died when she heard that Isaac had been taken to be slaughtered. Since she was 90 at his birth, and she died when she was 127, that would put Isaac’s age at 37. Of course, the Sages are speculating that Sarah died when she heard of this event (see the rabbinic commentaries on Gen 23:2). But regardless of the exact chronology, there is every reason to believe that Isaac was at least a young man by the time of this story. In Gen 21:20-21, the notice is given that Ishmael had married, and our *parashah* begins with the chronological notice “after these things,” indicating that the events of the previous chapter had already occurred. Isaac is therefore at least a young man, and able to reckon with the events about to take place. Therefore, the fact that the narrative gives no indication that he resisted Abraham’s actions points to Isaac’s faith as well. As far as the narrative is concerned, Isaac goes willingly to his death at the hands of his father. (This fact became a very significant element in rabbinic interpretation of the *akeidah* as we shall see below.)

The conversation between son and father as they climb to the high point of the terrain is minimal. What kind of conversation could have existed between them? Abraham is uncommonly silent—it is Isaac who speaks up: “Avi (my father),” he says. “*Hineini*,” Abraham answers. *Hineini*, for the second time! As though saying in a cryptic way, “Here I am, ready to do this most unspeakable thing!” And then Isaac asks the obvious question. Perhaps he had an inkling of what was afoot. “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” The all important element of the sacrifice was missing! Isaac must have also questioned the purpose of the

journey. Surely he knew of the times that Abraham had sacrificed to the Lord near their tents. Why had they travelled for three days to make this sacrifice? And now they had come so far without the all-important lamb for the sacrifice!

Abraham's answer is unexpected. Is he being allusive? Is he simply unwilling to face the inevitable? Or does his answer anticipate the possibility that somehow, in some way, God is going to spare him the terrible moment he is dreading? Or better yet, is Abraham *the prophet* giving a prophetic answer of the ultimate meaning of this decisive moment in the history of the covenant?

He answers, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה). The word translated "provide" is the Hebrew word רָאָה, "to see." This word sometimes has the sense of "to understand," just like our English word "see" in the common expression "I see!" meaning "I understand!" But it also takes on the sense of "choose" or "select." Our word רָאָה, *ra'ah* is used this way in 1Sam 16:1 speaking of God's selection of David. God commands Samuel: "Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected (רָאִיתִי, literally "seen") a king for Myself among his sons." The two phrases are almost identical: "God will *see for Himself* the lamb," "I have *seen for Myself* a king." The Lamb and the King—both chosen by God to fulfill His purposes.

Abraham's answer is therefore full of meaning. God knows (He sees) the lamb for the sacrifice. This is all within God's divine provision as far as Abraham is concerned. But will God really provide a lamb, or is Abraham being allusive? Did Abraham answer as he did because he did not want to admit that Isaac was to be "the lamb" for this sacrifice? Or had he come to the conclusion that God would, indeed, provide the sacrificial animal and spare Isaac's life?

We honestly cannot say, but Abraham's words are full of theological foreshadowing—that is clear. God will provide *for Himself* a Lamb, a Lamb that meets His criteria, and a Lamb that will in every way suffice to bring about a full and perfect redemption. Every lamb offered up in sacrifice, from passover lambs of the exodus, to the daily sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple, foreshadowed the Lamb that God Himself would provide as the final and perfect payment for sin. Yes, surely God will provide for Himself a Lamb, One chosen, One known from all eternity, His own beloved Son.

So Abraham and Isaac walk on, Isaac bearing the wood, and Abraham the fire and the knife. The narrative indicates that they reached the place that God had revealed to Abraham (v. 9), and in short, terse clauses, the story recounts how Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac, and put him upon the altar. The scene is unimaginable. It offends our thinking, and exists outside of the realm of our personal understanding. It is contrary to everything we know of a father-son relationship. In and of itself something is dreadfully wrong. It is never supposed to be this way—a father sacrificing his son! If we seek to ponder the scope of the scene, we turn our heads. No one can possibly consider this the norm!

And it is not the norm! Everything the Scriptures teach us is contrary to this picture. A father is to love his son, to care for him and to raise him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. A father provides for and protects his son, and passes on to him the inheritance of his own hopes and dreams. We may note Jacob's own sorrow at seeing what appears to be evidence of Joseph's death. And the heart sobs of David are recorded in his cry, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" while grieving the news of his death, in spite of the fact that Absalom had acted as his own enemy. Indeed, everywhere in the Scripture the norm is that a father deeply loves his sons. But here we see a loving father ready to sacrifice his son!

So what do we make of our story here? Of the norm turned on its head? We realize that it is unique, a one of a kind telling, and that it is therefore a foreshadowing of something much, much bigger—a portend of the manner in which the Father Himself would give His own Son. The *Akeidah* stands as a prophetic witness to the means ordained by God to bring about the redemption of wayward mankind by the death of His own Son, Yeshua.

The reason that the *Akeidah* so arrests our attention, and bruises our sensitivities, is because it is meant to do just that. It is meant to tell us that the means by which God will effect the redemption of His people is something entirely outside of the scope of the norm. The only way that our sins

can be atoned for is through the death of His Son, and the binding of Isaac is given to teach us how out of the ordinary and utterly unthinkable such a sacrifice would be.

In our modern times Judaism has repudiated the idea that Israel ever believed in the payment of sin by the sacrifice of an innocent person on the behalf of sinners, but it was not so among the more ancient rabbis. They too saw in the *Akeidah* a picture of redemption that transcended the event itself.

We see this in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. The emphasis is upon the fact that Isaac willingly gave himself to be offered:

And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay Izhak his son. Izhak answered and said to Abraham his father, My father, bind my hands rightly, lest in the hour of my affliction I tremble and confuse thee, and thy offering be found profane, and I be cast into the pit of destruction in the world to come. (Now) the eyes of Abraham reached unto the eyes of Izhak; but the eyes of Izhak reaching to the angels on high. And Izhak beheld them, but Abraham saw them not. In that hour came forth the angels on high, and said, these to these, Come, behold two righteous ones alone in the midst of the world: the one slayeth, the other is slain. He who slayeth deferreth not, and he who is to be slain stretcheth out his neck.

It was reckoned by the Sages that though Isaac was actually not sacrificed (the ram being given in his place), his willingness to be sacrificed was accredited by God as though he had been.

Indeed, the midrash takes the position that all subsequent sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple were done in order to recall the willingness of Isaac and subsequently the merits of his sacrifice:

Concerning the ram, it is said: And he shall slaughter it on the side of the altar northward (צפונה) before the Lord. It is taught: When Abraham our father bound Isaac his son, the Holy One, blessed be He, instituted (the sacrifice of) two lambs, one in the morning, and the other in the evening. What is the purpose of this? It is in order that when Israel offers the perpetual sacrifice upon the altar, and reads this scriptural text, Northward (צפונה) before the Lord, the Holy One, blessed be He, may remember the Binding of Isaac. (Mid. Rab. Leviticus 2.11, commenting on Lev 1:5, 11)

In the same way, Ps. Jonathan, commenting on Num 28:4, writes that the two lambs of the perpetual sacrifice atone for the sins of the day and of the night not in their own right, but solely through the virtue of the one true sacrifice (Isaac).

This motif, of the merit of Abraham's obedience and of Isaac's sacrifice to atone for the sins of Israel, was so central in the teaching of the Sages that it became part of the Rosh HaShanah liturgy:

O our God, God of our fathers, remember us with a remembrance for good. Visit us with a visitation for salvation and mercy from the everlasting heavens. Remember on our behalf, Lord our God, the Covenant, the lovingkindness, and the oath which You swore to Abraham our father on Mount Moriah. May the binding with which Abraham our father bound Isaac his son upon the altar be seen before You, and the manner in which he overcame his love in order to do Your will with a perfect heart. Thus may Your love overcome Your wrath against us. Through Your great goodness may Your anger turn away from Your people, Your city, and Your inheritance... Remember today the Binding of Isaac with mercy to his descendants. (*The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, London, 1956, pp. 251-2)

And Rashi (quoting Mid. Rab. *Gen* 56:9) writes in his commentary on *Gen* 22:14,

The Lord will see this binding to forgive Israel every year and to save them from retribution, in order that it will be said, “on this day” in all future generations: “On the mountain of the Lord, Isaac’s ashes shall be seen, heaped up and standing for atonement.”

It was with this idea in mind (the meritorious nature of the Binding of Isaac) that the Sages taught regarding the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah: “Why do they blow the ram’s horn? So that I should remember the Binding of Isaac son of Abraham” (b.*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). Note also the words of *Mechilta* on Ex 12:13, “And when I see the blood, I will pass over you’ – I see the blood of the Binding of Isaac” (*Mechilta*, 1.57, 88). While the majority of Sages teach that not one drop of Isaac’s blood was spilt, a few taught that one-fourth of a *log* (רִבְעִית) was actually offered on the altar (cf. *Tanchuma* Vayera §23).

It is seen, then, that the ancient Sages did indeed hold to the idea that the sacrifice of an innocent victim could bring about forgiveness of sins for Israel. What is more, they likewise interpreted the perpetual sacrifices of the Temple to be reminders of that one, perfect sacrifice which effected God’s mercy toward Israel. That this teaching was extant in the 1st Century CE is clear, and there is little doubt that it had some part to play in the Apostolic understanding of the efficacy of Yeshua’s death. Contrary to the rabbinic teaching that God reckoned the sacrifice of Isaac as atonement for Israel, the Apostles came to see that Isaac was himself a foreshadowing of the ultimate and eternal sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua. Thus Paul, most likely alluding to the *Akeidah* writes: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all...” (Rom 8:32).

So the principle that a righteous one could bring about the forgiveness of sins through his own sacrifice was not something foreign to the early Judaisms, in spite of what modern Jewish scholars may contend. The unique event of the *Akeidah* forever stood as a witness of the coming Son Who would not be spared, but would be delivered as a sacrifice for God’s chosen people. His blood would atone for sin, and through His sacrifice sinners would be healed.

Note carefully the role of the angel of the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) in our *parashah*. In vv. 11–12, the angel of the Lord is the One who halts Abraham from slaying his son, and in vv. 15–18, the angel of the Lord reiterates the covenant blessings to Abraham. Here, early in the Torah, we are given a glimpse at the mystery of the godhead. For in the first instance (vv. 11–12), the angel of the Lord has the authority to overturn God’s command originally given to Abraham, that he should sacrifice Isaac. But even more, the angel of the Lord takes to Himself the very essence of the Almighty, for He does not say that He speaks on behalf of Adonai, but He says (v. 12):

“...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

He says, “you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” He speaks of fearing God, but considers Himself the object of Abraham’s devotion! This apparent duplicity is not explained in the text, but presented as simply the reality of things. Adonai and the angel of the Lord share a unity that is beyond explanation. They are distinct yet one. Herein lies the mystery of the divine, Who is at once One, yet Father, Son, and Spirit. If we try to unravel the mystery, we inevitably end in error. Yet we are called upon to believe the mystery of God and to accept Him as He has revealed Himself.

Our *parashah* ends with the reiteration of the covenant blessings to Abraham. But there is a curious note: the blessings of the covenant are said to belong to Abraham “because you have done this thing, and not withheld your son, your only son” (v. 16). Yet were not these same promises already given to Abraham previously as the unconditional blessing of God? How could they now be offered as a kind of “reward” for obedience? In reality, the covenant is not renewed to Abraham as a reward for his obedience, but his obedience was the inevitable fruit of God’s relationship with him. Or to put it another way, God’s covenant blessings come upon those He has called to

be righteous, but His calling includes the means for living righteously, that is, the faith to believe Him and to therefore act faithfully. This harkens back to Gen 18:19, where Abraham is described as God's chosen one who will command his children to "keep the way of Adonai, *so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him*" (italics added for emphasis). God blesses those who obey Him, but such obedience is the fruit of His divine work in the hearts of those He chooses. Abraham proves himself to be a genuine covenant partner by acting in obedience to God's commands.

Verse 19 also contains an interesting puzzle, not missed by the Sages. It only reports the return of Abraham, not Isaac:

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

What are we to make of this? The Sages (Mid. Rab. *Gen* lvi.11) suggest that Abraham sent Isaac off to study Torah in the tents of Shem. That, of course, is a fitting midrash for the Sages, since they regularly taught that God's blessing comes to those who study Torah. We know, of course, that Isaac did return with Abraham, and even the genealogical listing at the end of the chapter is given to introduce Rebecca, who will become Isaac's wife. But why would the narrative leave out the obvious? Why would it make notice of Abraham's return, and not Isaac's? Is it a foreshadow of the ultimate sacrifice of the Son, Who after dying, would be hidden for three days and nights in the tomb?

Clearly, the *Akeidah* stands out in the Genesis narrative as a most unique and awesome story. Yet its primary function is clearly that of type and anti-type. The story of Abraham and Isaac, ascending Mt. Moriah, foreshadowed another Son who would climb the ascent of Golgatha. He too would carry the "wood" of the sacrifice. Like Isaac, He would submit to the will of His Father. This "only begotten Son" was the Son whom the Father loved, yet here is where the parallels end: the Son of God would not be spared. Caught in the thicket of the Father's love for His chosen ones, He would offer Himself up as the payment for their sin.

Perhaps in our *parashah* we get a glimpse of the Father's own grief in the event of the cross. Surely Abraham grieved at the thought of offering Isaac. Does not our *parashah* begin with the notice the God would "test" Abraham? Clearly Abraham as the father was wounded in spirit at the command to offer his son. There is a sense, also, that the Father participated in the pain of Yeshua's sacrifice. If Adonai loves His Son with an infinite love, then surely the agony of His death was also the agony of the Father.

What love is this, that we, enemies of God and rebels against His sovereignty, should be rescued, redeemed, and brought into His family! Never can we plumb the depths of the love of God, and never can we fully understand the mercy He has displayed in the sacrifice of His son. When we contemplate the mercies of God, and His love for us, we are drawn to worship, to praise, to dedication of our lives to the sanctification of His Name.

Paul expresses this in 2Cor 8:9—

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

We therefore live with the glorious hope of seeing our King and Savior, of dwelling together with our Master. As the closing verse of the *haftarah* emphasizes:

For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; He will save us—
(Is 33:22)