



**Daniel Freitag**

**This cartoon brought to you by Rashi on Gen 22:8**

**What was Abraham thinking?**

Teacher: The **akeidah** is a complicated and difficult issue... what's difficult about the *akeidah*? Problematic?

D.R.: Losing your son.

Teacher: Stronger than that.

S.B.: Killing your son.

Teacher: ... The problem of...?

G.W.: We don't murder. The whole thing of Hashem is, like, there were people who were sacrificing their babies...was that He was a good God.

דברים פרק יח (י) לא ימצא בך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונן ומנחש ומכשף:

- Let no one be found among you who consigns a son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer,

ירמיהו פרק ז (לא) ובנו במות התפת אשר בגיא בן הנם לשרף את בניהם ואת בנותיהם באש אשר לא צויתי ולא עלתה על לבי: ס

- And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command, *neither did it enter My mind* (Je. 7:31).

ירמיהו פרק יט (ה) ובנו את במות הבעל לשרף את בניהם באש עלות לבעל אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי: פ

- And they have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt offerings unto Baal; which I neither commanded nor spoke of, *neither did it enter My mind* (19:5).

ירמיהו פרק לב (לה) ובנו את במות הבעל אשר בגיא בן הנם להעביר את בניהם ואת בנותיהם למלך אשר לא צויתים ולא עלתה על לבי לעשות התועבה הזאת למען החטיא את יהודה: ס

- And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to set apart their sons and their daughters unto Molech; which I did not command them, *neither did it enter My mind* that they should do this abomination to cause Judah to sin (32:35)

### מדרש תנחומא

כך שנו רבותינו, "אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי" (ירמיה יט ה). "לא צויתי" לפתח שיקריב את בתו, "ולא דברתי" למלך מואב שיקריב את בנו, "ולא עלתה על לבי" לומר לאברהם שישחוט את בנו:

- So have our Sages taught...: "I have not commanded"—to Jephthah that he sacrifice his daughter; "I have not spoken"—to the king of Moab to sacrifice his son; "it never crossed My mind"—to tell Abraham to slaughter his son (*Vayeira* 40).

### תענית ד ע"א

וכתיב "אשר לא צויתי ולא דברתי ולא עלתה על לבי". אשר לא צויתי - זה בנו של מישע מלך מואב, שנאמר "ויקח את בנו הבכור אשר ימלך תחתיו ויעלהו עלה". ולא דברתי - זה יפתח. ולא עלתה על לבי - זה יצחק בן אברהם.

- Regarding the verse...: "I never commanded"—refers to the son of Mesha, king of Moab, of whom it states: "He took his eldest son, who would have succeeded him, and raised him as a pyre offering." "I never mentioned"—refers to Jephthah [who "sacrificed" his daughter]. "It never crossed my mind"—refers to Isaac son of Abraham (*Ta'anit* 4a).

## DON YITZHAK ABRABANEL

The sixth question is: If God clearly commanded Abraham to “take your son, your only one, Isaac, and raise him up there as a raised offering,” how could the Sages, in Tractate *Ta’anit*, have presumed to offer the homily that “I did not command... it never crossed My mind,” saying that “it never crossed My mind” refers to Isaac son of Abraham?

The homily that they offered in Tractate *Ta’anit* [namely] that “it never crossed My mind” refers to Isaac son of Abraham, informs us that it was not God’s intention that Isaac be slaughtered and that [He] the Holy One regretted it afterwards and instructed [Abraham] not to slaughter him, because **from the outset God did not intend Isaac’s slaughter**. So, it is reported in the Midrash: When the Lord told him “your seed shall be called from Isaac,” “God is not a mortal who [experiences] regret,” and when He told him “take your son,” “Is He one who speaks without fulfillment?” By this, [the Sages] intended [to say] that the two verses [“your seed” and “take your son”] are not contradictory, and both would be fulfilled, **because the divine intention was for Isaac to reach “the gates of death,” be regarded as though he were dead, and nullified from this world**, whereby the intent I have described would be complete. However, what Abraham’s thoughts were in this matter, undoubtedly, he thought that he was honestly and truly supposed to offer him completely as a burnt offering to God.

## R. LEVI BEN GERSHON (RALBAG): ביאור המילות

נֶסֶה – הוא מענין נסיון. וענין זה הנסיון היה - לפי דעתי - שבִּאֲתָהּוּ הַנְּבוּאָה בלשון מסופק; והוא, שכבר אמר לו ה' יתעלה על יצחק 'והעלהו שם לעלה' (ב), וזה המאמר יתכן שיובן שיזבח אותו ויעשה ממנו עולה, או שיעלהו שם לעשות עולה כדי שיתחנך יצחק בעבודת ה' יתעלה. וניסוהו ה' יתעלה אם יקשה בעיניו לעשות שום דבר שיצוהו עליו ה' יתעלה, עד שיהיה סיבה אל שיבין מזה המאמר זולת מה שיובן ממנו בתחילת העיון – רוצה לומר שיבין ממנו שיעלה שם עולה אחרת, לא שיזבח בנו.

*Nissah* is related [philologically] to *nisayon* [a test]. The subject of this test, in my opinion, was that **this prophecy came to [Abraham] in ambiguous terms** (*lashon mesuppak*). God told him, apropos of Isaac: “Take him up there for an offering,” which can be understood as [either] to make him the offering, or to bring him up there to make an offering, in order that Isaac should be educated in the Lord’s service. God did so [to determine] if he would find it difficult to do anything that God had commanded him to the extent that he would give it an interpretation other than the one [most readily] perceived at the outset; namely, that he was to raise up something else as an offering and not that he was to sacrifice his son.

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה־לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:  
Avraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the offering Himself, my son." And the two of them walked together.

(יג) וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵיְנָיו וַיִּרְאֵ וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחֵר נֶאֱחָז בְּסַבָּךְ בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלָּךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:  
Avraham lifted his eyes and saw, and there was a ram, after it was caught in the thicket by its horns. Avraham went and took the ram, and he raised it as an offering instead of his son.

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משנה אבות ה:ו

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֵתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמָּטָה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכֶּתֵב, וְהַמִּכְתָּב, וְהַלְוִיחוֹת. וַיֵּשׂ אֲוֹמְרִים, אֵף הַמַּזְיָקִין, וּקְבוּרָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוֹ. וַיֵּשׂ אֲוֹמְרִים, אֵף צֶבֶת בְּצֶבֶת עֲשׂוּיָהּ:

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and **the ram of Abraham**, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת וירא פרשה נו	רש"י על התורה (מהדורת ברלינר)
(יב) [ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער] וגו' וסכין איכן היא, נשלו דמעות ממלאכי שרת עליה ושחה, אמר לו אחנקנו, אמר לו אל תשלח ידך אל הנער, אמר לו נוציא ממנו טיפת דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה אל תעש לו מומה,	(יב) אל תשלח - לשחוט, אמר לו אם כן לחנם באתי לכאן, אעשה בו חבלה ואוציא ממנו מעט דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה, אל תעש בו מום.
אמר ר' אחא אף את לפניך שיחות, אתמול אמרת לי כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע וחזרתה ואמרת לי קח את בנך את יחידך ועכשיו את אומר לי אל תשלח ידך אל הנער, אמר לו הקב"ה אברהם לא אחלל בריתי ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק בשעה שאמרתי לך קח נא את בנך וגו' ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה כך אמרתי לך שחטהו, לא העלהו, אסיקתיני אחתיה.	[כי עתה ידעתי - אמר רבי אבא] אמר לו אברהם אפרש לפניך את שיחתי, אתמול אמרת לי (לעיל כא יב) כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע, וחזרת ואמרת (שם כב ב) קח נא את בנך, עכשיו אתה אומר לי אל תשלח ידך אל הנער. אמר לו הקב"ה (תהלים פט לה) לא אחלל בריתי ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה, כשאמרתי לך קח מוצא שפתי לא אשנה, לא אמרתי לך שחטהו אלא העלהו, אסקתיה אחתיה].

- 1382 Wycliffe Bible: Aftyr that thes thingis weren doon, God **temptide** Abraham
- 1611 King James: And it came to pass after these things, that God did **tempt** Abraham
- 1917 J.P.S.: And it came to pass after these things, that God did **prove** Abraham
- 1962 J.P.S.: some time afterward, God put Abraham to the **test**
- 1983 Everett Fox: Now after these events it was that God **tested** Abraham
- 1996 ArtScroll: And it happened after these things that God **tested** Abraham

- 2004 Robert Alter: And it happened after these things that God **tested** Abraham  
אבן עזרא פירוש ראשון בראשית כ"ב:א'  
ויאמר הגאון: שמלת נסה להראות צדקתו לבני אדם, גם מלת ידעתי (בראשית כ"ב:י"ב) כטעם:  
הודעתי. והלא ידע זה הגאון, כי בעת שעקד את בנו לא היו שם אפילו נעריו.
- The Gaon [See`adyah] said that nissah means to demonstrate his righteousness to mankind. Likewise, "I know" (v.12) means I have made known. Didn't the Gaon know that at the time of the Akeidah even his servants were not there?

G.M.: That Avraham could be a higher authority.

B.T.: The flag symbolizes something very important. So does Avraham....

A.P. We raise the flag.

Teacher: ... raising...he was put at higher heights.

B.W.: Let's talk about greatness! [enthusiastic tone]

E.L.: The flag, like, it's a whole different idea.

## CONCLUSION

To demonstrate Abraham's meritorious character and, hence, his worthiness to be "the father of a multitude of nations" (Ge. 17:5), God gave him a (deliberately) ambiguous instruction: "and take him up there for an *'olah*" (22:2). Abraham's preparations and procedure indicate that he initially understood God to mean that he should ascend the mountain along with (an adolescent) Isaac in order to initiate him in the rite of sacrifice. Indeed, when questioned by Isaac about the arrangements, he replied, in all candor, "God Himself will choose the lamb for the *'olah*" (22:8). However, when they reached the summit and no lamb presented itself, Abraham revisited his instructions and arrived at the erroneous conclusion that Isaac was to be the sacrifice.

God called a halt to the proceedings and, lo and behold, a ram was discovered—horns entangled on the far side of the thicket—and "Plan A" worked out after all. Indeed, the rabbinic tradition that assigns the ram's creation to the primordial Friday at sunset can be interpreted as an indication that had Abraham but sought it a bit longer or more thoroughly, he might never have had to put Isaac at jeopardy. The didactic moral of our story: Do not make our children the victims of our mistaken exegesis. The insinuation of other, more morbid, motives may have been initiated due to certain historical circumstances (i.e., the First Crusade) and can be discarded without doing any exegetical damage to the narrative itself.