

When Abraham Proved His Mettle

By Rochel Holzkenner

Abraham was one hundred and thirty seven years old when G-d appeared to him and made the following request (Genesis 22:2): "Please, take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering..."

Notice that G-d says, "Please." He didn't say please when He commanded Abraham to leave his father's home and move to Canaan. Neither did he say please when He asked Abraham to circumcise himself at the age of ninety-nine. Yet now G-d seems to implore Abraham to accept His challenge.

The Talmud, as quoted by Rashi, explains the reason for G-d's "please." G-d is saying, "I beg of you, pass this test for Me, so that people will not say that the first [tests] had no substance."

I'm wondering, what type of people would say that all of Abraham's prior accomplishments had no substance? Even if he couldn't bear to bring his son up to the altar, would that detract from his virtue in popularizing monotheism in a pagan society, or choosing to walk into a furnace of flames rather than renege on his belief in the One G-d? Would he lose credit for his unconditional hospitality and for his circumcision if he failed this one test? What type of critical people would dare judge Abraham, and, perhaps more importantly, why would G-d take their opinion into account?

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Abraham faced ten major tests in his life (Ethics 5:3). Passing each test required a large sacrifice on his part. He sacrificed the comfort of living in proximity to his family. He sacrificed his emotional and physical wellbeing to make a marked impact on the world. Time and time again he put his ego aside for G-d. What stood beneath the particulars of each test was the underlying divine challenge: can you chip away a piece of ego and put aside your agenda?

Apparently it's not just G-d who values sacrifice. It's a societal norm. Everyone admires those people who give up something of their own for a greater good. The philanthropist could have spent his charity on a new chateau, but doesn't. The football coach gives up his Sunday afternoons to help little kids score touchdowns. The rabbi sacrifices a life of (possible) material abundance to help inspire others. These people are heroes.

But the funny thing is that, with all of its heroism, sacrifice never spontaneously generates a deflated ego. To the contrary, some of the most self-righteous and arrogant people you will find are "sacrificers."

Speaking of sacrifice, I had a frightening epiphany one day last month. I used to think of myself as an altruistic person, but a little objective reflection forced me to conclude that that wasn't the case at all. True I may do nice thing at times, but it's almost always a tactical move. Occasionally I do something nice hoping that someone else will notice and think highly of me. (I'm just being honest.) Many times I give of myself quite strategically, in

order to invest in a relationship or to build up my organization. And even if no one were watching and nothing was to be gained – here comes the real disclosure... – I feel great about myself when I invest my time, efforts or money in an idealistic cause. It gives me an unparalleled euphoric high and it makes life worth living.

So am I a nice person? Yes. But to whom? To others, or mostly to myself?

Perhaps this was the criticism that was directed towards Abraham. "Sure you've make sacrifices for G-d," people argued, "but there was so much in it for you. You've become a demigod to the world and sparked off a massive movement towards monotheism. With every challenge you embraced you made a public statement about your beliefs. And every time you fulfilled G-d's calling, difficult as it may have been, you probably enjoyed the euphoria that comes from knowing that you've just made the world a better place. You may have sacrificed your comfort or even potentially your life, but you did not necessarily sacrifice your ego."

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Now, all of these critical arguments may have been plausible regarding Abraham's first nine tests. But they didn't apply now, to the tenth test. G-d asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac while secluded on the top of a mountain. No one would be there to witness them. What's more is that Abraham had convinced many people that sacrificing children, a common pagan ritual, was an act that G-d thoroughly detested. So there was no glory in sacrificing Isaac, there was no sense of self-satisfaction. To make matters worse, Abraham had waited one hundred years to have a child who would continue his life-long mission, and carry on the torch of monotheism. Without Isaac, Abraham's life investment would end with his death.

This was a test in which there was no possible way for the ego to reap benefits. If he passed this test people would have no choice but to also recognize the truth regarding the prior nine. If he would sacrifice his ego in this dramatic way, he would retroactively vindicate all his challenges and prove that they were done for G-d, and not to promote his own agenda.

Chassidic masters describe a very liberating phenomenon. They say that when we have an opportunity to give and there is no glory to be gained, and it doesn't feel glamorous at all, and there is no reciprocity in sight, we have been given a gift. It's a chance at ego-less sacrifice. And here's the clincher: this one humble sacrifice will vindicate all prior sacrifices we've made, cleaning them of traces of ego and lifting them to fly a little higher.

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