

Kehos Chumash

Chassidic Insights: Vayera, Chap. 22, Verse 2

Please pass this test, so that no one will think that the previous ones were

not real tests: As we saw when he was cast into the furnace in Ur of the Kasdites,⁹⁸ Abraham was ready to suffer martyrdom for his beliefs. Yet martyrdom is not necessarily an act of self-sacrifice; in act, ironically, it can sometimes be an act of self-aggrandizement. For example, the martyr might expect to be lionized in society's collective memory; after all, history is full of people who have accomplished more by their death than they did during their lifetime. Also, if the martyr believes that he will be rewarded in the afterlife, giving up his physical life is simply relinquishing one form of life in order to attain a superior one. Finally, someone who possesses a high degree of personal integrity can easily convince himself that life would not be worth living were he to compromise his values.

Seen in this light, Abraham's willingness to give up his life for God at Ur of the Kasdites—his greatest test prior to the binding of Isaac—could be construed as a calculated (albeit holy) act. He chose to give up his life rather than deny his beliefs, for he knew that his soul would live on in the afterlife, and, furthermore, that his death would show the world that the teachings of monotheism are worth dying for, serving thereby to disseminate them more widely than ever before.

True self-sacrifice, then, is more than simply giving up one's physical life. It is being prepared to give up everything that lends meaning and consequence to life—being willing for it to be as if one had never existed, to be erased from history's memory altogether.

In this light, the binding of Isaac was the ultimate in self-sacrifice. Taking Isaac's life would not have publicized Abraham's devotion to God, since nobody but Isaac was present.⁹⁹ On the contrary: Isaac's death would have spelled the abrupt end of Abraham's entire religious program, since he would be taking the life of the person whom he had groomed to carry on his legacy and promote his beliefs.

The binding therefore expressed true self-sacrifice on Abraham's part, motivated by neither physical nor spiritual gain, demonstrating that he was indeed a true servant of God. Furthermore, it proved retroactively that his overcoming the other challenges was also "real"—not motivated by ulterior motives but rather by his absolute devotion to God's will.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Above, 11:28.

⁹⁹ See Ibn Ezra on verse 1, above.

¹⁰⁰ Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, pp. 73-78.