

The Personal and Collective Journey to Har haMoria

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The intensity that we experience on *yom hadin*, when we stand before God as individuals awaiting judgment, is heightened by the reading of *akeidat yitzchak*. While we may perceive a powerful connection between Rosh Hashana and the story of the binding, the deeper significance of this juxtaposition is not immediately clear. The rousing wail of the ram-horn blasts, which represent and define the emotions of the day, draws our attention further toward the depth of this enigma.

*And it came to pass after these things, that God
"nisa" (lit. tested) Avraham.*

Bereishit 22:1

ויהי אחר הדברים האלו והאלקים נסה את אברהם.
בראשית כב:א

To begin our investigation of the connection between Rosh HaShana and the akeida, we will examine why God wanted to “test” Avraham by commanding him to sacrifice Yitzchak. Many medieval commentators seek to reconcile the concept of *nisayon*, understood in its literal sense as “test,” with a presumption of Divine foreknowledge. Some commentators were so concerned about this conflict that they opted to resolve it by exchanging the problematic term, *nisa*, with the word *nasa*, meaning “[God] lifted up.” Avraham Ibn Ezra points to the serious difficulties with this approach by asserting the fact that this interpretation is not consonant with the context of the akeida event.⁵⁰

The tenth century philosopher and biblical commentator R’ Saadia Gaon⁵¹, as well as Maimonides⁵² after him, maintain the literal sense of *nisa* as test, yet reconcile it with Divine foreknowledge. Both interpreters maintain that while *akeidat yitzchak* was indeed a test, its purpose was not for the sake of God’s knowledge, but for the sake of human knowledge.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ezra, Bereishit 22:1

⁵¹ Commentary on Torah, Bereishit 22:1

⁵² Guide of the Perplexed 3:24

Specifically, future generations would learn of the story of the akeida and would be inspired by Avraham's tremendous act of devotion.

Nahmanides also retains the literal sense of *nisa*. However, he sees the test as serving the personal goal of informing Avraham of his self-worth. For Nahmanides, the goal of the test was to actualize Avraham's inherent potential:

The matter of trial in my opinion is as follows: Since a man's deeds are at his absolute free command, to perform them or not to perform them at his will, on the part of one who is tried it is called a trial. But He who tries the individual, blessed be He, commands it [so that the one being tested may] bring forth the potential into actuality....

Ramban Bereishit 22:1

יקרא "נסיון" מצד המנוסה,
אבל המנסה יתברך יצוה בו
להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל
הפועל....

רמב"ן בראשית כב:א

The thirteenth century philosopher and biblical commentator, Gersonides (Ralbag) sees no contradiction concerning the literal understanding of *nisayon* and Divine foreknowledge.⁵³ He takes the opportunity to direct the reader of his biblical commentary to a more elaborate treatment of the matter in his philosophical work, "Wars of the Lord." There he explains that while God knows what will likely occur in the future, this future is ultimately determined by the individual choices of mankind. Specifically, according to Gersonides, God can predict whether certain basic patterns will occur, but when these patterns are connected to individual choices, He cannot know the future as determined. If He did, there would be no free-will inherent in human decisions.⁵⁴ Therefore Gersonides understands the trial of the akeida as serving the purpose of informing God of Avraham's devotion.

Rashbam (Rav Shmuel ben Meir), a twelfth century French commentator offers a fascinating approach to the akeida story. Rashbam, who is known for his fidelity to the literal meaning of the text, immediately takes note of the prelude to G-d's command to Avraham: "And it was after these things." He recognizes this introduction as evincing a link between G d's command to sacrifice Yitzchak and the previous Biblical account of Avraham's peace treaty with Avimelech. Rashbam suggests that the command to sacrifice Yitzchak is actually a punishment for making a treaty with the Philistine King. God was angry because Avraham had negotiated away land that was destined for his descendants' inheritance. The Rashbam writes:

In every place that it is stated "After these things," it is attached to the previous parsha. Here too, after the event in which Avraham signed a treaty with Avimelech... The Holy One Blessed Be He was angry at Avraham for this, because the land on which the Philistines were dwelling was part of the boundaries of the Land of Israel...

ויהי אחר הדברים האלה - כל מקום שנא'
אחר הדברים האלה מחובר על הפרשה
שלמעלה.... אף כאן אחר הדברים שכרת
אברהם ברית לאבימלך לו ולנינו ולנכדו של
אברהם ונתן לו שבע כבשות הצאן וחרה אפו
של הק' על זאת שהרי ארץ פלשתים בכלל
גבול ישראל ...

⁵³ Ralbag, Commentary on the Torah 22:1

⁵⁴ Ralbag, Wars of the Lord, trans. Feldman, part II, chapter 4

Hence, the Rashbam renders the term *nisa* not simply as a test, rather as a form of criticism and torment:

Therefore, God "nisa" Avraham, meaning that he tormented and pained him ... as if to say, "You have become so arrogant because of the son that I gave you, that you have made a covenant between yourselves and their children; now sacrifice that son, and let us see how effective your covenant-making will be.

Rashbam Bereishit 22:1

לכן והאלהים נסה את אברהם קינתרו וציערו ... כלומר נתגאיתה בבן שנתתיו לכרות ברית ביניכם ובין בניהם, ועתה לך והעלהו לעולה ויראה מה הועילה כריתות ברית שלך.
רשב"ם בראשית כב:א

According to Rashbam, God is commanding Avraham "to now bring Yitzchak as a whole burnt offering and see how your peace treaty will help you." Measure for measure, Avraham will not have a living son to whom to bequeath any part of the Divinely given land. This is clearly a rebuke of Avraham who should have expressed trust in God rather than succumb to the threat of a powerful enemy.⁵⁵

Based on Rashbam's interpretation, we can argue that the painful command of the akeida can be understood not as an isolated episode, but as one that follows a series of tumultuous events in Avraham's journey to becoming the first patriarch of the Jewish people. In this regard, it is worth comparing the first test of Avraham, that of *lech lecha*, with the *akeida*, the crowning jewel in Avraham's process of character and "nation building." In so doing, we can interpret these two *nisyonot* as the bookends of Avraham's spiritual journey. Indeed, in comparing the first and tenth of Avraham's tests, one notices a number of parallels. The most obvious is the detailed, almost rhythmic description of the tortuous personal sacrifice that God expects from Avraham:

Go for yourself out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house

Bereishit 12:1

לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך.

בראשית יב:א

Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go for yourself to the land of Moriah.

Bereishit 22:2

קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק ולך לך אל ארץ המוריה.

בראשית כב:א

The second significant parallel is the blind faith that is demanded of Avraham in these two commandments:

To the land that I will show you..

Bereishit 12:1

אל הארץ אשר אראך.

בראשית יב:א

And raise him up as a sacrifice on one of the hills that I will say to you..

Bereishit 22:2

והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך.

בראשית כב:ב

⁵⁵ Rashbam, Commentary on Torah Bereishit 22:1

Both phrases emphasize that Avraham must rely on God to point the way – “To the land and to the mountain *that I will show you.*” Finally, in both commands the deliberate use of the term “lech lecha” indicates that the text of the akeida is attempting to link this test with the earlier one. This connection is highlighted by the Midrash Tanchuma:

“Lech Lecha to the land of Moriah” - what is lech lecha? This last nisayon (test) is like the first test. The first was lech lecha from your homeland and birthplace, and this is lech lecha to land of Moriah.

Midrash Tanchuma Vayeira 22

ולך לך אל ארץ המוריה מהו לך לך נסיון אחרון
כנסיון הראשון, נסיון הראשון בלך לך מארצך
וממולדתך ונסיון אחרון בלך לך אל ארץ
המוריה.

מדרש תנחומא פרשת וירא סימן כב

Thus, the apparently separate challenges of these two nisyonot are in a sense two facets of the same test: God demands of Avraham utter reliance in the most difficult of situations, when the stakes are highest, and when they involve sacrifice on the most personal level⁵⁶.

If we only interpret the purpose of both nisyonot, lech lecha and the akeida, as to demonstrate Avraham’s level of sacrifice, devotion, and reliance to future generations, to Avraham himself, and to God, then the two nisyonot are redundant. Why, then, was the second test necessary? One might conclude that the most obvious reason for a second test is a “retest.” In other words, perhaps Avraham was not fully successful at the nisayon of lekh lekha, and therefore God challenged him again, not as a punishment but in order to offer him the chance to remedy his previous performance. This hypothesis can find support in the thought of Nahmanides who points to the “sin” that Avraham committed following the lech lecha command, when he left Israel in the time of famine:

His leaving the land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children..

Ramban Bereishit 12

גם יציאתו מן הארץ, שנצטווה עליה
בתחילה, מפני הרעב, עון אשר חטא, כי
האלהים ברעב יפדנו ממות. ועל
המעשה הזה נגזר על זרעו הגלות בארץ
מצרים ביד פרעה.

רמב"ן בראשית פרק יב

Avraham’s unsuccessful performance in the lech lecha test necessitated the retest of Avraham’s devotion under similar personally challenging conditions.

Teshuva Gemura vs. Teshuva

Interpreting the akeida as “rectification” for an incomplete performance of the lech lecha challenge renders the akeida as a fulfillment of the *teshuva gemura* that Rambam describes:

⁵⁶ In the case of the akeida, the sacrifice is not only personal and hence difficult, but also represents a philosophical faith crisis for Avraham. The will of God demands that Avraham commit an act that is contrary to the notion of the ethical and moral God that Avraham has come to know through his philosophic inquiry. This act will not only require personal sacrifice, but reliance upon the truth and immutability of God’s essence.

[What is] complete Teshuva? A person who confronts the same thing in which he sinned and has the potential to commit [the sin again] and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his Teshuva.

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 2:1

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה.
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ב:א

The opportunity for teshuva gemura, absolute teshuva, emerges when the “sinner” is faced with a situation that mirrors the circumstances of his earlier downfall. The goal for the penitent is clearly defined and structured. In this “retest” he emerges heroically, having chosen wisely. This status of teshuva gemura is attained by Avraham in the climax of the akeida. The image of Avraham as the “ba’al teshuva” is a powerful link to the theme of yom hadin.

Rambam however, does not limit his discussion of repentance to his own notion of teshuva gemura. In the case of teshuva gemura there is a tangible end goal, and the individual when successful emerges triumphant from that test, with trophy in hand. Rambam also talks of another form of teshuva which is distinguished from the teshuva gemura. The second type of teshuva, has no limited or definable goal; rather it is a continual process consisting of steady evaluation and improvement of ways. It is not teshuva for a specific sin, but the will to change the pattern of behavior and direct oneself to a more spiritual existence. The ultimate goal of this continuous introspection and action is linked to the ultimate goal of our being, i.e. to serve God.

Teshuva for the sake of love

The understanding of teshuva as a life long process can be understood in light of Rambam’s philosophical outlook on the service of God. When Rambam introduces his conception of ahavat and yirat Hashem, love and awe of God, he emphasizes the cyclical nature of these pursuits:

What is the path to [attain] love and awe of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify Him, yearning with tremendous desire to know [God’s] great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God.” When he continues to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil and be afraid, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before He who is perfect of knowledge, as David stated: “When I see Your heavens, the work of your fingers ... [I wonder] what is man that You should recall him.” Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide for a foothold for a person of understanding to develop love of God, as our Sages said regarding love: “In this manner you will recognize He who spoke

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו, בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול כמו שאמר דוד צמאה נפשי לאלהים לאל חי, וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו ויפחד ויודע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה עומדת בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות, כמו שאמר דוד כי אראה שמיך מעשה אצבעותיך מה אנוש כי תזכרנו, ולפי הדברים האלו אני מבאר כללים גדולים ממעשה רבון העולמים כדי שיהיו פתח למבין לאהוב את השם, כמו שאמרו חכמים

and [thus] brought the world into being.”

Rambam Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2

בענין אהבה שמתוך כך אתה מכיר
את מי שאמר והיה העולם.
רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ב:ב

Rambam establishes love of God as inextricably intertwined with knowledge of God and His universe. He describes a cyclical pattern whereby the individual experiences an overflow of love for God that emerges spontaneously as a result of his attainment of knowledge. The spiritual experience of loving God leads to an inspiration and intense desire for furthered study of God and the universe. At the point of heightened awareness of God and His splendor, the man of speculation is automatically overcome by the potent experience of awe for God.

According to Rambam the love for God is an outgrowth of knowledge, and the two are directly proportional. The more knowledge the person amasses, the more profound becomes the emotional experience of love for God.

It is a well known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person's heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting, leaving all things in the world except for this. This was implied by the command: "Love God, your Lord, with all your heart and all your soul."

One can only love God as an outgrowth of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one's love depends on the nature of one's knowledge. A small amount of knowledge arouses a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love.

Therefore, it is necessary for a person to seclude himself in order to understand and conceive wisdom and concepts which make his Creator known to him according to the potential which man possesses to understand and comprehend as we have explained in Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah.

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 6:10

דבר ידוע וברור שאין אהבת
הקב"ה נקשרת בלבבו של אדם עד
שישגה בה תמיד כראוי ויעזוב כל
מה שבעולם חוץ ממנה, כמו
שצוה ואמר בכל לבבך ובכל
נפשך, אינו אוהב הקב"ה אלא
בדעת שידעהו, ועל פי הדעה
תהיה האהבה אם מעט מעט ואם
הרבה הרבה, לפיכך צריך האדם
ליחד עצמו להבין ולהשכיל
בחכמות ותבונות המודיעים לו
את קונו כפי כח שיש באדם
להבין ולהשיג כמו שבארנו
בהלכות יסודי התורה.
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה י:ו

Rambam's formulaic conception of "knowledge equals love" reflects the notion that there is no end or limit to one's love of God. Just as one journeys through life developing his intellect in pursuit of Divine knowledge, so too, the emotional correlative, love of God, increases throughout life.

The most supreme level of human love of God, in Rambam's thought, mirrors the passionate human love between a man and a woman. One may wonder why the Rambam chooses the most intensely passionate description of man's expression of love for God, the lovesick individual, as the finale for his discussion of teshuva:

What is the proper degree of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person's thoughts are] never

וכיצד היא האהבה הראויה הוא
שיאהב את ה' אהבה גדולה יתירה עזה
מאוד עד שתהא נפשו קשורה באהבת
ה' ונמצא שוגג בה תמיד כאלו חולה

diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater love, the love for God should be implanted in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded: "with all your heart and with all soul." This concept was implied by Solomon [SS 2:5] when he stated as a metaphor: "I am lovesick." Indeed the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing this.

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 10:3

חולי האהבה שאין דעתו פנויה מאהבת אותה אשה והוא שוגג בה תמיד בין בשבתו בין בקומו בין בשעה שהוא אוכל ושותה, יתר מזה תהיה אהבת ה' בלב אוהביו שוגגים בה תמיד כמו שצונו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, והוא ששלמה אמר דרך משל כי חולת אהבה אני, וכל שיר השירים משל הוא לענין זה.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה יג

To answer this question of why the Rambam selected this comparison as the denouement of Hilchot Teshuva, we must revisit the Rambam's conception of the second type of teshuva, the life long teshuva. He posits that this form of teshuva has no finite goal, and therefore transcends any limitations. This form of teshuva is an ongoing service that accompanies one's lifelong pursuit of ahavat Hashem. It extends beyond the temporal confines of the yamin noraim. Most emphatically, it is a way of achieving a profound relationship with God based on ahava.

The Akeida as Embodying Teshuva

We have already posited that the akeida presented Avraham with an opportunity to accomplish teshuva gemura. However, Avraham's readiness to perform the akeida may be an actualization of the second type of teshuva, the teshuva l'tsorech ahava, as well. In his Guide of the Perplexed, Rambam talks of two major purposes for the akeida. One purpose is to recognize the clarity with which the prophets perceived their prophecy. Rambam maintains that prophecy is always transmitted in the form of a vision or a dream. Although the prophecy came to Avraham in the form of a vision, he never doubted the command of the akeida, and he never requested clarification. The second fundamental purpose of the akeida, according to Rambam, is the teaching and inspiration to the future generations. The lesson of the akeida is the boundless expression of man's love and fear of God. Avraham's deep devotion and love for God is highlighted by his thoughtful and deliberative mode in the consideration of the act of the akeida in the three days leading to his action.

As for the story of Avraham at the binding, it contains two great notions that are fundamental principles of the Law. One of these notions consists in our being informed of the limit of love for God, may He be exalted, and fear of Him - that is, up to what limit they must reach. For in this story he was ordered to do something that bears no comparison either with sacrifice of property or with sacrifice of life. In truth it is the most extraordinary thing that could happen in the world, such a thing that one would not imagine that human nature was capable of it. Here there is a sterile man having an exceeding desire for a son, possessed of great

ואמנם ענין אברהם אבינו ע"ה בעקדה כלל שני ענינים גדולים הם מפנות התורה, הענין האחד הוא להודיע אותנו גבול אהבת השם ויראתו עד היכן היא מגעת, וצוה בזה הענין אשר לא ידמה לו לא נתינת ממון ולא נתינת נפש, אבל הוא מופלג מכל מה שאפשר שיבא במציאות ממה שלא ידומה שטבע בני אדם יטה אליו, והוא שיהיה איש עקר בתכלית הכוסף לילד ובעל עושר גדול ואיש נכבד ובוחר שישאר מזרעו אומה, ונולד לו בן אחר היאוש איך יהיה חשקו בו ואהבתו אותו, אבל ליראתו הש"י

property and commanding respect, and having the wish that his progeny should become a religious community. When a son comes to him after his having lost hope, how great will be his attachment to him and love for him! However, because of his fear of Hashem, and because of his love to carry out His command, he holds this beloved son as little, gives up all his hopes regarding him, and hastens to slaughter him after a journey of days. For if he had chosen to do this immediately, as soon as the order came to him, it would have been an act of stupefaction and disturbance in the absence of exhaustive reflection. But his doing it days after the command had come to him shows that the act sprang from thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command, love of Him and fear of Him....

Moreh Nevuchim 3:24

ולאהבתו לקיים מצותו בו לולד האהוב ההוא והניח כל מה שקוה בו והסכים לשחוט אותו אחר מהלך ג' ימים, כי אלו היה רוצה לעשותו לשעתו בבוא המצוה אליו, היה פעולת בהלה בבלתי השתכלות, ואמנם עשותו זה אחר ימים מעת בא המצוה אליו, היה המעשה במחשבה ובהשתכלות אמתי ובחינת חק מצותו ואהבתו ויראתו, ושאיין צריך להשגיח בענין אחר ולא לעורר הפעלות כלל, כי אברהם אבינו לא מהר לשחוט יצחק לפחדו מהשם שיהרגהו או ירוששהו, אבל כדי שיתפרסם לבני אדם מה ראוי לעשותו בשביל אהבת הש"י ויראתו לא לתקות גמול ולא לפחד עונש, כמו שבארנו במקומות רבים....

ספר מורה הנבוכים חלק שלישי פרק כד

The mode in which Avraham deals with the challenges of his life prior to the event of the akeida, is representative of his life long process of teshuva which is l'tsorech ahava, for the sake of love. The intellectual and spiritual perfection that Avraham struggles to achieve throughout his life is for the sake of the expression of ahavat Hashem that culminates in the akeida. In this light, we can see each of Avraham's tribulations as rungs on the ladder of service aimed toward perfected love of God.

One might ponder why Rambam is interested in the fact that Avraham contemplated the akeida for three days prior to action. While the narrative of the text in Bereishit does not reveal Avraham's thoughts or considerations during the three day waiting period prior to the akeida, the midrash serves to elucidate the nature of Avraham's inner struggles.

The Satan accosted him and appeared to him in the guise of an old man. The latter asked him: Whither goest thou? Avraham replied: To pray. Said the Satan: For a man going to pray, why the fire and knife in his hand and the wood on his shoulder? Avraham answered: Peradventure we shall tarry a day or two, slaughter, cook, and eat. Said he: Old man! Was I not there when the Holy blessed be He did say of thee: "take thy son..." Notwithstanding an old man the like of thee will go and put away a son vouchsafed him at the age of a hundred. Avraham replied: just for this.- And if He tries more than this, canst thou withstand it? Said he: and more. The Satan retorted: Tomorrow He will tell thee, a shedder of blood art thou for shedding his blood! Avraham replied: Just for this.

As soon as he saw that Avraham was not to be moved, he went and

קדמו השטן בדרך ונדמה לו כדמות זקן א"ל לאן אתה הולך, א"ל להתפלל א"ל ומי שהולך להתפלל למה אש ומאכלת בידו ועצים על כתפו, א"ל שמא נשהא יום או יומים ונשחט ונאפה ונאכל, א"ל זקן לא שם הייתי כשאמר לך הקב"ה קח את בנך וזקן כמותך ילך ויאבד בן שנתן לו למאה שנה לא שמעת המשל מה שהיה בידו אבדו ומבקש מאחרים וא"ת יהיה לך בן אחר תשמע מן המשטין ותאבד נשמה שתחייב עליה בדין, א"ל לא משטין היה אלא הקב"ה יתברך היה לא אשמע ממך ... כיון שראה שלא קבלו ממנו הלך ונעשה

assumed the form of a large river. Forthwith Avraham plunged into the waters which reached as far as his knees. He said to his young men, follow me. They plunged in after him. As soon as they reached midway, the waters came up to his neck. At that moment, Avraham, cast his eye heavenward and said before Him: Lord of the Universe, Thou didst choose me, and revealed Thyself to me and said to me: I am one and thou art one. Through thee shall My name become known in My word, so offer up Issac thy son before Me for a burnt offering. I did not hold back and behold I am engaged in Thy command, but now the waters are endangering life itself. If Isaac or myself doth drown – who will fulfill Thy way? Who will proclaim the unity of Thy name? Said God: by thy life! Through thee, shall the unity of My name be proclaimed in the world. The Holy One forthwith rebuked the spring and the river dried up and they stood on dry ground.

Midrash Tanchuma Vayera 22

לפניהם נהר גדול, מיד ירד אברהם לתוך המים והגיעו עד ברכיו, אמר לנעריו בואו אחרי ירדו אחרי, כיון שהגיע עד חצי הנהר הגיע המים עד צוארו באותה שעה תלה אברהם עיניו לשמים אמר לפניו רבש"ע בחרתני הודרתני ונגלית לי ואמרת לי אני יחיד ואתה יחיד על ידך יודע שמי בעולמי והעלה יצחק בנך לפני לעולה ולא עכבתי והריני עוסק בצוויך ועכשיו באו מים עד נפש אם אני או יצחק בני טובע מי יקיים מאמריך על מי יתייחד שמך, א"ל הקב"ה חייך שעל ידך יתייחד שמי בעולם, מיד גער הקב"ה את המעין ויבש הנהר ועמדו ביבשה.

מדרש תנחומא פרשת וירא סימן כב

How can we interpret the significance of the conversation between Avraham and the Satan? Nechama Leibowitz z"l interprets the satan speaking with Avraham as symbolizing Avraham's inner voice with which he struggled during the three days prior to the akeida. An inner voice within Avraham serves to raise doubts and to dissuade him from performing the akeida. In this horrific struggle within Avraham the voices that speak out against the akeida are the emotional father who waited to have a child all these years, as well as the voice of the philosopher within Avraham that objects to the immoral command of God.⁵⁷

Chazal attempt to express the intense pain and torment that filled the three day journey to Har HaMoriah. The doubts and trepidations which Avraham experienced during his metaphorical battle with the Satan, afford us a more profound appreciation of Avraham's deep inner conflict with its ultimate resolution in submitting to God's command.

Avraham's determination despite his doubts to comply with God's wishes is represented in the midrash by the powerful imagery of the river waters rising up to meet Avraham's neck. Avraham's three day journey to Har HaMoriah represents not only the personal struggle of the akeida challenge, but Avraham's life long struggle of teshuva l'stolech ahava. It is his love for God that ultimately inspires Avraham to submit himself, both emotionally and intellectually to the Divine will.

Reading the Akeida on Rosh HaShana

There are powerful messages that resonate when we read the akeida on Rosh HaShana. We are reminded of Avraham's exemplary act of teshuva gemura at the moment of the akeida. In standing before God, we are stirred by the model of Avraham avinu who was tormented by the

⁵⁷ Leibowitz, Iyunim b'sefer Bereishit, p. 138.

pain of his inner failures and the personal crisis inherent in coming face to face with them. Most importantly, we are inspired by Avraham's lifelong process of teshuva, and glean from this the personal objective of cultivating our minds and souls toward ahavat Hashem, the most supreme lesson taught by Avraham's performance at the akeida.

Ma'aseh Avot Siman L'Banim (*The ancestor's actions foreshadow the descendants actions*): The lech lecha uttered in the two Divine commands to Avraham; directing him to the land of Israel, and pointing him towards Har HaMoriah, are reflective of the spiritual trek that we as individuals must embark on in our service of God. On Rosh HaShana, as we stand as individuals and as a collective before God, we are each reminded of our personal and collective Divinely inspired journeys of lech lecha.