

“And he saw the place from afar”: Avraham’s Journey to the Akedah

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The evocation of the Akedah is an important theme of the High Holiday liturgy.¹ In the course of the *Selihot* and prayers of the season, we remember and recite *piyyutim* that recall the great and terrible price that Avraham was willing to pay, and that Yitzchak was prepared to bear, to heed God’s command. The Midrash identifies Avraham himself as the one who first urged God to grant forgiveness to Yitzchak’s descendants in light of the heroic act of Avraham who “conquered his mercy for his son and wished to slaughter him in order to do Your will.” Thus we have a long-standing tradition of “reminding” God of the Akedah as part of our pleas for Him to forgive us.²

¹ The Akedah raises weighty theological and ethical questions, of course, (also issues of parshanut, geography, philology and psychology) and has generated an enormous literature. We will focus on certain midrashim relating to the Akedah. The aggadic literature was gathered and analyzed by Shalom Spiegel, “Me’agadot ha’akedah,” *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (S. Lieberman ed., 1950), pp. 471-547, and in his *The Last Trial—on the Legend and the Lore of the Command to Avraham to Offer Yitzchak as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* translated by Judah Goldin, (New York, 1974). Of course, the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashana is the Akedah narrative [although this appears to be a late development—cf. M. Megillah 3:5]. References to the Akedah are sprinkled throughout the Rosh Hashana prayers, although one would be hard-pressed to justify seeing the story as central to the liturgy. There was, a type of *piyyut* known as Akedah, some of which (such as Az Behar Mor, ascribed to Ibn Gabirol) are recited even today as part of the *Selihot*. Ezra Fleischer, *Sacred Hebrew Poetry in the Middle Ages* [Magnes Press, 2007] (2d ed.), pp. 469-470. Some midrashim [e.g. *Bereishit Rabbati* on the phrase “as it is said to this day” (Gen. 22:14)] understand the Akedah to have occurred on Rosh Hashana (see Albeck’s note, ad loc, and compare with Spiegel), though this is not the only view in the aggadic literature. Some [see Rashi to Lev. 23:24] see a connection between the mitzvah of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashana, and the ram which was substituted for Yitzchak.

² Avraham called the name of that place “God-will-see.” R. Yochanan said: He said before Him: Master of the Universe, when You said to me, “take your son, your only son,” I had a proper retort—yesterday You said to me, “for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called,” and today “take your son?” But God forbid I said no such thing! Rather, I repressed my feelings of pity in order to do Your will. May it be Your will that when the children of Yitzchak shall behave badly and sin, that You should remember the Akedah and be filled with pity for them. **Bereishit Rabbah 56:10**

² ויקרא אברהם שם המקום ה' יראה. ר' יוחנן אמר אמר לפניו רבון העולמים בשעה שאמרת לי קח נא את בנך את יחידך היה לי מה להשיב אתמול אמרת כי ביצחק וגו' ועכשיו קח נא את בנך וגו' והס ושלום לא עשיתי כן אלא כבשתי את רחמי לעשות רצונך יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו בשעה שיהיו בניו של יצחק באים לידי עבירות ומעשים רעים תהא נזכור להם אותה העקידה ותתמלא עליהם רחמים.
בראשית רבה נז:י-

Rashi refers to God recalling the Akedah each year (presumably on Rosh Hashana) and notes that when the pasuk adds the seemingly extra phrase 'יראה ה' הַיּוֹם, כְּהַיּוֹם, "as it is said today: In the mount where the LORD is seen," "today" refers to all generations, at all times:

There is a Midrash which interprets "The Lord is seen" that this Akedah will serve to forgive the Jewish people each year and save them from punishment.

Rashi, Bereishit 22:14

ומדרש אגדה ה' יראה עקידה זו לסלוח
לישראל בכל שנה ולהצילם מן
הפורענות.
רש"י, בראשית כב:יד

Even today, as a new year dawns, we continue to hope that God will recall the Akedah and find a way to forgive us and to save us from an evil decree.

As we examine the story of the Akedah, we note the richness of detail that echoes in our thoughts. The location of the Akedah is, according to our tradition, the future site of the Bet HaMikdash.³ The name given for this location, בהר ה' יראה, alludes to the mitzvah of appearing before God three times a year at the Bet HaMikdash where we are then seen by Him observing His mitzvot.⁴ The animal that was ultimately sacrificed at the Akedah becomes the paradigm for sacrifices⁵ that will be offered in the Bet HaMikdash. The ram's horn becomes the shofar that

Note that Avraham speaks of Yitzchak's children, not his own descendants who would include the children of Ishmael and others. While it was Yitzchak who was offered as a sacrifice, in our tradition the event is most often seen as a test of Avraham.
³ See, for instance, *Pesikta Rabbati* section 40 (Ish Shalom (Friedmann) ed., 1880). This, of course, turns on the identification of "Eretz ha-Moriah" (Gen. 22:2). Moriah could be seen as linguistically related to, or at least evocative of, the words *yireh* or *yera-eh* as in v.14, and the pasuk itself contains a broad hint that this is a special place since the end of the pasuk refers ostensibly to the site where God can be and will be "seen," that is the site of the Temple. (But see Rav S. R. Hirsch's view cited in footnote 3 which reads our pasuk (and Gen. 22:2 which speaks of Eretz ha-Moriah) in light of Ex. 23:17 which speaks not of God appearing but rather of the thrice yearly pilgrim "who appears (*yera-eh*) before the Lord God." The Talmud (*Hagiga 2a*) juxtaposes the words *yir-eh* (seeing) and *yera-eh* (being seen or appearing—the two words are identical when looked at without vowels) to derive the law that one who is blind even in one eye is exempt from the mitzvah of coming to the Mikdash on the three pilgrim festivals. Rashi (to Gen. 28:11 and 28:17), following the midrashic tradition, labors mightily to show that Jacob's dream of the ladder on which angels ascend and descend also highlighted the unique status of Har ha-Moriah.

⁴ Rav Hirsch expounds on this idea in his commentary on this pasuk:

By the name יראה ה', Avraham bequeathed the יראה ה' which Moriah is to bring to his descendants by the remembrance of this event, יראה ה', (somewhat reminiscent of 'ה' יראה לו וגו' God sees. Even when we and where we do not see, God sees, freely and willingly have we to subordinate our own judgment to His. "God sees" thus Avraham expresses the general meaning of Moriah. But today, after this general conviction of God has manifested itself for us in a special act of revelation, and God has given us His insight into what is good and right for us in His Torah—for which a Sanctuary is to be erected on this Mount—so that we are to live the whole of our lives in accordance with it, today this great Torah is not expressed by the general term "God sees," but that each one of us "is seen by God" and has to present himself repeatedly on this Mount "to be seen" to be testingly inspected. Thrice yearly יראה ה', every son of Avraham and Yitzchak must be seen on this mount, and not עולת ראיה, with mere inner passing devotion, but with the sacrificing dedication of the whole of his being as expressed in ראיה.

For Rav Hirsch, it is not just about God appearing, but that once we have learned what God demands of us, once we have learned to subjugate ourselves to the demands of God, we then appear before God on the same mountain that Avraham saw God. And we appear with gifts of korbanot that express our dedication and love of God.

⁵ Rashi notes that for every step that Avraham performed during the sacrifice of the ram, he had his son in mind:

was blown on Har Sinai and will be blown in the future to gather the exiles from around the world and bring them to the Land of Israel.⁶ The ashes of the sacrificed ram become the foundation upon which the Temple's altar is built.⁷ Even the knife, which is called a מאכלת (emphasizing the root אכל), suggests the benefit that future generations will derive as a result of the mesirat nefesh of Avraham and Yitzchak:

It is called a ma'achelet because the Jewish people consume its reward.

Rashi, Bereishit 22:6

זאת נקראת מאכלת, על שם שישראל אוכלים מתן שכרה:

רש"י בראשית כב:ו

When Scripture reports, "And he sacrificed it (i.e., the ram) as a burnt offering" [that should have sufficed]. What is the significance of the phrase, "in place of his son"? For each stage of the sacrificial procedure, Avraham would pray as follows: May it be [His] will that this [act] be done as though it was being performed on my son. It is as though my son were slaughtered, as though his blood were sprinkled, as though his skin were stretched out, as though he were burned to ashes.

Rashi, Bereishit 22:13

תחת בנו - מאחר שכתוב ויעלהו לעולה, לא חסר המקרא כלום, מהו תחת בנו, על כל עבודה שעשה ממנו היה מתפלל ואומר יהי רצון שתהא זו כאלו היא עשויה בבני, כאלו בני שחוט, כאלו דמו זרוק, כאלו הוא מופשט, כאלו הוא נקטר ונעשה דשן:

רש"י בראשית כב:ו

The Ramban reflects upon the idea of a korban in the beginning of Sefer Vayikra.

A more acceptable rationale is the one set out as follows: Seeing that human conduct is expressed in thought, speech and action, God instituted that a person who has committed a transgression and offers a sacrifice shall place his hands on it—symbolizing the deed, makes a confession—as a reminder of the misused power of speech, and burn with fire the bowels and kidneys—which are the organs of thought and lust, and the legs—symbol of the human hands and feet, instruments which serve man in all his activities. And the blood shall be sprinkled on the altar—representing his life-blood. All this should make him realize that having sinned against God with his body and soul, he would deserve to have his blood spilled and his body burned. However, God in his infinite mercy, accepts this substitute for an atonement, and its blood in lieu of his, its main organs in place of his, the portions (of the sacrifice eaten by the priests) so as to sustain the teachers of the Torah that they may pray for him. Accordingly, the daily sacrifice is offered up because of the masses who are constantly caught up in the web of sin. This explanation is plausible and appeals to the mind even as the expositions of the Aggada. However, in the context of (mystical) truth, the sacrifices contain hidden mysteries...

Ramban, Vayikra 1:9 Translation taken from www.jafi.org.il

ויותר ראוי לשמוע הטעם שאומרים בהם, כי בעבור שמעשי בני אדם נגמרים במחשבה ובדבור ובמעשה, צוה השם כי כאשר יחטא יביא קרבן, יסמוך ידיו עליו כנגד המעשה, ויתודה בפיו כנגד הדבור, וישרוף באש הקרב והכליות שהם כלי המחשבה והתאוה, והכרעים כנגד ידיו ורגליו של אדם העושים כל מלאכתו, ויזרוק הדם על המזבח כנגד דמו בנפשו, כדי שיחשוב אדם בעשותו כל אלה כי חטא לאלקיו בגופו ובנפשו, וראוי לו שישפך דמו וישרף גופו לולא חסד הבורא שלקח ממנו תמורה וכפר הקרבן הזה שיהא דמו תחת דמו, נפש תחת נפש, וראשי אברי הקרבן כנגד ראשי אבריו, והמנות להחיות בהן מורי התורה שיתפללו עליו. וקרבן התמיד, בעבור שלא ינצלו הרבים מחטוא תמיד. ואלה דברים מתקבלים מושכים את הלב כדברי אגדה: ועל דרך האמת יש בקרבנות סוד נעלם.

רמב"ן, ויקרא א:ט

⁶ *From that ram, nothing was wasted. The ashes of the ram are the foundation upon which the inner mizbeach was built. As it says: The tendons (גידים) become the strings of the harp used by David to sing praises to God; the leather is fashioned into a girdle worn by Eliyahu HaNavi; and the two horns are also put to use. The left horn is the horn that was blown by God on Har Sinai. The right horn, considered to be larger and greater, is the horn that will be blown in the future to gather the exiles. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer no. 31*

⁷ Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, ibid.

רבי חנינא בן דוסא אומר: אותו האיל לא יצא ממנו דבר לבטלה. אפרו של איל- הוא יסוד שעל גבי המזבח הפנימי, שנאמר 'וכפר אהרון על קרנותיו אחת בשנה'. גידיו של איל הם עשרה- כנגד עשרה נבלים של כנור שהיה דוד מנגן בהם. עורו של איל- הוא אזור מתניו של אליהו, שנאמר 'ויאמרו אליו, איש בעל שער ואזור במתניו' שתי קרניו של איל שופרות, בשל שמאל- תקע בו הקב"ה על הר סיני, שנאמר 'ויהי קול השופר', וקרן ימין הוא גדול מן השמאל, ועתיד לבא, בקבוץ של גלויות, שנאמר 'והיה ביום ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול'. **פרקי דרבי אליעזר לא**

One detail, though, that is not provided in the text is the timing of the Akedah.⁸ We are told neither the ages of Avraham and Yitzchak, nor the time of year. All we are told is that Avraham spotted the mountain from afar on the “third day.”

In the absence of any other temporal markers, why is it so important for us to know the length of time he travelled until he was able to “see the place from afar”? Why in fact did God insist that Avraham travel anywhere to perform the deed? Was the demand not hard enough? Did God not already ask him to be prepared to give up his son, his only son, that he loved, his Yitzchak? Why could he not be shown the mountain at once? Macbeth, trying with only partial success to (shall we say) “man up” and prepare himself to commit the murder of his king, notes “if it were done, when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well/ It were done quickly” [I, vii, 1-2]. While offering one’s son in response to the command of God is fundamentally different than the treasonous killing of one’s sovereign, the underlying psychological truth must have borne on Avraham as well. When faced with a monstrous task, when forced to choose between the son he cherished and the God he had committed himself to obey, any delay can only compound the pain and suffering. Would it not have been more merciful to test Avraham without forcing him to walk alongside his son during the long hours en route to Moriah?

Rashi, quoting from the Tanhuma, notes that the delay of three days was to give Avraham time to think.⁹ Perhaps he had not immediately processed the enormity of the request to sacrifice his son. Perhaps he really didn’t understand what God was demanding of him. Perhaps he acted in a moment of confusion and would regret his reflexive acquiescence to the word of God. By insisting upon a three-day journey, God was ensuring that Avraham would have enough time to reflect upon the deed by the time he tied his son to the altar, and that his actions would be with full knowledge and intent. Rashi is aligning himself with *Bereishit Rabbah* that a focal point of the Akedah was to raise a banner, נס להתנוסס, to inform the world at large the extent to which Avraham loved God, the depth of the faith that Avraham displayed in God. Were it possible for those who were told about the story and about Avraham’s heroic faith to argue that Avraham had acted in a state of panic and confusion, that message would be diluted and discredited:

And it was after these things that God tested Avraham etc. You gave to those who fear you a banner to raise [Tehilim 60:6]. Test after test, elevation after elevation, in order to test them so that the rest of the world will see how they withstand the test, in order to elevate their status among the other nations of the world, in

ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלקים
נסה את אברהם וגו' נתתה ליריאיך
נס להתנוסס וגו' (תהלים סו) ניסיון
אחר ניסיון גידלון אחר גידלון
בשביל לנסותם בעולם בשביל לגדלן

⁸ It is interesting to note that in *Bereishit Rabbah* [see below], most of the events that are associated with the Akedah by virtue of the common phrase ויהי ביום השלישי all occur in Nissan. Spiegel and others in his wake have addressed the polemical implications of the Nissan versus Tishrei question.

⁹ Why did He delay from showing him the location right away? So that others would not say He confused him and that his [Avraham’s] mind was overloaded, and that had Avraham time to consider what was being asked of him he would not have complied. Rashi, Bereshit 22:4

⁹ רש"י ברשאתי כב:ד- ביום השלישי - למה
איחר מלהראותו מיד, כדי שלא יאמרו הממו
וערבבו פתאום וטרד דעתו, ואילו היה לו שהות
להמלך אל לבו לא היה עושה:

Rashi asks not why the Akedah was not performed in Be’er Sheva, but why God did not show Avraham the site from even further afar. Perhaps Rashi means Avraham could have been awarded “*kefitzat ha-derekh*,” a shortened path, and arrived much sooner than three days after beginning his journey.

order to raise their performance like a banner is raised on a ship. Why? [what is the purpose of putting Avraham through all of these tests?] For the sake of truth, to show that God judges fairly [and that those who are rewarded are deserving]. So that if a person were to say that God arbitrarily makes whoever He wants rich, that God arbitrarily makes whoever He wants poor, that God arbitrarily makes whoever He wants a king; that Avraham was arbitrarily made rich, that Avraham was arbitrarily made a king. Now we have an answer and reply: Could you have done what was asked of Avraham? Avraham was one hundred years old when Yitzchak his son was finally born. And after waiting so many years to have a son, he was then told to take this very son ... and he did not hesitate. "You have given those who fear You a banner to raise high."

Bereishit Rabbah no. 55

בעולם כנס שלספינה, וכל כך למה מפני קושט סלה בשביל שתתקשט מידת הדין בעולם שאם יאמר אדם למי שהוא רוצה מעשיר ולמי שהוא רוצה מעני ולמי שרוצה הוא עושה מלך, אברהם כשרצה עשאו עשיר כשרצה עשאו מלך, יכול את להשיבו ולאמר לו יכול את לעשות מה שעשה אברהם, ואברהם בן מאת שנה בהולד לו את יצחק בנו (בראשית כא ה) אחר הצער הזה נאמר לו קח נא את בנך וגו' ולא עיכב נתתה ליראיך נס להתנוסס, [והאלקים נסה את אברהם].
בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשה נה

In Bereishit Rabbah 56:1, we find yet another perspective. Here, Chazal take note of the phrase and look at all the other places in Tanach where that exact phrase [or in some cases the same passage of time] exists and they seek a common thread.

It is after three days in jail that Yosef frees his brothers on condition they return to Canaan to bring their youngest brother Binyamin down to Egypt (Bereishit 42:17). It is on the third day of preparations that God “descends” on Har Sinai to give the Torah to Bnai Yisrael (Shemot 19:16). It is after three days of hiding in the mountains that it is safe for the spies to return to Yehoshua and report on the city of Yericho (Yehoshua 2:16). It is on the third day of being swallowed by a fish that Yonah prays and is ejected from the fish (Yonah 2:1). It is after three days of fasting that Esther appears before Ahashverosh and begins to execute her plan to save the Jews (Esther 5:1). And in the time of Ezra, Bnai Yisrael return to Yerushalayim on the third day and begin to collect money to reestablish korbanot (Ezra 8:32).

We find another example in Sefer Hoshea:

Blow ye the horn of the Gibeah, and the trumpet in Ramah, sound an alarm at Beth-aven: "Behind thee, O Benjamin!" Ephraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke; among the tribes of Israel do I make known that which shall surely be. The princes of Judah are like them that remove the landmark; I will pour out my wrath upon them like water. Oppressed is Ephraim, crushed in his right; because he willingly walked after filth ... and when Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to King Contentious, but he is not able to heal you, nor shall he cure you of your wound ... "Come, let us return unto the Lord; for He hath torn, and He will heal us, He

הושע ה, ח תקעו שופר בגבעה, הצצרה ברמה; הריעו בית און, אהריף בגמיון. ה, ט אפרים לשמה תהנה, ביום תוכחה; בשבטי, ישראל, הודעתי, נאמנה. ה, י היו שרי יהודה, כמסיגי גבול; עליהם, אשפוד פמים עברתי. ה, יא עשוק אפרים, רצון משפט: כי הואיל, הלה אהרי-צו. ה, יב ואני כעש, לאפרים; וכרקב, לבית יהודה. ה, יג וירא אפרים את-תליו, ויהודה את-מזרו, וילך אפרים אל-אשור, וישלח אל-מלך ירב; והוא, לא יוכל לרפא לכם, ולא-יגהה מכם, מזור. ה, יד כי אנכי כשחל לאפרים, וכפפיר לבית יהודה; אני אני אטרף ואלה, אשא ואין מציל. ה, טו אלה אשובה אל-מקומי, עד אשר-יאשמו ובקשו פני: בצר להם, ישתרנגי. ו, א לכו

hath smitten, and He will bind us up. After two days will He revive us, on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live in His presence.”

וְנִשְׁבָּחָה אֱלֹהֵי, כִּי הוּא טָרַף וַיִּרְפָּאנוּ; וְ, וַיִּחַיְנוּ, מִיָּמִים; בַּיּוֹם, הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, וַיִּקְמְנוּ, וַיִּנְחָה לְפָנָיו.

On the level of *peshat* we understand that the people had suffered for two days and looked forward to the following day when God would deliver them [parallel to the paradigm we have seen thus far]. *Metzudat David*, though, suggests a historic and redemptive context. By defining the term יומיים not as days, but as events, he expands the scope of the message. We seek to return to God, Who has saved us from troubles twice in the past, and Who will deliver us once more in the future.

Behold He has sent to us salvation from two previous episodes that have already transpired—from the exile to Egypt and the exile to Babylon. On the third day, the third time, in the third redemption He will raise us from having fallen down and we will live in front of Him forever because we won't be sent any longer into exile.

Metzudat David, Hoshea 6:2

יַחֲיִינוּ מִיּוֹמָיִים- הַנָּה שָׁלַח לָנוּ רְפוּאָה מִשְׁנֵי הַעֲתִים שֶׁעָבְרוּ עָלֵינוּ הוּא גְלוּת מִצְרַיִם וְגְלוּת בָּבֶל. בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי- בַּעַת הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּגְּאוּלָּה הַעֲתִידָה יִקְמְנוּ מִן הַנִּפְיֵלָה וְנִחְיָה לְפָנָיו עַד עוֹלָם כִּי לֹא נִבּוּא עוֹד לְגוּלָּה.
מצודת דוד הושע ו:ב

The midrashim see a broad historic sweep in Hoshea's message. They ask: In what merit do we deserve to be saved yet again on a third day in a time to come in the future? And for that matter, in what merit did we deserve to be saved on all those other third days in the past? The midrashim offer two suggestions:

In what merit? The Rabbis and Rabbi Levi [have two different approaches]. The Rabbis suggest that in the merit of accepting the Torah on the third day [i.e. at Har Sinai we earned the privilege to be saved on other third days in the future]. Rabbi Levi says it was in the merit of the three days that Avraham traveled that we continued to be saved on the third day.

Bereishit Rabbah 56:1

בְּאִיזָה זְכוּת? רַבֵּן וְרַבִּי לֵוִי רַבְּנָן אָמְרֵי בְּזְכוּת יוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי שֶׁל מַתֵּן תּוֹרָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיּוֹת בּוֹקֵר וְר' לֵוִי אָמַר בְּזְכוּת שֶׁל יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי.
בראשית רבה פרשה נו:א

We can find, elsewhere in midrashic literature, an attempt to merge Har Sinai and Har ha-Moriah, perhaps as a bridge between the views of the rabbis and Rabbi Levi:

And Har Sinai from whence came? Rebbe Yossi says, it was uprooted from Har ha-Moriah, like a challah pulled from the dough, from the place upon which Yitzchak Avinu was bound. God said: since Yitzchak was bound on this mountain, it is desirable that upon this mountain his children will receive the Torah.

Midrash Tehillim 68:9

וַיִּסְנִי מֵהֵיכָן בָּא? אָמַר ר' יוֹסִי, מֵהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה נִתְּלַשׁ, כְּחָלֶה מֵעִיסָה, מִמָּקוֹם שֶׁנֶּעֱקֵד יִצְחָק אֲבִינוּ. אָמַר הַקַּב"ה: הוֹאִיל וַיִּצְחָק נֶעֱקֵד עָלָיו, נֹאֵה לְבָנָיו לְקַבֵּל עָלָיו אֶת הַתּוֹרָה.
מדרש תהילים סח:ט

R. Yonatan Grossman, in fact, posits that the story of Akedat Yitzchak serves as a foundation for the covenant that was established on Har Sinai for both historical and ethical reasons. “By passing this difficult test, Avraham certifies his children to receive the Ten Commandments and eternally: the *mesirut nefesh* of man to his God is the basic condition and prerequisite for the Covenant.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Y. Grossman, “Akedat Yitzchak u-Berit Sinai” in Y. Rozenson and B. Lau, *Akedat Yitzchak Le-Zar'oh* (R. Mass: Tel Aviv, 2006), pp.355-364. Translated from the Hebrew by the author.

Akedat Yitzchak emerges as the lynchpin in the midrash upon which all the other events of the “third day” depend. In the various events listed in the midrash, the first two days represent a tragedy, a conflict. The third day brings deliverance or salvation. The deliverance can be of a personal nature [such as Yosef with his brothers or Yonah in the fish]. The deliverance can be of a communal nature [such as Esther in Shushan or the Jews in the time of Ezra or Hoshea]. But what theme is Rabbi Yochanan trying to extrapolate from Akedat Yitzchak- who is being delivered and what is the nature of the deliverance? One obvious answer is that it is Yitzchak who is being saved. But his name is not even mentioned in the midrash. So confining ourselves to Avraham, what is the nature of his deliverance? Has he been saved from having to sacrifice his son? Has he been saved from the dread, the trembling of the previous days? What is Avraham feeling at the moment that he lifts up the knife to sacrifice his son? And what is his reaction to the angel’s announcement that he is to cease and desist at once? Is there relief that he need not kill his son? Is there sadness in not being able to fulfill the Divine command?

This conflict that was raging in Avraham over the course of the three day journey comes to a head at the moment that Avraham raises his knife, and is poignantly depicted in the following midrash as a struggle between the eyes and the heart- the eyes representing the emotion and the heart representing the mind.

And Avraham stretched out his hand.” He stretches out his hand to lift the knife, and tears streaming from his eyes, fall into the eyes of Yitzchak as a result of the pity of a father [for a son]... but even so the heart is happy to be able to do the will of his Creator.

Bereishit Rabbah 56:8

וישלח אברהם את ידו הוא שולח יד
ליטול את הסכין ועיניו מורידות
דמעות ונופלות דמעות לעיניו של
יצחק מרחמנותו של אבא ואעפ"כ
הלב שמח לעשות רצון יוצרו...
בראשית רבה נו:ח

Avraham was willing to pay a great and terrible price to heed God’s command. Yet his journey to Har ha-Moriah was tumultuous. As an ethical man, he had spent his life trying to do what was right. Moreover his efforts had been very much in the public eye, and he called on all people that he met to meet the ethical challenges of life. The command of Akedat Yitzchak challenged the very fiber of his previous understanding of what is good and what is right. Yet as one who feared God he has pledged himself to do that which God has commanded him.

It is this struggle, the struggle between the eyes and the heart, between ethical mores and religious values, that is at the heart of the three day travel and serves as a basis for our deliverance throughout history. Every morning we beseech God to follow in the ways of Avraham as we recite the korbanot section of Tefilat Shacharit:

The same way that Avraham conquered his feelings of mercy as a father to fulfill Your command, You should let Your feelings of mercy conquer your feelings of anger towards us.

כמו שכבש אברהם אבינו את רחמיו מבן יחידו ורצה
לשחוט אותו כדי לעשות רצונך, כן יכבשו רחמך את
כעסך מעלינו, ועלו רחמך על מדותיך.

Avraham was not ultimately forced to choose between the loving father and the loyal servant. God reminds Avraham that He never asked for a sacrifice, but for Avraham to offer.¹¹ But because of his willingness to comply with the words of God, because of the arduous three day journey filled with wrenching emotion but steadfast observance, not only Avraham and Yitzchak but we, too, seek deliverance and redemption.

¹¹ See the *Sifra*, Devarim 148, [also *Taanit* 4a and *Tanchuma, Vayerah* 40], quoting a pasuk from Sefer Yirmiyahu (19:5) to explain that God never intended for Yitzchak to be sacrificed.

That you did not command, this is the daughter of Yiftach; that you did speak about, that is the son of Mesha the king of Moav; that never came into my mind, that is Yitzchak the son of Avraham.

אשר לא צויתי זו בת יפתח, ולא דברתי זה בנו של
מישע מלך מואב, ולא עלתה על לבי זה יצחק בן
אברהם