

STUDY GUIDE FOR RABBI NANUS' ZOOM TORAH CLASS – WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22**THE AKEDAH (Genesis 22:1-19)**

22 Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!”

And he said, “Here I am.”

² Then He said, “Take now your son, your only *son* Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

³ So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. ⁵ And Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the ^(a)lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.”

⁶ So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid *it* on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. ⁷ But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!”

And he said, “Here I am, my son.”

Then he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where *is* the ^(b)lamb for a burnt offering?”

⁸ And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together.

⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. ¹⁰ And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

¹¹ But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!”

So he said, “Here I am.”

¹²And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only *son*, from Me.”

¹³Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind *him* was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴And Abraham called the name of the place, ^[e]The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said *to* this day, “In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

¹⁵Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, ¹⁶and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only *son*— ¹⁷blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” ¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

²⁰Now it came to pass after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, “Indeed Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: ²¹Huz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, ²²Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” ²³And Bethuel begot ^[o]REBECCA. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. ²⁴His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah, Gaham, Thahash, and Maachah.

Many modern readers wish that the story of the Akedah was different. Abraham should have protested! He did so about Sodom, so why not now?^[1] He should have resisted! A command, even from God, is not binding if it is not ethical, and we hardly have to point out that murdering a child is not ethical.

And yet, the Torah’s story seems unambiguously positive about Abraham’s behavior. Not only does God say to him, “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me” (Gen 22:12), but the same action merited a divine oath of favor:

Traditional commentators have long tried to mitigate the problems with the story, both on God’s part and Abraham’s, in such a way as to make all parties seem ethical.^[3] And yet there has always been, even among traditional readers, an under-current of unease with the story.

Walking There Together but Leaving Separately

While the text may be unambiguous in its praise of Abraham's devotion to God, it also clearly hints at a problem: a rupture in his relationship with Isaac. On the way to the Mountain, one phrase is used twice about Abraham and Isaac (vv. 6 and 8):

"The two of them walked together."

Yet, after the Akedah, a variant of the phrase is used a third time,^[4] "and they walked together," but the word "the two of them" is absent:

Gen 22:19 "Abraham returned to his attendants, and they rose and **they walked together** to Beersheba, and Abraham lived in Beersheba."

Abraham walks back together with his attendants, but, as Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) comments: "It does not mention Isaac." Ibn Ezra and Radak argue that Isaac was in fact there, and only not mentioned; Abarbanel, more dramatically, suggests that Isaac did not in fact return with Abraham to Beersheba, but instead went to his mother in Hebron, apparently living separate from her husband. In any case, however, the omission of Isaac is jarring, and suggests some sort of rupture between father and son, husband and wife.^[5] In short, vis-à-vis God, Abraham is doing very well, but vis-à-vis Sarah and Isaac, things are less happy.

Comparison to the Story of Hagar and Ishmael

Comparing the story of the Akedah in Genesis 22 to the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael in the previous chapter (Gen 21) suggests a particular mistake Abraham made. The two stories are strikingly parallel.^[6]

In both,

- God tells Abraham that he needs to get rid of his son – banish in the case of Ishmael, kill in the case of Isaac (21:12-13; 22:1-2).
- Abraham "wakes up early in the morning" and takes his supplies (21:14; 22:3).
- The end draws near: Ishmael, about to die of thirst, is left under a bush by his mother (21:15-16), and Isaac is about to be slaughtered by his father (21:9-10).
- At the last minute, an angel appears to offer a reprieve (21:17, 22:11–12).
- The appearance of the angel is followed by blessings for the future (21:18; 22:16-17).
- The salvation is tied to the parent seeing something new – a well of water in the case of Hagar (21:19) and a ram in the case of Abraham (22:13).
- Each end with notices related to the children's marriages (21:21; 22:20-24).

For both stories, "the central issue," as biblical scholar Jon Levenson puts it, "is whether the first-born son of Abraham will survive the ordeal into which he has been placed by a father preeminently obedient to God's command."^[7]

Hagar Cries Out to God: What About Abraham?

One important difference between the stories relates to the issue of God's covenant with the Patriarchs. Ishmael and his Egyptian mother are banished; Ishmael marries an Egyptian girl and will not inherit his father. Isaac, however, will inherit his father's blessings and marry within his father's family.

For our purposes, though, an ostensibly small difference between the stories is the most important. The story of Hagar and Ishmael describes Hagar's reaction to her plight (Gen 21:16):

"[Hagar] lifted up her voice and cried."

This is immediately followed by the message from the angel reassuring Hagar that God has heard her cry and reassuring her about the future of her son. In the story of the Akedah, however, Abraham never cries out for mercy for Isaac. The rabbis were troubled enough by this absence that they seem to have simply assumed that he did pray.

The mishnah appears to assume that Abraham prayed that he would not have to sacrifice his son, and that this prayer was answered.^[8]

But of course, this is absent from the biblical text. In the narratives themselves, Abraham could have prayed, as Hagar did, but failed to do so. Taken together with the previous observation, this suggests that Abraham was pious, but not perfect, in the Akedah.

Why Didn't Abraham Receive the Torah? A Piyyut by Qillir

According to rabbinic midrash, the Torah antedates the creation of the world (*Gen. Rab.* 8:2). Why, then, did God wait until the time of Moses to actually bestow it upon the world? In a *piyyut* for Shavuot,^[9] R. Qilliri answers that until the time of Moses, no worthy recipient could be found.

The poem takes the form of a dialogue between two characters:

1. **God** reviews history looking for people to whom the Torah may be gifted.
2. **The Torah** rejects each potential recipient with a critical look at their flaws.

And thus, we hear of the great of yore, and the flaws of each. Adam was ruled out because of the sin; Cain because of his murder; Noah because of his drunkenness. Then we come to Abraham.^[10]

God begins, in Qilliri's poem, with all the reasons to think that Abraham may indeed be deserving:

"Turning to the end of twenty he saw
Indeed, to circumcise him I rejoiced and exulted
He burnt idols, and I gazed upon him
He abandoned his family to enter my fold."

But the Torah—referred to here as אמת, “the faithful one”—replies:
 The young man with whom you graced him when his strength was spent
 He bound on the wood of the altar
 Arrested for three days, he offered his chick
 It was pleasant, and his offering was accepted
 He became great, and his reputation spread throughout the land.
 But he forgot how a father is supposed to have mercy on children
 A prayer or plea he should have offered!”

The Torah does not, of course, criticize Abraham for having offered Isaac – it could not, and concedes that God said, “now I know that you are a fearer of God.” But still it finds something to criticize, a profound reason why Abraham cannot receive the Torah: He forgot to have mercy to on his children.

It may be that he had no choice, that faced with the overwhelming command of God, even a loving father must act as he did. But surely, he should have asked!

The Pathos of the Akedah in Yudisher Shtam

A thousand years later, a Yiddish epic poet turned his attention to the Akedah in the poem *Yudisher shtam*.

This text, written in rhyming quatrains in around 1500, is part of a genre of early Yiddish epic re-tellings of biblical stories, combining the biblical text, midrashic and other rabbinic interpretations and embellishments, as well as creative additions and recastings. The text is unflinching in its depiction of the pain and pathos of Abraham and Isaac, focusing on the pain the sacrifice would cause Sarah:^[12]

Isaac’s face was covered in hot tears:

**“Dear father, what are you going to say to my mother,
 when she does not see me returning with you?”**

“Dear son, I well know what will happen to us both.

**I and your dear mother, Sarah,
 After your death, will not long remain on earth,
 for who could comfort me in my misery
 and your mother in her grief and pain?” ...**

This text is noteworthy for its cynicism about the value of the Akedah – a stunning attitude for a traditional Jew to take towards one of the most often-quoted biblical stories. Contrary to the long line of Jewish texts that emphasize the significance of the Akedah for later Jewry, the *Yudisher shtam* concludes on this note:

**It is also written in our holy books
 that when we blow *teki’ah, teru’ah, shevarim,***

**then many of the gates of mercy open
 and all evil decrees and evil vows are torn apart. ...
 And we will soon be delivered from the exile.
 And he will send us the Messiah even as far as Cremona and Venice.
 If you want to know the truth,
 I (=the poet) do not think much of people.
 I swear to you as a true Jew:
 they are only so pious that they indeed need another Binding just about every day.
 Now, be that as it may, I cannot change it.
 I will ask His name, blessed be He, that He hasten and end it
 and soon send us the Redeemer.
 And with that I will conclude and make an end.**

Modern Poems Critical of Abraham

Far more criticism of Abraham, against the grain of the text, can be found in modern times.

The British poet of World War I Wilfred Owen, who died on the front in 1918, published "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" in the year of his death.

He stands in a line of modern readers who see the Akedah as a stand-in for some of the evils of the world, older men sending the younger generation to fight and die for a cause that is dear to those who will return to their homes, safe and sound, at the end of the conflict:

**So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
 And took the fire with him, and a knife.
 And as they sojourned both of them together,
 Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
 But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
 and builded parapets and trenches there,
 And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
 When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
 Neither do anything to him. Behold,
 A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
 Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
 But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.**