VAYERA: The Sacrifice of Isaac

Adapted from the book “Encounters” by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan z»l

Abraham hears a Voice. The Voice is familiar. It is the same Voice that commanded him to leave the land of his ancestors and migrate to the land of Canaan. The same Voice that promised him that he would bless him and that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. That voice, the Voice of God, made many promises and never let him down. Sometimes he had doubts, like when he got to the promised land and found a terrible drought. Or when the Egyptian Pharaoh kidnaped his wife Sara. But Abraham realizes that not all Divine promises materialize immediately. Sometimes you have to wait. And that is how “patience” became a pivotal part of his faith. Abraham learned to obey and trust his interlocutor: The Creator of the heavens and the earth. That Voice promised Abraham, at the age of 100, that Sara would have a son. The promise was fulfilled, and that child was called Yitzhaq, “the [child] who will make his parents laugh”. He will be the source of happiness for Abraham and Sara for the rest of their lives.

But now, when Abraham gets up to pray and thank the Creator in the morning, the Voice addresses him with the familiar call: “Abraham, Abraham”. Abraham hears that Voice physically as if someone is speaking very close to him. Abraham looks around him to make sure no human is there, and then he replies: “Hineni”. “Here I am”, I’m ready to carry out Your command.” And then he hears the Voice telling him something unimaginable: “Take your son, your only son, the one you love so much: Yitzchaq. And go with him to the land of Moriah (Jerusalem) and offer him there as a sacrifice to me.” And then the Voice disappears.

Abraham is left alone. His mind is confused. He has no idea that this is just a test. He feels dizzy as if the world around him is collapsing. He is about to faint. Abraham leans against a tree to keep from falling. His heart is beating very fast. “Oh, Creator of the world, this is not possible. You cannot have ordered me to sacrifice my son Yitzchak. The son You gave me in my old age. The child who finally brought infinite joy to me and my beloved wife, Sara. This is a mistake. A hallucination. A nightmare “.

But then Abraham realizes that he cannot fool himself. God that guided and blessed him has given an order to the most loyal of all His servants. To the man who taught the world that there is a Creator, the source of life and all blessings, that He must be obeyed by His creatures. Now is the time for the most excruciating test of Abraham Abinu’s loyalty to God. Will Abraham only obey God when it suits him? Would Abraham be loyal to God only when He bestows upon him blessings and glory? Will Abraham be able to obey God and be faithful to Him when he is about to lose what he most wants in his life?

Abraham is still in the same place. He hopes to hear the Voice again with some clarification. Or a counterorder. But as the day passes, Abraham’s doubts about the Voice’s identity dissipate. The order was not a hallucination. The Voice was as clear as when He promised him a son, whom he now loves more than anything. Much more than himself. How easy it would be to obey this order, thought Abraham if the Voice had commanded him to offer himself as a sacrifice! But Abraham is asked to do more than any other man has ever done.

After a night of terror and when Abraham no longer doubts the origin of the Voice, he realizes that he cannot deny God anything. The Creator gave him to his son, and for some reason that Abraham cannot understand, now He is asking for him back. In the morning, Abraham gets up early from his bed and prepares to fulfill the still inexplicable Divine order. Without saying a word, Abraham indicates his beloved son Isaac

and his two servants to help him load a wood pile onto the donkey. And then the four men leave in silence.

Abraham's face is stiff as a stone. His gaze, elusive, fixed on the road ahead. His eyes reflect light but hide some secret. No one dares to question Abraham, who always does the right thing. They walk for three agonizing days through the woods and fields. Abraham remains silent; he does not utter a word, strangely, not even to his son.
At last, they see Mount Moriah. Abraham orders his servants to unload the wood and load it onto young Isaac's strong back. Abraham takes the stones to light a fire, and under his robe, he hides a long knife.

Now, father and son walk up the mountain together. Speechless. Isaac finally breaks the silence and asks Abraham the obvious question, "Father, it looks like we're going to offer a sacrifice. I see the wood and the stones to light the fire. But where is the animal we will sacrifice?" Abraham closes his eyes and cries. Can he reveal to his beloved son that God has chosen him to be the sacrifice? "God will provide the sacrificial animal," Abraham answers, his voice cracking. Isaac continues walking next to his beloved father and says nothing more. Isaac fully trusts that his father is fulfilling some Divine order. And so, father and son, together in mind and heart, continue to climb the mountain until they come close to the top. There Isaac watches as his father brings some heavy rocks to build an altar, and when he finishes, he helps him place the wood on the newly built altar.

Abraham, pale and trembling, asks his son to extend his hands and binds his wrists with leather straps. Once Isaac's hands are restrained, Abraham binds his feet. Isaac doesn't understand what's going on. Unable to imagine the truth, he thinks his father is playing some game with him. He looks at his father, but Abraham avoids looking at him. There are only tears in his eyes and a muffled cry. Something terrible is happening. "Where is the sacrificial lamb?" Isaac wonders

again. And suddenly, he realizes that the lamb is him! Isaac pales and begins to tremble, but his respect for his father is as great as Abraham’s respect for God. And incredibly, he offers no resistance. The old patriarch takes the young man in his strong arms, lifts him up, and lays him gently on the altar. Isaac looks at him in disbelief. His father continues to avoid his gaze. Isaac watches as his father pulls out the knife hidden under his clothes and feels the cold metal against his throat.

Abraham holds the knife and takes courage to finish the most challenging test that no man of faith had ever had to accomplish. But suddenly, just before the final act, he hears the Voice calling him urgently and saying: “Abraham, Abraham.” Abraham lowers the knife and replies, “Here I am.” Ready to fulfill Your command. The Voice, now louder and more evident than ever, orders him: “Do not direct your hand at your son. Don’t do him any harm. Now you have shown your complete devotion to God: you have not denied Him anything, not even your only son.” And the Voice says no more. Abraham’s eyes are filled again with tears, but those tears are joy this time. Abraham unties his son; he lifts his eyes and sees that very close to where they are, there is a ram with its horn caught in a bush. Abraham takes the animal, brings it to the altar he built for Isaac, and offers it as a sacrifice.
The test is over.