



The *Akeida*  
By David Silverberg

The final and perhaps most famous section of Parashat Vayera tells the emotional story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, literally, "the binding of Yitzchak," God's startling command to Avraham to offer his beloved son, Yitzchak, as a sacrifice. Avraham faithfully obeys the divine command and prepares to slaughter his son, until an angel of God calls to him and bids him to withdraw his knife.

The opening verse of this narrative appears to very clearly establish the purpose underlying God's otherwise unfathomable demand: "*Va-yehi achar ha-devarim ha-eileh ve-ha-Elokim nisa et Avraham*" – "After these events, God tested Avraham..." (22:1). The shocking command to kill his own son in the divine service served as a test to determine the extent of Avraham's devotion to God. This underlying motive appears to emerge as well from the angel's declaration to Avraham as he lifted the knife to slaughter Yitzchak: "Do not cast your hand against the lad... for now I know that you are God-fearing, for you did not [even] withhold your only son from me" (22:12). At first glance, Avraham had to prove to God his boundless "fear" and sense of obedience, by being prepared to destroy his most treasured possession and act in direct opposition to the strongest human emotion and most elementary sense of ethical conduct.

Many writers have addressed the obvious question that immediately presents itself when one reads this narrative, and which, for that matter, arises from the very notion of a *nisayon* – a "test." God undoubtedly has prior knowledge of the results of such a "test." Human beings test each other because they would otherwise be unable to know the extent of the tested individual's knowledge, skill, devotion, and so on. The Almighty, however, has advanced knowledge of all events, and the concept of a *nisayon*, a test to determine a person's level of commitment, seems entirely unnecessary. Indeed, Maimonides introduces his discussion of the concept of *nisayon* by remarking, "The doctrine of trials is open to great objections; it is in fact more exposed to objections than any other thing taught in Scripture."

In this essay we will first present and discuss Maimonides' approach to the concept of *nisayon* generally, and we will then proceed to his comments regarding specifically the test of the *akeida*. Maimonides' treatment of this topic is contained in a single chapter – chapter 24 of the third section of his *Guide for the Perplexed*.

### **Maimonides on the Concept of *Nisayon***

Maimonides begins by dispelling what he deems a common misconception regarding the notion of "tests" that God brings upon an individual: "People have generally the notion that trials consist in afflictions and mishaps sent by God to man, not as punishments for past sins, but as giving opportunity for great reward." According to the popular approach, a "test" is undeserved suffering imposed upon a righteous person for the purpose of increasing his reward later. Maimonides outright dismisses such a notion, citing a verse from the Book of the Devarim (32:4) which describes the Almighty as "a God of faithfulness, and there is no iniquity in him." The Torah says about God "*ve-ein aveil*" – He is above any injustice or iniquity, and one therefore cannot consider the possibility of undeserved affliction brought upon a person by God. Furthermore, Maimonides adds, the Sages in the Talmud (Shabbat 55a) explicitly affirmed, "There is no death without sin, and no affliction without transgression." He concludes, "Every intelligent person should have this faith, and

should not ascribe any wrong to God, who is far from it; he must not assume that a person is innocent and perfect and does not deserve what has befallen him."

Maimonides therefore advances a much different approach to the concept of *nisayon*, whereby it serves not the interests of the tested person, but rather the needs of mankind in general: "The sole object of all trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe; so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired; it is but an example for our instruction and guidance." God subjects a person to a trial so that his triumph will set an example and precedent for others to follow. For example, in the Book of Devarim (13:4), Moshe informs *Benei Yisrael* that false prophets may arise and perform impressive wonders in an attempt to lead them away from the service of God. Moshe bids the people to ignore the charlatan's miraculous "proofs" of the Torah's abrogation, "for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." Though on the surface the "test" seems aimed at proving the people's allegiance to God, in truth, Maimonides explains, its purpose is "to prove to the nations how firmly you believe in the truth of God's word...that you cannot be misled by any tempter to corrupt your faith in God." *Benei Yisrael's* steadfast faith and their unquestioning rejection of even the most dazzling miracle-worker provides to the nations of the world an inspiring example of unshakeable faith and resolute confidence in one's religion. The result, Maimonides explains, is that Judaism "will then afford a guidance to all who seek the truth, and of all religions man will choose that which is so firmly established that it is not shaken by the performance of a miracle."

In a similar vein, Maimonides interprets the verse cited above from the *akeida* narrative: "for now I know that you are God-fearing, for you did not [even] withhold your only son from me." Maimonides asserts that the word *yadati* – "I know" – should be read as *hodati* – "I have made known." God did not need the *akeida* to prove to Him Avraham's boundless faithfulness, but He did require this trial to prove it to the world. (Later, we will discuss Maimonides' view as to what particular message was broadcast to mankind through the trial of the *akeida*.) Indeed, the Midrashic volume *Bereishit Rabba* (56:7) explicitly interprets *yadati* to mean "I have made known," and it is likely on this basis that Maimonides arrived at his reading.

Later in this chapter, Maimonides acknowledges that a verse in the Book of Devarim (8:16) indeed appears to cast future reward as the purpose underlying a *nisayon*. Moshe recalls to *Benei Yisrael* the hardships they endured during their travels through the wilderness, and explains that the Almighty subjected them to this experience "in order to torment you, and in order to test you, to do good for you in the end." Seemingly, the sole purpose of the wilderness experience was for *Benei Yisrael* to accrue future reward as a result of a period of undeserved suffering.

Maimonides refutes this proof by suggesting two novel, alternative interpretations of that verse. First, he suggests reading it to mean that the wilderness experience was intended "to show [to all people] whether faith in God is sufficient to secure man's maintenance and his relief from care and trouble, or not." In this verse Moshe explains the purpose of the hardships in the wilderness as demonstrating God's ability to care for people under any circumstances, and that following His instruction can enable one to survive even in the unbearable conditions of the wilderness. The phrase, "to do good for you in the end" thus refers not to the direct purpose of the trial, but rather the central message this trial is meant to convey: obeying the Almighty ultimately yields benefit and reward.

Secondly, Maimonides suggests rereading the word *nasotekha* (generally interpreted as "to test you"), to mean "to accustom you." (He cites precedent for this usage of this word from Devarim 28:56 – "*asher lo niseta khaf ragla hatzeg al ha-aretz.*") The harsh conditions of desert travel "did good" for *Benei Yisrael* once they entered the Land of Israel. For one thing, Maimonides writes, "the transition from trouble to ease gives more pleasure than continual ease." The difficulties endured in the wilderness thus enhanced the people's gratification upon entering and cultivating their permanent homeland. But perhaps more significantly, Maimonides writes, "the Israelites would not have been able to conquer the land and fight with its inhabitants, if they had not previously undergone the trouble and hardship of the wilderness... Ease destroys bravery, whilst trouble and

care for food create strength." The hardships experienced during this period helped hone the nation's physical skills and stamina in preparation for the warfare that awaited them in the Land of Israel. The trial of the wilderness benefited Israel not in terms of reward in exchange for undeserved suffering, but rather as a natural effect of the harsh conditions, which prepared them physically and emotionally for the difficult battles against the Canaanite population.

Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to the *akeida* narrative, cites a similar approach in the name of Rabbenu Sa'adya Gaon, and objects, asking, "Was not the Gaon aware that when Avraham sacrificed his son there was no one present, not even his servant?" How, Ibn Ezra asks, could the test of the *akeida* serve as a demonstration to all mankind, if it occurred on an isolated mountaintop and was witnessed by no one other than the two men subject to this trial?

The obvious answer, as provided by numerous writers (Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, in his commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak*; Abarbanel; and Rabbi Menachem Meiri, in his treatise on repentance), is that the Biblical account of this trial suffices to publicize it to the world. In Rabbi Arama's words, "Since this trial was narrated in the Torah as testimony of the living God, it is as if the trial took place in the presence of every Jew, past, present and future."

### **Nachmanides' View**

Nachmanides, in his commentary to this narrative, advances a much different approach to the concept of *nisayon*: "God, who confronts man with the trial, commands him in order to translate into action the potentialities of his character, and give him the reward of a good deed, in addition to the reward of a good heart." Nachmanides describes a trial as an opportunity for the individual being tested to express his devotion in practice, so that he may earn the reward for action, which exceeds the reward for internal faith and commitment. In direct contrast to Maimonides, who perceives a trial as an instruction by example to all mankind, Nachmanides sees a *nisayon* as serving the interests of the tested person, allowing him the opportunity to act upon his devotion, rather than just feel it internally.

This debate between Maimonides and Nachmanides may have much earlier roots, in two interpretations by *Chazal* to the opening words of the *akeida* narrative, "*Va-yehi achar ha-devarim ha-eileh*" (literally, "It occurred, after these things"). The Gemara (Sanhedrin 89b), cited by Rashi, addresses the question, in response to what "things" did God command Avraham to sacrifice his son? According to one view, this command resulted from the accusation of the Satan that Avraham offered no sacrifices to God during the festivities he held to celebrate his son's birth. To refute the Satan's allegation of Avraham's selfishness and religious indifference, God ordered him to offer his son as a sacrifice. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 55:4), however, describes Avraham as himself entertaining these thoughts, dismayed over having neglected to make any offering to God during his celebrations. These two differing accounts correspond to the positions taken by Maimonides and Nachmanides in understanding the concept of *nisayon*. The "Satan," the heavenly prosecutor, likely represents in this case the skeptical attitude of many of Avraham's contemporaries, who seized every opportunity to question Avraham's religious sincerity. Thus, according to the Gemara, the *akeida* served as a demonstration to mankind, confirming Avraham's loyalty to the God whose existence and authority he worked so hard to teach. The Midrash, however, speaks of Avraham's dissatisfaction with his achievements, and the opportunity God grants him to actualize his potential. This perspective likely corresponds to Nachmanides' understanding of *nisayon* as a means of enabling a righteous individual to translate his potential into concrete action.

### **The Two "Great Ideas" of the *Akeida***

Now that we have established that, in Maimonides' view, a trial serves to set an example and provide instruction for mankind, let us turn our attention to the binding of Isaac and the instructions that emerge from this particular trial. Towards the end of this chapter in the *Guide*, Maimonides

points to "two great ideas or principles of our faith" affirmed by the *akeida*. Maimonides eloquently describes the first principle as follows:

First, it shows us the extent and limit of the fear of God. Abraham is commanded to perform a certain act, which is not equaled by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses everything that can be done, and belongs to the class of actions which are believed to be contrary to human feelings. He had been without child, and had been longing for a child; he had great riches, and was expecting that a nation should spring from his seed. After all hope of a son had already been given up, a son was born unto him. How great must have been his delight in the child; how intensely he must have loved him!" And yet because he feared God, and loved to do what God commanded, he thought little of that beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and consented to kill him after a journey of three days. If the act by which he showed his readiness to kill his son had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment, proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the Divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of God. There is no necessity to look for the presence of any other idea or anything that might have affected his emotions. For Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God might slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is man's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment. The angel, therefore, says to him, "For now I know," etc., that is, from this action, for which you deserve to be truly called a God-fearing man, all people shall learn how far we must go in the fear of God.

Avraham's compliance with God's command to slaughter Yitzchak sets the precedent of unconditioned loyalty to God, the willingness to sacrifice all that one has in the fulfillment of the divine will. Needless to say, and as evidenced by the story's conclusion, God has no interest in human sacrifices; to the contrary, the Torah on several occasions denounces in the strongest terms the pagan ritual of Molekh, which involves burning children. The purpose of the *akeida* was to demonstrate that one must obey the divine command regardless of what sacrifices it entails, and irrespective of any foreseeable benefit it will yield.

Several writers questioned the necessity of this example of unlimited devotion. After all, as mentioned, the ancient pagans were well accustomed to this very kind of sacrifice – offering one's children as gifts to the gods. If idolaters were already practicing this sort of ritual, why would Avraham have to demonstrate his willingness to do the same to the one, true God? His message, seemingly, involved not the extent of sacrifice – a concept that was well-established in pagan rites – but rather the issue of to whom to sacrifice – to the one omniscient God, or to the celestial beings and graven images. Why, then, was the *akeida* test necessary to show the extent of unconditioned fear of God?

A second question, raised by Rabbi Yehuda Amital ([www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/9-sichot/04vayera.rtf](http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/9-sichot/04vayera.rtf)), involves the relevance of this message to "all people," as Maimonides distinctly emphasizes, including gentiles. In his *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Melakhim 10:2), Maimonides explicitly rules that Torah law never demands that a gentile surrender his life to observe the laws that apply to him. Even in situations where he is forced to worship idols, in which case a Jew must refuse even at the threat of death, a gentile may worship the foreign deity to save his life. How, then, is this message of the *akeida*, the notion of boundless sacrifice in the divine service, relevant to "all people"?

Rabbi Amital explained Maimonides' comments in light of the context of the *akeida* within Avraham's campaign against the pagan world. As Maimonides famously describes in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Avodat Kokhavim, chapter 1), the world had all but forgotten the concept of an omniscient, incorporeal deity governing the earth. Mankind could relate only to gods sharing man's physical properties and even emotional tendencies, and could not imagine the existence of an entirely non-physical Creator. The test of the *akeida* was necessary to prove the extent of man's

devotion to a God which he cannot see or even envision or imagine. The pagans found it difficult to commit themselves unconditionally and make sacrifices on behalf of Avraham's incorporeal deity. They could make all kinds of painful sacrifices for gods to whom they could relate on the basis of shared qualities and experiences, but not to a God that is – in their view - so remote and inaccessible. The precedent of the *akeida* was therefore necessary to prove the possibility of man's committing himself to such an extent even to a God without any manlike features.

We might suggest a different reason for the particular expression of devotion manifest through the *akeida*. Towards the end of the passage cited above, Maimonides emphasizes that "Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God might slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is man's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment." Avraham fulfilled the divine command not to escape retribution or to earn immense reward, but purely for the sake of obeying God, which is intrinsically the greatest good a person can achieve. It is this type of devotion, perhaps, that the trial of the *akeida* served to exemplify. The sacrificial rituals practiced by the pagans worked as a kind of "barter" system, whereby the human being gave to the gods so that they would in turn grant him health, success, and so on, or spare him the ravages of the natural elements, disease and hostile enemies. Part of Avraham's message to the pagan world was that the worship of God is intrinsically meaningful, irrespective of any reward or escape of punishment. The *akeida* underscored his conviction in this regard, as he prepared to make the most painful sacrifice without any identifiable benefit other than the inherent value of serving the Creator.

The second "great idea" and "principle of our faith" manifest through the *akeida* involved the concept of prophecy:

The second purpose is to show how the prophets believed in the truth of that which came to them from God by way of inspiration. We shall not think that what the prophets heard or saw in allegorical figures may at times have included incorrect or doubtful elements, since the Divine communication was made to them, as we have shown, in a dream or a vision and through the imaginative faculty. Scripture thus tells us that whatever the Prophet perceives in a prophetic vision, he considers as true and correct and not open to any doubt; it is in his eyes like all other things perceived by the senses or by the intellect. This is proved by the consent of Abraham to slay "his only son whom he loved," as he was commanded, although the commandment was received in a dream or vision. If the Prophets had any doubt or suspicion as regards the truth of what they saw in a prophetic dream or perceived in a prophetic vision, they would not have consented to do what is unnatural, and Abraham would not have found in his soul strength enough to perform that act, if he had any doubt.

Since prophecy is conveyed indirectly, through a vision or dream, one might have questioned the accuracy of any alleged prophecy. Who is to say that the prophet correctly deciphered the prophetic vision he beheld? On what basis may we assume that what the prophet communicates to the people accurately reflects the divine message conveyed to him? Given that the Torah's laws were all transmitted to *Benei Yisrael* through prophecy, an answer to these questions is necessary to affirm the validity of the very foundations of the Torah. Maimonides thus claims that the *akeida* provides us with such a basis. It is inconceivable that Avraham would have lifted the knife to sacrifice his son had he not heard the divine word with complete clarity, "like all other things perceived by the senses or by the intellect." His preparedness to obey such a command confirms his unwavering belief in the command, which can be explained only in light of the perfect clarity of prophetic communication.

The question has been raised (by Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv, writing in the journal *Megadim*, vol. 1) as to whether the commandment of the *akeida* can truly be said to have served this function. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:8) discusses God's seeming "change of heart" in suddenly dispatching an angel to order Avraham to withdraw his knife. According to the Midrash, this decision did not result from a change in plans, but rather followed the Almighty's initial scheme, so-to-speak. The initial command to Avraham that he take his son and "bring him up as an offering" ("ve-

*ha'alehu...le-ola*" – 22:2), meant that Avraham should bring him to the designated site, but not that he should slaughter him. The Midrash appears to claim that the angel came to clarify to Avraham what the Almighty had in mind – that he should bring his son to Moriah, but not that he should kill him. At first glance, then, this prophecy indicates that to the contrary, prophetic visions are subject to ambiguity and misinterpretation. Avraham, as it turns out, misunderstood the divine command, interpreting it to mean that he must kill his son, rather than simply bring him to the designated location. How, then, can Maimonides point to this prophecy as establishing the axiom of prophetic clarity?

The answer, it would seem, is plainly obvious. Avraham did not misinterpret God's word; it could hardly be doubted that God intended for Avraham to understand the instruction, "*ve-ha'alehu...le-ola*" to mean that he must slaughter his son. The intent of the Midrash is to clarify that God did not have any change of heart in this episode, and that He did not ever wish for Avraham to actually kill his son. Already from the outset, He planned to prevent Avraham from sacrificing his son. From Avraham's perspective, however, there is no question that he understood the divine command precisely as it was intended to be understood, namely, that he should sacrifice his son. Thus, Maimonides is indeed correct in pointing to the *akeida* as compelling evidence to the clarity of prophetic messages, and the accuracy with which the prophet hears and understands the words conveyed to him from the Almighty.