



Parashat Vayera concludes with the famous story of the *akeida*, God's "test" of Avraham by instructing him to offer his beloved son, Yitzchak, as a human sacrifice to God. Avraham heroically prepares to slaughter his son, until an angel of God appears and bids him to withdraw the knife. God then promises to reward Avraham for this act by creating a great and successful nation from him.

Rashi, in his commentary later in the Book of Bereishit (23:2, 25:20), follows the view recorded in several Midrashic sources (*Bereishit Rabba* 58:5, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 32, and elsewhere) that *akeidat Yitzchak* occurred just prior to the death of Avraham's wife, Sara. As many writers have noted, this chronology yields a surprising conclusion regarding Yitzchak's age at the time of the *akeida*. Sara begot Yitzchak at the age of ninety (Bereishit 17:17), and she passed away at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven (23:1). Thus, if the *akeida* occurred just prior to Sara's death, Yitzchak was thirty-seven years old when he was bound upon the altar by his father.

Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham, writes in his Torah commentary that his father "strongly distanced this" (*haya marchik et zeh harbeh*), and argued that this view represents an incorrect reading of the *akeida* narrative. Maimonides noted that were Yitzchak to have been a mature adult when Avraham received the command to offer him as a sacrifice, and he willingly surrendered his life in obedience to the divine command, then Yitzchak would have been the greater hero. Yet, this narrative begins by describing God's command as a "test" to Avraham, not Yitzchak, and as a result of Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak God declared, "I now know that you are God-fearing" (22:12) and promised him reward. Clearly, Maimonides claimed, Yitzchak was but a small child who had no power to oppose his father's decision, and for this reason it was Avraham who emerges as the "champion," so-to-speak, of this episode. This is the view taken as well by Ibn Ezra (22:4), who estimates that Yitzchak was approximately thirteen or so years old at the time of the *akeida*.

Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky, in his work *Emet Le-Yaakov*, discusses this position of Ibn Ezra (without citing Rabbi Avraham Ben Ha-Rambam's commentary) and attributes this perspective to Ibn Ezra's rejection of the famous Midrashic account of the miracle of the furnace at Ur Kasdim. If we accept this famous tradition, that Avraham allowed himself to be thrown into the furnace rather than embrace monotheism, then we must in any event explain why the *akeida* more clearly demonstrated his loyalty to God than his martyrdom at Ur Kasdim. We would be forced to conclude that indeed, killing one's son constitutes a greater act of sacrifice than surrendering one's own life. Only one who does not accept the story of the furnace could advance the argument that

surrendering one's own life is the greater expression of loyalty, and thus conclude that Yitzchak must have been a young child at the time of the *akeida*.

Rabbi Kaminetzky's line of reasoning in essence amounts to a difficulty regarding Maimonides' view. In *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* (1:3), Maimonides makes a brief reference to the story of the furnace of Ur Kasdim, writing that the king of the time sought to kill Avraham for his monotheistic beliefs, and Avraham was miraculously spared. Presumably, he refers here to the famous account of Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his life. If so, then he is forced to concede that the *akeida*, where he was prepared to slaughter his son on behalf of God, marked a greater expression of loyalty and sacrifice than surrendering his own life. How, then, could he argue – as his son testifies that he did – that had Yitzchak been a grown man at the time of the *akeida* his test would have far outweighed his father's?

The answer, perhaps, lies in two distinguishing factors between Avraham's act of martyrdom at Ur Kasdim and Yitzchak's surrender of his life according to the view of the Midrashim. First, at Ur Kasim Avraham was fully aware of the vital purpose served by his sacrifice of life, in demonstrating to the world the truth of monotheism. In the story of the *akeida*, however, God provided no explanation at all for why He demanded such an unthinkable act, and thus Yitzchak's self-sacrifice at the *akeida* would perhaps exceed that of his father at Ur Kasdim. Secondly, and perhaps primarily, Yitzchak never heard God's command to Avraham concerning the *akeida*. Had he been a mature adult, we must conclude that he blindly trusted his father's word as to the accuracy of the prophetic vision he beheld in which God ordered the sacrifice of his son. This test of faith, which required faith not only in God, but also in the prophetic powers of Avraham, could easily be seen as a far greater test than the challenged posed to Avraham, who personally beheld this prophetic vision. By contrast, when Avraham jumped into the furnace at Ur Kasdim, there was no ambiguity; he knew without doubt that the situation demanded the ultimate sacrifice.

Hence, even though Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son marked a greater expression of devotion than his martyrdom at Ur Kasdim, Maimonides is nevertheless correcting in asserting that Yitzchak's would have been the greater act of sacrifice had he been an adult at the time of the *akeida*.