

Parashat Vayera 5781

Shabbat Shalom! This week's Parasha is extremely eventful. There's so much to say about it, but I'm going to try to focus on one aspect which is by far the most disturbing and which has generated an enormous amount of commentary of the centuries. First to sum up that the Parasha begins with three strangers passing by Avraham and Sarah's tent as Avraham is recovering from his Brit Milah. He is told that in a year's time Sarah will give birth to a son. We have the entire episode of Sodom and Gomorrah. We have the birth of Isaac, the weaning of Isaac and finally the binding of Isaac (with a little drama thrown in the middle with Avimelekh the king of Gerar who takes Sarah for his harem, but has a dream of G'd warning him to keep his royal hands off, etc.).

Chapter 22 (p.117) begins with saying that G'd tested Abraham and said to him: Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac. There's an interesting Midrash about this passage. As you know Avraham has a son with Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden Hagar 13 years before. So the Midrash has Avraham responding to each of the statements. Take your son – I have two sons, Your only one – they are both unique to me and to their mother. Whom you love – I love them both. Isaac. Now he knows which one.

Next the phrase is very interesting. It says again : Lekh L'kha just like last Parasha which goes by that name. Lekh L'kha generally means "Get yourself going." Lekh L'kha has a very powerful resonance in the Jewish tradition because its earlier use signals the beginning of our connection to the land of Israel 4,000 years ago. But now he's going to Mount Moriah to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. How shocking and horrifying. Avraham gets up early in the morning and takes his two youthful helpers – remember he's about 136 years old give or take. Almost from the beginning of Avraham's story the issue of having a child with Sarah who will be his heir and carry on his work has been central. Now he finally has this cherished child and he's being asked to offer him up as a burnt offering. This apparently is the test.

We all face tests in our lifetimes, some formal like in school, some really the tests that life throws our way from time to time – for some people more frequently than others. These tests put our values and our character on trial. They can gauge who we are as a person – what we

are willing to do for our values and for our beliefs. Avraham's "test" can be understood in many ways. According to the Talmud, Pirkei Avot Chapter 5, Mishna 3 – Avraham was tested ten times. The Akedah (the binding of Isaac – as it's called in Hebrew) is the tenth and last. On the surface it looks like the test was if Avraham was willing to give up his beloved son. I'm sure it would have been much easier for him to sacrifice himself than to sacrifice Isaac. How do we look at the Akedah? Maybe the real test was for him to say "no, I won't do it" and to argue with G!d just like he argued over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah earlier in the Parasha. It would not be difficult to see the situation as Avraham failing because he didn't argue. There's one thing in the text that raises another question. Chapter 22 verse 5 (p.119) Avraham says to the young men assisting him to stay there as he and Yitzkhak go up the mountain and he says "we will prostrate ourselves and return." Both verbs are in the plural. Did Avraham believe that somehow he would not end up offering up Yitzkhak and that's why he said they would return? Or, possibly, on the other hand he didn't want to alarm or forewarn his young assistants. Ultimately there's no way of knowing. There's one more complicating factor. This episode essentially ends the Parashah and it's followed immediately by the death of Sarah. The rabbis say that Sarah heard of what Avraham did, and, consequently, died of shock at the age of 127. How old does that make Yitzkhak in this story? (Thirty six years old – twice *Chai*). Who's stronger a 36 year old Yitzkhak or a 136 year old Avraham? Is Yitzkhak sacrificing himself? What is being tested in Avraham – his faith (that G!d would ultimately not really require him to sacrifice Yitzkhak, or his obedience or his willingness to argue for what he thinks is just and right? This amazingly complex story is told in about one page.

P.S. Avraham sees a ram stuck by its horns in a thicket and sacrifices it in Yitzkhak's place – which is one explanation for why we blow the Ram's horn, the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah (and also read the story of the Akedah in the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah). Shabbat Shalom.