THE AKEDAH: A DIVERSE SAMPLING
FROM ANTIQUITY
AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Belief in the justice of God and in a purposeful existence guided by the Divine Presence is often belied by experience. If, on the one hand, faith teaches that life is meaningful, steered by divine personal providence, experience, on the other hand, often mocks these claims. The history of Jewish interpretation of the Akedah, or Binding of Isaac, shows that deep-seated questioning of the pillars of faith is probed and tolerated. The justice of God, the divine tolerance of suffering, the role of the patriarchs, the offering of the martyr, and the possibility of finding meaning in the absurd are all questions that emerge from an examination of the nineteen verses found in Genesis 22. In this study, I provide a sampling of the disquieting questions that emerge in Jewish reflection on the Akedah from antiquity to the Middle Ages.¹ This survey shows that earlier generations’ questions found various responses. In some investigations, queries were left unanswered; in other commentaries, we may find answers, but they may leave us unsatisfied. Some questions were answered in argumentation, others in story, still others were deflected. The foci are varied — once the emphasis is on God’s command, alternatively, on the prompting of Satan. The hero is once Abraham, again Isaac. Ultimately, the story and its commentary reflect a powerful grip of disquietude. The silence and incompleteness of the answers are mirrored in the permutations of emphases and responses found in the totality of the tradition.

Each generation probes the following questions that stem from the biblical account. How could an omniscient God ask such a horrific question of Abraham, seemingly negating His covenantal promise? Why command an act — child sacrifice — that God’s own words forbid? The narrative warns the reader that God’s directive to Abraham is only a test. But apparently Abraham does not know this — or does he? How can it be that the Abraham who pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah does not plead for his beloved son? How could Abraham listen to this command to commit murder? Upon the completion of Abraham’s act of obedience, God declares that He now knows that Abraham will totally submit to the divine will. But must an omniscient God pose such a cruel test to discover this? And for those who see Abraham as the obedient, sublime patriarch, why should he be so lauded when countless other Jews have no happy ending to their own trials of the loss of their children?

God

The tradition deals with the unreasonable and troubling aspects of the command in various ways. One method emphasizes that, all along, Abraham hoped that God would save Isaac; a second, that the results of Abraham’s obedience were transformative, mitigating the irrationality by turning to the fruits of the results. A third protects the capriciousness of the command by deflection — the test was prompted by Satan; a fourth dares to allow the awful command to stand in its bleak severity.

Hope that God would save

One trajectory underscores that Abraham’s faith was unshakeable, not only because he obeyed God’s command, but because he believed that God would ultimately find another path that would redeem his son. This point stresses that behind the unfathomable, seemingly cruel demands of God lies a higher purpose that will become known in the future. Thus, in a discussion of God’s test of Abraham, we find a reference to the divine loyalty to Israel — the Almighty will come through in the end, saving them as He did in the battle of Midian (Gen. Rab. 55:3).2 According to the sages, Abraham expresses this faith to Isaac, for, in commenting on the biblical verse, “we will worship and we will return to