



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### Session 4: Parshat VaYera: The Test

Text: Genesis 22

בראשית כב:א וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֵל הִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי. ב  
וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָת אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אַרְצַי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לַעֲלֹה עַל  
אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אִמַּר אֵלֶיךָ. ג וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ שְׁנֵי אֶת-שְׁנֵי גַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֶת  
יִצְחָק בְּנֹו וַיִּבְקַע עֵצִי עַל הָהָר וַיִּקַּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר-לּוֹ הָאֵל הִים. ד בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשֶׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-  
עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמְּקוֹם מֵרַח ק. ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-גַּעֲרָיו שְׁבוּ-לָכֶם פֹּה עַם-הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנְּעָר נִלְכָה עַד-  
כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁוֹבָה אֵלֵיכֶם. ו וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵצִי הַעֲלֵה לָהּ וַיִּשֶׂם עַל-יִצְחָק בְּנֹו וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת-הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת-  
הַמַּאֲכָלִת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו. ז וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ  
וְהָעֵצִים וְאִיָּה הַשֶּׁה לַעֲלֹה. ח וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֵל הִים יְרָא-לוֹ הַשֶּׁה לַעֲלֹה בְנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו. ט וַיִּבֹּאוּ  
אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֵל הִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת-הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנֹו  
וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-עֹל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים. י וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלִת לְשַׁח ט אֶת-בְּנֹו. יא וַיִּקְרָא  
אֵלָיו מִלֶּאךָ יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי. יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנְּעָר וְאֶל-  
תַּעֲשֵׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרְא אֵל הִים אֶתְּהָ וְלֹא חִשַּׁקְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי. יג וַיֵּשֶׂא אַבְרָהָם  
אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאחַז בְּסַבֵּר בְּקִרְבּוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לַעֲלֹה תַחַת בְּנֹו.

<sup>1</sup> Some time afterward, God put Avraham to the test. S/He said to him, "Avraham," and he answered, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup> And S/He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." <sup>3</sup> So early next morning, Avraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar. <sup>5</sup> Then Avraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you." <sup>6</sup> Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. <sup>7</sup> Then Isaac said to his father Avraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup> And Avraham said, "God will see to the sheep for Her/His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together. <sup>9</sup> They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Avraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> And Avraham picked up the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Avraham! Avraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup> And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." <sup>13</sup> When Avraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. <sup>14</sup> And Avraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."



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#### Context

God appears to Avraham and Sarah in the desert in the form of three visitors. Avraham and Sarah honor their guests by washing and feeding them generously. The guests turn out to be angels who deliver the news that the old couple is to bear a child, news that causes Sarah to laugh.

Feeling too close to Avraham to hide Her/His plan to destroy nearby cities, Sedom and Amorrhah, God reveals the plan. Avraham resists. Bargaining hard, Avraham pleads for God to save the cities for the sake of fifty, forty-five, forty... down to ten righteous people. Meanwhile two of the angels visit Sedom, and find shelter from a brutal mob in Lot's house. Lot offers his daughters to appease the crowd outside his door, but God intervenes and strikes the assailants blind. When even ten righteous people cannot be found, the angels instruct Lot and his family to flee, and not to look back. God destroys Sedom and Amorrhah in a rain of sulfurous fire.

Perhaps feeling that the world had come to an end, Lot's daughters make him drunk and sleep with him. They conceive and bear the nations of Moab and Ammon. Avraham, meanwhile repeats his ruse of posing Sarah as his sister, this time with Avimelech, the King of Gerar.

Sarah bears the child they were promised, Yitzchak, whom Avraham circumcises on his eighth day. They celebrate the day she weans him with a feast. Sarah is concerned about Yishmael's influence on Yitzchak. With God's backing, she instructs Avraham to send Hagar away with her child to perish in the desert. God blesses her and reveals the well at Beersheva, where Avraham makes a pact with Avimelech. Then, God tests Avraham.

#### Explorations

Our text is one of the most famous passages in the Torah, referred to as the “binding of Yitzchak”, the [Akedah](#). Many claim that these hours of anguish forge Jewish faith: from the moment of the commandment to sacrifice his child until the angel releases him from this ultimate act of submission. Volumes have been written about the Akedah and its meanings. The [Mishnah](#) in tractate Ta'anit (2:4 & 5) records an ancient assumption that Avraham prays on Mount Moriah. Sages put the effectiveness of Avraham's prayer at the head of a supplication for God's response in times of crisis.

Some midrashim feature Satan--God's prosecuting attorney--in the drama. After Satan had been slighted at the weaning feast, he taunts the characters in the scene. He goads God about Avraham's lack of allegiance; he tries to prevent Avraham from offering his son, "How can you sacrifice the son of your old age?" To Yitzchak, he declares, "Your



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father is mad." These traditions, summarized by Rashi, assume that God desires the sacrifice as proof of Avraham's faith.

[Philo](#), a first-century Jewish thinker who transmitted Jewish teachings to the Hellenistic world, emphasizes both the uniqueness of Avraham's selfless love of God, and the significance of the *cancellation* of the command to sacrifice. For Philo the *Akedah* also protests against the ancient idolatrous practice of sacrificing a child (see II Chronicles 2: 33:6).

One very troubling aspect of the text is that it does not mention Sarah, Yitzchak's mother at all. Most presume with the text that Avraham has the right to take their child, without consulting Sarah, and to do with him as he understands God's command. Some reason that Avraham resists telling her lest her love of Yitzchak interfere with performing God's will. Classic readers struggle to interpret why Sarah dies shortly after the Akedah; they are looking for Sarah in the text. Most read her death as the outcome of her grief when Satan informs her that Avraham is sacrificing their child, or from the grief of learning of Avraham's intention to sacrifice him. The Akedah is part of the Torah reading chanted on the New Year, Rosh HaShanah. The piercing quick shofar blasts--the ram's horn—vocalize Sarah's agony.

I propose another midrash:

Sarah, wakened by the packing of the donkey and hushed voices, rises early in the morning. Gazing intently at figures disappearing into the distance, she recognizes the gait of her spouse and her child tracing their path away from the embrace of love and life. She sees with clear vision as Avraham takes their child; she understands God's command and Avraham's readiness to offer too precious a gift.

As Avraham had pleaded with God to save unknown lives in Sedom and Amorrhah, Sarah pleads with God to save the life of their child. She storms the gates of heaven with her appeal.

Her plea intensifies, climbing with each stride to a higher register, “How can the compassionate One pit love against love??!!”

With each turn of the cord as Avraham binds their child to the altar, she cries out for God's sake, “You who bring forth life as I have, must not demand death in Your Name!”

As Avraham pulls the knife from its sheath, and slowly raises it over the child, Sarah's appeal tears open God's heart, “I will not continue with You in Your Creation so long as You, the Creator, shatter Your promise of our destiny, and command parents to murder!”

With this, God dispatches an angel just as Sarah sends forth her soul flying to Mount Moriah. Her final word, “Avraham,” and the angel's, “Avraham” stays the shining blade poised in Avraham's trembling hand.



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#### Questions for Discussion

- In your view, did Avraham pass or fail the test? Explain.
- And Sarah, and Yitzchak, what was their test? Did they pass or fail, and why?
- And God?
- How do you relate to this formidable story as a child, as a parent, as a member of the Abrahamic community, and how does it affect your faith?
- According to biblical tradition, the site of the Akedah--Mount Moriah is where King Solomon would build the Jerusalem Temple (II Chronicles 3:1), crowning the stone on which Avraham bound and released Sarah's child. What impact does the *Akedah* have on our idea of a sacred place?

#### Study Links

- [Click here](#) to read Philo's full analysis of Avraham's test.
- For an analysis of Rashi's approach to the *Akedah*, click on this [link](#) to an article in an online *Journal of Textual Reasoning*.
- A preview of Leila Leah Bronner's views of Sarah's role in the Akedah in *Stories of Biblical Mothers* is [here](#).

#### Summary of Issues

Sarah's absence from the text of the *Akedah*, and Avraham's silence invite readers to fill in missing details— parents' desperation for the life of her child, and rebuke of the divine command. Midrash works with the written text to construct meaning and to express the values and sensibilities of the interpreter.

#### Methods & Observations

Identifying the missing voices of women in the Torah, feminists often write midrash to fill in the characters who are insufficiently detailed, and whose views and experiences are missing. Here I have built on traditional sources to intensify ideas already present, and to update them with more contemporary sensibilities.

I raised the issue about God “learning” in Parshat Noach. My midrash about Sarah suggests that her prayer brought God to appreciate the need to abolish child sacrifice as a mode for sacred service. The terrible tragedy of this text is that it cost Sarah her life.

#### Contact

Please address queries and comments to Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - [bonnadevora@gmail.com](mailto:bonnadevora@gmail.com) – or the online forum at [www.icjw.org](http://www.icjw.org).