

***THE AKEDAH:
ISSAC'S VISION QUEST AND NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE***

by

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A Rosh HaShana sermon on the Akedah,
based upon Shalom Spiegel's book, *The Last Trial*.

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Every year on Rosh HaShana we re-visit the Akedah, telling a tale of how our ancestor Avraham responded to a call to sacrifice his son Yitzhak on Mount Moriah. As the Torah tells us, this potentially traumatic story has a redemptive ending when a random ram appears to serve as a sacred substitute on the sacrificial altar. Yitzhak lives, and Avraham passes the test of loyalty to God in flying colors.

In the spirit of this season of *Teshuva* [repentance], we read this story to remind us how God can intervene with grand beneficence in human lives. It is exactly this we pray for on Rosh HaShana: that in hearing our prayers for healing, wholeness and transformation, the God of our understanding will intervene in our lives with merciful benevolence, as he did for Avraham and Yitzhak.

Only nineteen verses long, this story is one of the most frequently discussed pieces of Torah. While the text seems to portray Avraham as a man of deep faith, Yitzhak is often regarded as a minor character, sometimes even a passive victim. With contemporary psychological savvy and political correctness, in our times Yitzhak is blamed for being a co-dependent, tolerating his father's abusive acting out. Rarely do we hear Yitzhak's voice, and know of his internal experiences on the altar at Har Moriah.

Today, with the help of Midrash, I want us to read between the lines, and look at the Akedah not in terms of Avraham's test, but rather as an initiation ritual, a sacrificial ceremony marking Yitzhak's transition into spiritual maturity. A variety of Midrashim [taken from Shalom Spiegel's study, *The Last Trial*]¹ highlight Yitzhak's experiences on Har Moriah, and the subsequent journey that unfolded as a result of the Akedah. Through the Akedah Yitzhak was transformed so that he might follow the unique destiny of his own life, just as Rosh HaShana prepares each of us to follow the unique destiny of our lives more fully in the coming year.

First, here is the problem we have to address. If you recall, Genesis 22:6 tells us: "*Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering & put it on his son Yitzhak.*" Later, after descending from Har Moriah, Gen. 22:19 tells us: "*Avraham then returned to his servants, & they departed together for Beer Sheba.*" Avraham and Yitzhak go up the mountain together; when Avraham returns, his son is not with him. What happened? The Rabbis became very suspicious about Yitzhak's fate. And with the inquisitive minds of a CSI investigation, began to piece together the facts, at least the mythic facts.

In the chapter following the Akedah, we read of Sarah's death. "*Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba; which is Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*" (Gen. 23:2-3) Sarah dies; Avraham comes to mourn her. Where is Yitzhak? Why wasn't he accompanying his father, mourning Sarah's death? For the Rabbis, this is further cause for suspicion.

If this were a CSI investigation, we would hear some eerie music, then go to commercial. For us, we are about to discover a series of Midrashic legendary traditions explaining Yitzhak's disappearance

after the Akedah. The mythic story of Yitzhak's experience of the Akedah provides us with inspiration and a map for our own spiritual journeying in this season of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Awesome Days.

First, the facts: how old was Yitzhak at the time of the Akedah? In *Midrash Ha-Gadol* [on Gen 22:8] we read: "*When the Holy Blessed One said to Avraham, Offer him up as a burnt offering before Me, Avraham came home and said to Sarah: "How long is your son Yitzhak to hang on to your apron strings, Is he not after all thirty seven years old? ... Come now, fix provisions for our journey, for he and I are off to the Great Study House."*

We usually imagine Yitzhak to be a child; the Torah describes him as *na'ar*, a youth. To the contrary, Yitzhak is a man of thirty-seven, approaching a spiritual pinnacle of his life. Where is Avraham taking him? To the Great Study House, according to Midrash "*to the Yeshiva of Shem and Eber*" (Noah's son and grandson). What we see here, symbolically, is that a thirty-seven year old man is on a journey with an older mentor to a place of spiritual initiation. The Akedah is Yitzhak's midlife vision quest to discover the inner calling of his soul. This is an initiatory process, deepening his relationship with God, with spirit.

Yitzhak is primed for mid-life transition. Whether this natural developmental stage is at 37, 50, 65 - that is not what is important. As C.G. Jung reminds us frequently, the second half of life brings profound moments of transition, often painful and challenging. In these transitions, questions we wrestle with are exactly the ones we encounter through our *Teshuva* at Rosh HaShana. *Who am I right now? What is my life is really about? What do I hold on to, what do I let go of from the past? How do I forge the next steps of my journey?*

As the Akedah story unfolds, we find Yitzhak upon the altar of Moriah. Imagine for a moment the thoughts racing through his mind. Undoubtedly he was asking himself the questions we all wrestle with in moments of spiritual crisis, bound upon the altar of our own life journey. Surely he was reflecting on his destiny, what his father's God was asking of him. Painful or frightening life transitions are moments when, in the words of the Slonimer Rebbe, we need extreme clarity to discern "*et asher Hashem Elohecha sho'el may-imcha*", exactly what it is that God is asking of us, and what path is ours?

As Avraham's knife touched his son's throat, did Yitzhak see his entire life pass before him in an instantaneous flash? To deepen our understanding of what happened on Yitzhak's vision quest, we again turn to Midrash, filling in the gaps between the end of one sentence in the Torah, and the beginning of the next. Listen carefully, let your visual imagination guide you as Midrash reveals new and startling information.

According to the expert testimony of *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* [Chapter 31]: "*And lo, when the knife touched Yitzhak's throat his soul took wing at once...and flew clean out of him.*" And from R. Judah of Barcelona's *Commentary on Sepher Yetzirah* [p. 125] we learn: "*When Father Yitzhak was*

on the point of being sacrificed as a freewill burnt offering, he beheld the light of the Shechinah and his soul flew out of him, but the Holy Blessed One revived him.”

What we see here replicates the phenomena of a near-death experience - that which takes place when a person is pronounced clinically dead and later resuscitated. Near-death experiences have been documented extensively in the past three decades. But these phenomena have been also described in Rabbinic literature, and mystical Jewish tradition dating back almost two thousand years.

The forensic evidence keeps mounting. Midrashic texts go one step further, this time explaining about mother Sarah's death: *“When the sword touched [Yitzhak's] throat his soul flow up into Gan Eden and he beheld the soul of his mother Sarah, who had died in the interim because Samael [Satan] had gone and informed her [that] ...Avraham had already slaughtered Yitzhak. Whereupon she let out a scream and the soul departed.”* [Midrash Sechel Tov, p. 64]

According to Rabbinic tradition, Sarah died of traumatic shock - likely due to coronary thrombosis (heart attack) - when Samael, that deceitful angelic being, told her Avraham killed her son. The Midrash we just read describes Yitzhak meeting his mother Sarah in Gan Eden. From the mythic data it appears that Yitzhak experienced a supernal state of consciousness on Har Moriah. As in the testimony from those who have had near-death experiences, he had an out of body experience, an encounter with ancestral beings of light, and visions of the heavenly Garden of Eden.

Contemporary research indicates people who have near-death experiences are profoundly transformed. As some of you know, an encounter with one's mortality unlocks a spiritual potential dormant in the psyche. As people discover a deep interconnectedness with the divine, life takes on renewed purpose. If this is what Yitzhak experienced, as Midrashic testimony suggests, the Akedah was a transformative spiritual event for him. Every year, at Rosh HaShana we yearn for this type of spiritual transformation, as we stand vulnerable before God and community, not knowing who among us will live and who will die this year.

Other questions emerge in our thirst to understand the outcome of Yitzhak's vision quest. By learning more of Yitzhak's inner journey, perhaps we can see our own reflected more clearly in this ancient mythic story. We have further reports on Yitzhak, one from *Midrash Ha-Gadol* [on Gen. 22:19]: *“And Yitzhak, where was he? The Holy One, blessed be He, brought him into Gan Eden, and there he stayed for three years.”* *“What was he doing all that time in Gan Eden?”* asks another medieval Midrash. *“They were healing him there. ... [T]he angels bore him to Paradise, where he tarried three years, to be healed from the wound inflicted upon him by Avraham on the occasion of the Akedah.”* [R. Yitzhak bar Judah Ha-Levi, *Paaneah Raza*, 29a]

Midrashic tradition teaches that it took three years of an intensive spiritual retreat in Gan Eden for Yitzhak to integrate the transformative experiences he had atop Mount Moriah. We learn from this

that those important and sometimes eruptive life-changing events do not occur over night. In dealing with life's changes we need contemplation and reflection to assimilate spiritual growth into our lives. We thirst to find time for healing and spiritual sustenance, the kind of sacred time Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur and the season of *Teshuva* provides.

If we do the work of *Teshuva*, we are more prepared for the unknown of the year that is about to unfold. And if we do the work of healing in response to crisis, we are prepared to re-enter our lives, ready to move forward to meet our destiny. Once more, the Midrash informs us: "*Yitzhak remained on Mount Moriah for three years until he reached the age of forty, & then he married Rivkah.*" [Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Mishneh Kesef* on the Torah II, p. 63]

Yitzhak is now forty, having been through a major three year transition. He is ready to re-enter the world healed and prepared to meet his fate, to face the destiny of his life, to meet his partner. We each have our own unique destiny to follow. Throughout our lives, at each stage of the life cycle, we face profound challenges of birth, death and re-birth.

Living in this era of total cultural and global transition, we are always undergoing through transitions in our lives. We are always passing from stage to stage, from adolescence to adulthood, through midlife crisis to eldering, from child-bearing through to menopause, from life to death, from birth to bereavement, life is ever-changing. In this age of post-millennial stress, those cycles of change are happening more and more rapidly, with an intensity unheard of in the history of human civilization.

Like Yitzhak on the altar at Moriah, we all have moments of crisis and complexity, when we see our life flash before our eyes, and have no idea what fate will unfold. On Rosh HaShana, we read the Akedah to remind us that our transitional moments need not be of death, despair and trauma, but instead about life, spirit and re-birth. Can we all be like Yitzhak, and remain open to genuine spiritual experience that will transform and prepare us to meet the destiny of our lives this year? We pray, like Yitzhak must have, that we be inscribed in the Book of Life. We pray that we be re-born, this year, as spiritually-transformed, God-conscious beings, more able to fulfill our destiny and serve, not only our Creator, but also the Creation. We pray this Rosh HaShana that we be guided to sacrifice our limited selves on the altar of life's transitions to become people who can hear the words of God stirring within us, and becomes agents to serve the healing and well-being of the Planet.

I WISH YOU ALL A SHANA TOVAH * MAY WE ALL BE SIGNED & SEALED IN THE BOOK OF LIFE FOR A SWEET AND HOLY NEW YEAR

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCE

¹ Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial - On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*. Trans. Judah Goldin. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967).