

ROSH HASHANA

Bereshit, Chapter 22: The Akeidah, The Binding of Isaac

I call this chapter “The Knife to the Heart of our people.” This chapter challenges us to the very depths of our being. Every time I read it it does this to me. It is not easy to understand the “whys” of this narrative. But it is totally “nifla” (wonderful). *Nifla* means a number of things in Hebrew. It is one of the 4 words that are used for a “miracle,” or something really out of the ordinary. Indeed, our chapter is really out of the ordinary. In addition, the word *nifla* can mean: “wonderful, awesome, too much to take in all at one time, ‘mind-blowing’, incredible, out of the box.” It means all of these things, all at once. That is how chapter 22 strikes me: wonderful, awesome, too much to take in all at one time, mind blowing, incredible and out of the box. It has struck our Jewish people that very same way for thousands of years. That is why there have been so many commentaries written on chapter 22. A scholar named Seymour Spiegel collected and edited them all and became famous by putting them into one book.

Immediately as the narrative starts, we know there is going to be a real problem. Verse 1 states:

And after these things, the Great God gave Avraham a test, a trial, and He said to him, Avraham; then he responded, “Here I am, and I am ready to do whatever you ask me, even before you ask it.”) Or, as it has also been translated:

“It was after these events that God made Avraham pass through a great ordeal. So He said to him, “Avraham.” He (Avraham) replied, “I’m right here!” (22.1, *Bereshit, the Book of Beginnings*)

Avraham doesn’t know what will happen at the moment HaShem begins to speak to him. But by the words used, he knows right away: it won’t be easy, and it’ll test him to his very depths. The word “*nisa*” is used to describe what awaited him. It is our Hebrew word for *a trial* or *a very hard experience*. Avraham leaped right into it by using the word “hineni.” And then the hammer hits, the hard experience is explained, quite clearly and to me, shockingly:

v. 2: He told him, “*Please take your only son that you love, Isaac; then hurry to the Land of Moriah. Then offer him up as a whole burnt offering on one of the hills that I will designate to you.*”

At that point, I may have done a “double take.” What? I may have doubted that I heard the voice of the One True God. At face value, this instruction goes against everything Avraham may have known about God. God is not similar to the gods of Mesopotamia where Avraham grew up. They weren’t good; they weren’t merciful. Avraham’s God was *both* good & merciful. God is not like the vicious, blood thirsty idols of Canaan, of the neighboring tribes surrounding where Avraham lived. So how could the One True God ask Avraham for bloodshed? How could God fulfill His

promise to Avraham to give him an heir from his own bloodline if Isaac was dead? All of these questions would have gone through my mind.

But Avraham was not like me...I don't think. He responds, and there is no record in Torah of him hesitating for a moment. He was sincere with his "hineni," that is, "Here I am, and I am ready to do whatever you ask, even before You ask it." The language of v. 2 is really strange. Two Hebrew idioms, "kach-na" and "lek-leka" are used in this one verse. God is at the same time very polite in his words to Avraham, yet urgent in the time aspect of the instruction. "Please take..." (kach-na) and "hurry up and go" (lek-leka) are a strange sounding combination together. It's more logical for the verse to have said "kach" and "lek-leka" = "take him and get going already, hurry up." The use of the polite word "na" shakes me to the core. I know that sounds strange, but it really does. Why? The Holy One of Israel is so beyond my understanding. His ways are so awesome. I see what He is doing here, but I can't fathom how He is thinking and feeling. Nor do we have any record of how Avraham was feeling and thinking. All we find is his quick response. Here it is, in v. 3. Would he run away? Would he face the trial?

Verse 3: So Avraham got up early in the morning, and saddled his donkey. He took two youths with him, along with Isaac his son. As well, he bundled wood together for a whole burnt offering. Then he left to go to the place that God told him about.

Avraham quickly does what HaShem asks him to do. No argument, no reasoning with him, like in chapter 18. I ask: Avraham, why do you not plead for your son's life, like you pleaded for your nephew's life in chapter 18? But he doesn't. All he does is obey. In the midst of a horrendous trial, he does what God asks.

We are all engaged and engrossed in the story when we get to verses 4 and 5.

On the third day, Avraham looked and saw this place from a distance. Avraham said to his youths, "Stay here with the donkey, and the boy and I will go and prostrate ourselves in worship. Then we'll return to you."

At our summer school in Dublin, we discussed this chapter in the broader question of asking, "What was the Abrahamic covenant like?" A point that has been brought up is this: in v. 5, Avraham said, "...**we'll** return to you." He somehow knew that he and Isaac would be back. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us the tradition that his community received: that Avraham knew that if Isaac was killed, he'd rise from the dead. Also, v. 8 states: *Avraham answered, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the whole burnt offering, my son."* By these words, we see that Avraham knew that an animal would be present so that Isaac could return home with him. So now I can be at rest. Avraham had to pass through this unpleasant experience, but Isaac would live, and God of course would be shown to be faithful to Avraham and to Isaac.

This year I cannot help but to think about us today here in Israel, and that the first five verses of our text are meaningful for us in our situation. Usually, I like to study and teach on the *peshat*, that is, the literal and historical meanings of any Torah text.

This year, though, I see a real *midrashic* (non-literal, symbolic) use of our chapter 22 that impresses me very strongly. So I will take the liberty to finish with a midrashic application.

How much our situation resembles that of the Akeida! As a nation, we are like Isaac. Take a look around us: it is as if our nation today is walking up a hill to our death, just like Isaac. It is if we are Isaac, and we look to our Father, God, and hold His hand as He walks with us right up to circumstances are fully beyond our control, and look on the surface, 100% lethal.

In Europe last week, someone said to me, “I really worry for your people. I worry about another diaspora, about Israel being destroyed. That’s what so many nations have in their plans for you.” And like Isaac, our hands are bound by a cord: *He also tied up his son Isaac and put him on the altar, above the wood (v.9)*. What cord is around our hands? When Israel is wronged, we are not allowed by the world to respond. Our hands are bound. We are expected to just sit there and be wronged. Our “allies,” the USA, the EU, and the UN to which we are a member, threaten us with economic sanctions if we defend ourselves after we are attacked. If we defend ourselves, we are threatened with nuclear holocaust by Iran; with rockets by Hizbullah (they have a 60,000 rocket arsenal in Lebanon). We are publicly blamed for all of the problems in the Middle East by Turkey, while Russia invests 40 billion dollars in supplying weaponry and advisors to the nation that says it will use the nuclear weapons against us that they will shortly have operational. We can’t escape our position in the world, no matter what we do, just as Isaac couldn’t escape laying on the altar that his father Avraham was preparing. No matter how much Israel helps the world around us by sharing our medical technology, distributing our medicines, tending to the sick of enemy nations in our hospitals, we still are bound on the altar; that is, the nations of the world do not change their minds about us. Due to rampant international anti-Semitism, we are still the evil ones. Although it was God who asked Isaac to lay there, seemingly to die, **that was not his God-given destiny!**

Perhaps this was something that Avraham could always be assured of after the *nisayon*, the trial, of the Akeida — that Isaac had an important calling and destiny, because God did not let him perish, but God in a very real way *delivered Isaac* from the knife.

We today in Israel are expected to lay down on the altar of militant Islam, on the altar of Russia’s economic and military growth, on the altar of a world that looks for a punching bag to blame for all of its problems. If we die there, a lot of the world would be very happy. Let’s look around our borders: Hizbullah, Lebanon, the government of Syria and the rebels fighting the civil war in Syria all hate us; Iran, Hamas, and the PA all want us dead. The quicker the better. Turkey stated that Israel is at fault for all of the problems in Egypt (where Christians are being killed by jihadist Muslims), and much of the world believes this lie. We are on the altar, ready to be sacrificed by a world that is unaware of who God is, and the real identity of the people of Israel. Will we be left there to die? To be stabbed through by the nations till we die? No.

The Akeida is symbolic of our God-given destiny. It is a pattern to think about. When things look bad, when it looks like death is imminent and soon to occur...God provides His deliverance. This, my friends, is the history of Israel, the Destiny that He has given us to live out. The future will prove this true, and the Akeida can give us hope as we see over and over again, that this is the pattern that God uses in delivering Israel. Let's see a few examples:

The Exodus is one, but I won't talk about it today; no time. King Hezekiah and the Assyrians is another, and I will talk about this: **2Kings 18:5**

Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.

v.7: He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.

Israel today is like Judah then: standing our ground, refusing to give up our independence and country; both time periods had just witnessed national tragedy: In Hezekiah's time, the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel, only the Kingdom of Judah was left:

Shalmaneser king of Assyria marched against Samaria and laid siege to it. At the end of three years the Assyrians took it. So Samaria was captured in Hezekiah's sixth year, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel. (2 K. 18:9–10).

In our time period, the Holocaust destroyed close to 40% of our people, leaving only Israel and a dwindling Diaspora population. Then, we lost another 1% of Israel's Jewish population in the War of Independence; but we won the war, and have stood our ground. We are similar to Hezekiah's kingdom in this regard, standing our ground in the midst of a hostile Middle East.

v.8: He defeated the Philistines, as far as Gaza and its territory.

Modern Israel has done similarly, taking the ancient territory of the Philistines, until recent times, including Gaza. Just a few years later, this happened:

Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them (8:13).

We are in a similar situation: Hamas, the fundamentalist Muslim arm that hates Israel and has declared eternal war against us, has won the hearts, minds, and votes of the PA areas surrounding us (Gaza, Hebron, increasing influence in Judah and Samaria). The number of Muslim entities that are working for our demise are too numerous for me to mention here. A friend of mine once was a student to be an imam. He told me **"Israel is not in conflict against the Palestinians; the conflict is the entire Muslim world of 1 billion people versus Israel."** We are like Hezekiah, surrounded by the powerful Assyrian army. And like Hezekiah, some in Israel would give up a lot to compromise with our enemies, in my opinion, risking our very lives:

"I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me." The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah

gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the LORD and in the treasuries of the royal palace (2 Kings 18:14–15).

Our President has offered half of Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and most of Judah and Samaria to anyone out there among our enemies, including the PA and Syria, in exchange for a peace treaty (which has always been non-existent). He urges us to trust the EU and the USA to protect us, advocating that we offer one security concession after another. We are in similar times to Hezekiah.

We get a picture of Hezekiah almost in despair giving up anything he can for an empty promise of peace from the Assyrians:

Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the LORD, and gave it to the king of Assyria (2 Kings 18:16).

But all the dreaming of peace led to this: *They came up to Jerusalem (the Assyrians), 2 Kings 18:17.* Listen to what the King of Assyria said to Hezekiah: this is similar to what the nations tell us today!

“This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have strategy and military strength — but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man’s hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him (vv.19–21).

We brag about our military here...Jane’s Defense Weekly rates us as the best army in the ME. But with what is coming, does our army alone make us stand our ground? Most of you know I was an IDF officer; I am proud of the IDF in many ways. But we face overwhelming odds against us in the near future, with strategic equations that spell a real threat to our lives. This is not 1967, when land based wars were the norm. Russia just poured \$40 billion into Iran’s weapons development. They won’t stand by to lose their investment, as they did in 1967. Like in Hezekiah’s day, there are those in our government who say, “Trust America, they have our back,” or “Compromise with the EU and trust them to protect us (Peres).” In Hezekiah’s day it sounded like this: “Don’t worry; Pharaoh hates Assyria, he’ll protect us.” Guess what? Pharaoh didn’t. Neither should we look to the USA or the EU to be our salvation. Many of our neighbors do!

Again, another similarity: *The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.”* (v. 25). Senhariv tells Hezekiah that the great power in heaven has ordained Hezekiah’s submission to Assyria. Just like today: Islam has declared that Israel will be part of a worldwide muslim caliphate, destroyed as a JEWISH entity; it is Allah’s will. Allah has planned Israel’s destruction. It is expressed this way in the “Hadith,” a commentary on the Quran that is considered as authoritative: Allah’s Messenger (Mohammed) taught: The last hour would not come unless the Muslims would fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them, until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: Muslim, servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him.... “There is nothing

new under the sun” stated King Shlomo. How true here. Same threats, whether it is from Senhariv or the ancient muslim world, from 2700 years ago, or 1400 years ago, to today.

When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD (19:1).

This is the only reaction that there can be — back then, and looking at the world around us today.

Hezekiah’s staff told him: pray for the remnant that still survives (19:4). And he did: Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God.” (19:19).

Today, we don’t have a righteous government in our nation. But, there is a remnant, us, who are righteous before the Holy One, and I want to say it is our task to stand in the place of Hezekiah, and be like our forefather Avraham in Genesis chapter 18, and like Hezekiah here. And we are joined by many lovers of Israel around the world who pray for our nation; we do not stand alone. Last week when I was at the Auschwitz death camp, some 250 believers from Poland, Germany, Holland, Britain, Austria, Switzerland, and Hungary made it clear how much they pray for our nation to be safe, and to walk in our destiny. I was encouraged, and it is tough to feel anything positive at Auschwitz.

God rules and when He had had it “up to here,” He acted, as He promised against Assyria:

When King Hezekiah’s officials came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, “Tell your master, ‘This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard — those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

Listen! I am going to put such a spirit in him that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.” (2 Kings 19:5–7).

And that is just what happened in history.

We, too, have “great and precious promises,” as it is written. Here is one set from Hosea 14:4–9:

*We will never again say ‘Our gods’
to what our own hands have made,
for in you the fatherless find compassion.
I will heal their waywardness
and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.
I will be like the dew to Israel;
he will blossom like a lily.
Men will dwell again in his shade.
He will flourish like the grain.*

*He will blossom like a vine,
and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.
I will answer him and care for him.
I am like a green pine tree;
your fruitfulness comes from me.”
Who is wise? He will realize these things.
Who is discerning? He will understand them.*

So we know that we shall survive the current onslaught. We may hurt, and hurt badly, but we shall survive. God has partnered with our forefathers and gave them covenants that our holy Messiah Yeshua renewed. God will be faithful to His promises to them (read Gen. 12–21 to learn those promises). And then, we will walk in our destiny, as Messiah returns and puts into reality our calling, so we will be his holy nation and priests to the entire world (cf. Zech 8:23). Our nation’s enemies will be humbled and join the true God (Isa. 19:23ff.)

The road on the way is a hard one. Of all believers around the world, we have one of the most difficult callings. I’m sure Isaiah felt this same way. But God is faithful. Our times resemble those of Hezekiah and Isaiah, and their actions help show us the way through it.

So the Akeida fits into this pattern. Isaac is our father; he was brought to the brink of death, but because of the promises of God to Avraham, we know Isaac could not die. HaShem’s promises had to come true, to the end that the redemption of the world will occur. Israel is in Isaac; his DNA is found, granted in rather small amounts, in many of us. What Isaac our father went through, Israel (and may I add those who are grafted onto into the root of the olive tree of Israel) must go through. It has always been this way. Yet, in the end, God our Redeemer brings us through the *nisayon*, the trial, because He has promised that Israel will function in the manner we were created to function in.

Zech 8:23, Ex 19:5–6, Isa. 19:23, Deut 4:4–8

Our nation, as well, may be brought to the brink of death in the near future, like our father Isaac was.

Zech 12:3: On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her (Jerusalem)...

Zech 14:2: I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured...Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city.

Ezekiel 38: 4–23 gives us a similar view of a future situation:

Ezek. 38:4 (to Gog and Magog): I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army — your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords.

Ezek. 38:5 Persia (Iran), Cush (No. Africa) and Put (No. Africa) will be with them, all with shields and helmets,

Ezek. 38:6 also Gomer (Turkey) with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north (Russia?) with all its troops — the many nations with you.

Ezek. 38:7 “ ‘Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them.

Ezek. 38:8 After many days you will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety.

Ezek. 38:9 You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land.

Ezek. 38:10 “ ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme.

Ezek. 38:11 You will say, “I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people — all of them living without walls and without gates and bars.

Ezek. 38:12 I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land.”

Ezek. 38:13 Sheba and Dedan (Arabia) and the merchants of Tarshish (USA?) and all her villages will say to you, “Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?” ’

Ezek. 38:14 “Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it?

Ezek. 38:15 You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army.

*Ezek. 38:16 You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, O Gog, I will bring you against my land, **so that the nations may know me when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.***

Ezek. 38:18 This is what will happen in that day: When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Ezek. 38:21 I will summon a sword against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign LORD. Every man’s sword will be against his brother.

Ezek. 38:22 I will execute judgment upon him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstone, and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him.

Ezek. 38:23 And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD.'

The pattern is the same as the Akeida: Israel is about to be destroyed, but God steps in and saves us from our lethal enemies. In this portion of Torah, not yet fulfilled in our history, we see that Iran, North Africa, Turkey, and Russia are identifiable in leading an assault into an unsuspecting Israel. Interestingly enough, all 4 of those entities are today the declared enemies of Israel: Libya from 1971, Iran from 1978, Tunisia from 2011 (though its civilian population may not feel so strongly in this direction), Turkey from 2010, and Russia in the past 5 years under their current heavy-handed government. And once again, we see the same pattern as the Akeida: a quick march towards certain death, but God saves us in the end.

So our Torah portion for me today sets a pattern, a valid midrashic one for us to gain confidence in God's deliverance, no matter what we face, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the threats from our enemies.

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