

## Faith Over Force

This week's Torah reading, Chayei Sarah, comes on the heels of the story Vayeirah and the climactic account of the binding of Isaac. When we read the Binding of Isaac story, we cannot help but feel stunned by God's command and Abraham's unquestioning willingness – if we are stunned because of admiration or revulsion is open question. But the ethical challenge of the binding account is sharpened when we consider Isaac's role in the process; namely, he has none. Isaac is not consulted. Abraham may legitimately believe, or he is evading, or, at worst, lying to Isaac's direct question: 'Where is sheep for the slaughter?' To which, Abraham should have replied: it is you. Particularly if we read, as some commentaries do, that Isaac was only a child at the time of the binding - consent, or lack of consent, is the great difficulty when we read the binding of Isaac story.

In a different sense, when Abraham begins his journey to a foreign land – only Abraham will suffer the consequences of his departure from Ur Kasdim. *Lech Lecha*, go for yourself [as Rashi would read it] is a journey that will ultimately determine Abraham and Sarah's destiny. They are the architects of their future. The Binding of Isaac, in sharp contrast, highlights the revocation of Isaac's autonomy. To further emphasize the point, when God sets the mission before Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God again uses the language *Lech Lecha* – go for yourself. The binding of Isaac is a story, like the original journey to Canaan that is about Abraham. However, in this context, sacrificing Isaac seems a grossly abusive act. How can we admire an act of devotion that is not self-sacrificial, but other-sacrificial?!

Now, we turn to this week's portion, and once again Abraham acts autonomously on behalf of his son Isaac; this time, to seek out a fitting bride. Abraham sends his steward on a reverse journey – back to his birthplace, to his ancestral home. Abraham compels his steward to take an oath that he would not bring Isaac back to Charan in order to find a match. The steward is described as the administrator over all of Abraham's possessions. It would seem that Isaac ought to be itemized on Abraham's list of property. Further, Ramban wonders, quite pointedly, why did Abraham make his steward take the oath; he ought to have Isaac take this oath? (See Ramban's comments to Gen 24:2) Again, the consistent message seems to be that Isaac is not invited to the conversation on the direction of his life.

Abraham insists that his steward find a wife for Isaac and bring her to Canaan since God swore to Abraham that He would give the land to Abraham's children that they would inherit the soil. (Genesis 24:7) We might read this message as Abraham's plea for his legacy. At the end of his life, he cannot find a mate for Isaac so he must find him a match that will secure the future of the family. But this takes Isaac's feelings and values and needs for granted.

The blustering, bigger-than-life parent that Abraham surely was overlooked Isaac. Abraham's sheer force of will was enough to keep Isaac in line and on course. But one generation later, when Isaac tries to power through Esau as his chosen one – the family is nearly shattered. Parents and educators have the advantage of age, experience and history to direct and determine - to use a theologically-laden word – the child's/student's future. But the powerful force of personality does not last. The only feature that is essential for an enduring future is faith, love. The Mishna's point: A love that depends on no thing lasts forever.' (Avot ch 4)

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach

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