

The Akeida--Sarah's Test of Faith?

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Dr. Shera Aranoff Tuchman has been teaching a class at Kehilath Jeshurun for over fifteen years. Material from this class culminated in the publication of two books about the women in Genesis and Exodus respectively: *Passions of the Matriarch* and *Moses' Women*. Dr. Aranoff is also a dermatologist, practicing Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. This article appears in issue 5 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

And it was after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham,” and he replied, “Here I am.” And He said, “Please take your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you.” So Abraham woke up early in the morning, and he saddled his donkey. He took his two young men with him and Isaac, his son....(*Bereishith* 22:1–3)

Isaac faces the supreme test of his religious obedience: the *Akeida*, the “binding of Isaac.” Countless articles and books have been written to describe Abraham’s test of faith. Most surprisingly, however, is the fact that there is no textual reference describing *Sarah’s* response to the *Akeida*. From the moment God commands Abraham to heed Sarah’s voice following her directive to send away Hagar and Ishmael, “*Whatever Sarah says, listen to her voice,*” (*Bereishith* 21:12), not only does Sarah never speak again, but she is not even mentioned again in the Torah text until it records her death. (*Bereishith* 23:1) Her entire life has been bound up with her passion to mother the covenantal son; now, that dream—and her son’s very life—appear threatened, yet we hear not one word from Sarah herself, or even a textual mention of Sarah during those endless days that Abraham and Isaac are away. The commentaries themselves are aware of this thunderous silence and attempt, with various explanations, to fill in the gap. The commentaries differ on what Sarah “knew” and how she responded to that knowledge. *Sefer Tosafot haShalem* proposes that Sarah knew nothing of Abraham’s plans. Worried about Sarah’s response to his true mission, the commentary states that Abraham told Sarah he was taking Isaac away in order to educate him. *Ohr haHayyim* concurs, stating that Abraham entreated Sarah to allow Isaac to accompany him to learn Torah. Rashi adds that by the text’s placement of the event of Sarah’s death in the chapter immediately following that of the *Akeida*, we learn that there exists a cause and effect relationship between the two events.

The relationship between Sarah’s death and the *Akeida* is imagined by several commentaries. *Pirkei d’Rabi Eliezer* describes a disgruntled Satan who had sought Isaac’s death—perceiving that Isaac is

alive and well—turning his evil intentions to Sarah. He approaches her saying, “Your old man took your son, Isaac, and sacrificed him on an altar to His God. And the boy was crying out and wailing, and there was no one to save him.” Assuming that her son was slaughtered, Sarah cries out three times, her soul departs, and she dies. The commentary states that the blasts of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah immortalize Sarah’s anguished cries. According to *Siftei Hakhamim*, the messenger of doom need not have been Satan, who convinces Sarah, incorrectly, that her son is dead, but only an ordinary wayfarer from Mount Moriah, who relates the true story of the *Akeida*. Before he could finish the story, however—with the happy ending that Isaac was saved from death—he pauses for a brief instant to catch his breath, and in that instant, Sarah is overwhelmed by his tale, her soul departs, and she dies. In both of these interpretations, Sarah is led to believe that her beloved son Isaac is dead. Rashi posits another story. According to Rashi, Sara in fact learns that Isaac has *survived* the *Akeida*, narrowly escaping death. In that instant, Sara realizes that although Isaac survived, her entire life *could have been annihilated* by the razor’s edge of Abraham’s sword. According to Rashi, this *knowledge* resulted in extreme anguish and existential angst, which caused her death.

These three commentaries give Sarah a presence during the time of the *Akeida*. Ultimately, with these interpretations, however, one must certainly wonder about Sarah’s faith—or rather lack of faith—at this most important moment. The *Akeida* confirms Abraham’s supreme faith in God, and by inference from these scenarios, Sarah dies by what appears to be a supreme *lack of faith*! *Sefer Tosafot haShalem*, however, draws the opposite conclusion, by asking rhetorically, “How could Sarah, a woman of such enormous faith in God, have grieved over God’s choice of her son as a sacrifice. On the contrary, her faith is so great, that she was able to extract undiluted joy from the fact that, for whatever reason, God had chosen *her* son.” According to this commentary, Sarah then dies of the powerful flood of emotion, which resulted not from grief, but from overwhelming *joy*.

In all these scenarios, however, Sarah appears to be a passive bystander to the *Akeida*—*the Akeida* is Abraham’s test of faith—not Sarah’s. What I would like to suggest is that Sarah is *not* passive in this story—quite the contrary. She is actively by Abraham’s side—as she has always been—if not physically, then emotionally and spiritually. The *Akeida*, therefore, becomes her own test of faith as well.

From the very first, Sarah is an equal and active partner at Abraham’s side. She is his counterpart in his mission to introduce his God to the Canaanite world. The text states that Abram takes his wife, Sarai, Lot, his brother’s son, all their possessions, and the souls *they* made in Haran. *Midrash Rabba* explains the use of the plural—*they*. The midrash states that the souls they made were converts. Abram converted the males, and Sarai converted the females. Thus, the text credits them equally in the creation of converts to monotheism. Although God has promised Abraham a child to continue the covenant between Him and Abraham, time passes and Sarah remains barren. Sarah realizes that despite God’s promise of fertility, she remains unable to conceive. She offers her handmaiden, Hagar—the first surrogate—to her husband, hoping that Hagar will bear Abraham’s child for them. “And Abraham listened to Sarah’s voice” (*Bereishith* 15:3). Sarah hopes that she and Abraham will raise this child as their own. Perhaps God’s promise was to be fulfilled biologically through Abraham only, and was not to be Sarah’s biological child.

In contrast to Sarah’s lifetime of barrenness, Hagar becomes pregnant immediately with Abraham’s child. Hagar ridicules Sarah about her infertility compared to her own success in conceiving a child, and Sarah complains to Abraham. Abraham instructs Sarah to deal with the matter as she sees fit. The relationship between Sarah and Hagar becomes untenable for Hagar, and she flees. An angel accosts Hagar in the desert, promising her a strong nation from the son she will bear—and Hagar returns. A child, Ishmael is born of that pregnancy. It is following the birth of Ishmael that God changes their names from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, and instructs Abraham that the covenantal child will not be Ishmael, but will be born from Abraham *and Sarah*. God sends messenger angels who reiterate His promise; within the year, Sarah is blessed with her only child, Isaac. As the boys grow, Sarah observes a negative influence that Ishmael, Hagar’s son, has on Isaac, and wants to banish both Hagar and her son. Abraham is greatly distressed at Sarah’s desire to banish his firstborn son—and perhaps the mother as well—but God clearly commands him, “*All that Sarah says, listen to her voice.*”

Abraham obeys God's command to listen to Sarah, and sends away Hagar and Ishmael. It is only twelve sentences later—after a brief description of a covenant of peace between Abimelekh and Abraham—that the test of the *Akeida* appears.

Abraham listens to Sarah when she offers him a surrogate, Hagar, to bear him a child. He is reluctant, however, to listen to Sarah, when she urges him to banish Hagar and their son, Ishmael. It is here that God actually commands him to listen to “all” Sarah says to him—and Abraham does listen to Sarah, and expels Hagar. God does not say to Abraham to listen to Sarah in this instance only—expelling Hagar—but explicitly states, “*All that Sarah says, listen to her voice, for your offspring will be perpetuated through Isaac.*” Thus, God tells Abraham to accept Sarah's advice *always*, for through Isaac will Abraham's seed be recognized. Rashi fleshes this sentence out further, playing on the Torah text's unusual use of the preposition “*Be*” meaning *within*, rather than “*Le*” meaning, *to*. Rashi would then read the sentence as, “Listen to the voice of divine inspiration from *within* her.” Analyzing this amazing sentence, we see two apparently disparate, but connected thoughts. First, God commands Abraham to listen to *whatever* Sarah says. The first part of the statement is, by itself, an astounding proclamation by God to Abraham. God commands him to listen to *everything* that his wife says! In addition, the second half of the sentence, usually considered *less* revealing and often omitted when the first part of the sentence is quoted, may be even more astounding—“*for your offspring will be perpetuated through Isaac.*” Not only is God giving Abraham a general command to obey Sarah, but He is stating the reason—because all that God has promised Abraham—the blessing and the covenant, will be passed down through Isaac's—not Ishmael's—progeny, through the child that Abraham has conceived with Sarah, not the child he has conceived with Hagar.

Surprisingly, after this explicit command to Abraham, until the death of Sarah, there is nothing written about Sarah advising Abraham, or of Abraham accepting Sarah's advice. It seems strange that God tells Abraham to do *whatever* Sarah says, and then, she says nothing! It would seem therefore to be reasonable to assume that Sarah *did* in fact give Abraham advice regarding their son Isaac, but for some reason the Torah alludes to it, without explicitly stating it.

In the Torah text, Sarah is portrayed as a woman of words. Interestingly, however, there are two episodes, other than the *Akeida*, when her voice is not heard. In the two episodes where Abraham describes Sarah as his “sister” rather than as his wife, Sarah is mute. In these stories Sarah's own honor and existence as she has known it are at stake. She is carried off into the bedchamber—first—of the Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and at a later date to that of Abimelekh, King of Gerar. She does not cry to Abraham, nor plead for herself before the kings, nor even raise her voice in prayer to God. We are not privy to her innermost thoughts. Here, as later at the *Akeida*, we thirst for her thoughts and words, but we only hear the sounds of silence.

Shofetim, the book of Judges (Chapter 4) relates the oppression of the Israelites by Yabin, king of Canaan and his general, Sisera during the time of the reign of Deborah, the prophet, and her general, Barak the son of Abinoam. At Deborah's command, Barak assembled ten thousand able bodied men and confronted Sisera's entire force, which was equipped with nine hundred iron chariots. In the ensuing battle, Sisera's army was decimated. Sisera abandoned his chariot and escaped by foot, fleeing for his life. War weary, tired and thirsty, he arrived at the tent of Yael, the wife of Hever the Kenite.

“Come in, come in to me; fear not,” she said, offering him refuge. And he pleaded, “Give me a little water, for I am thirsty.” Yael gave the shivering man a blanket to warm himself, and a jug of milk. And he said to her, “Stand in the doorway of the tent, and if anyone asks you if there is a man here, say, ‘There is not.’” Weary from battle fatigue, he fell asleep. Yael quickly took a hammer and an iron tent-pin, thrust the pin deep into his temple, and he died. (*Shofetim* 4:18–21)

Pursuing the escaping Sisera, Barak arrived at Yael's tent. Yael came out to meet him. “Come and I will show you the man whom you seek.” And behold, Sisera lay dead, the pin in his temple. Upon his return, Deborah and Barak exalt God with a song of victory, an expression of cognizance and gratitude to God. The song encompasses the entire period of the Judges up to Deborah's time, including the

battle of the defeat of Sisera. In the song, Deborah blesses and praises Yael's deed. Surprisingly, in this concise ballad of their recent Jewish history, Deborah devotes several sentences to the response of Sisera's *mother* to the delayed return of her son from the battlefield.

Through the window, Sisera's mother looked out, and peered through the window. "Why is his chariot late in coming? Why tarry the wheels of the chariots?" The wisest of her friends answered her, and so she consoles herself, "He is finding and dividing the spoils of war—one woman, no, two, to each man, valuable embroidered garments...." (*Shofetim* 5:28–30)

Why does Deborah incorporate these sentences into her victory song? What are we to learn from the reactions of Sisera's mother and her friends?

Two mothers—Sarah, Isaac's mother, and the unnamed mother of Sisera: both mothers have sons who have left the safety of their homes and their mother's protective watch. Sisera's mother has watched her son, regal in military attire go off to war in his iron chariot in the service of Yabin, the Canaanite King. Sarah, whether she actually saw Isaac leave with Abraham, or does not realize they had gone until she awakes later that morning, must know that her son has gone off somewhere—in the service of God. Both mothers wait expectantly at home, not knowing what is happening to their sons, or when they will return. Will a sacrifice be made, or will they return safely, each to his waiting mother's arms? I would suggest that the responses of the mothers represent the secular and the religious responses to the anxiety of the unknown—to existential angst.

Staring out of the window, as seconds stretch into minutes, and minutes seem like hours, Sisera's mother is unable to live with this heart-wrenching anxiety. She bursts forth, verbalizing her innermost thoughts, "Where is he? Why don't I hear the sound of his chariot? Why the total silence on the road?" What she is expressing is her deep worry that something has happened to her son—something that has stopped that iron chariot from returning home, something that has stopped it from bringing back her victorious son with rowdy cheering crowds accompanying him. She knows, deep in her innermost soul, that something is very wrong. Unable to live with that thought, and with the help of her well-meaning friends, she considers an alternative ending. The chariot must be delayed because her son is busying himself with the rewards of war—raping young women, stealing the valuables of the men. He will of course be home later—now is the time for celebration. She tries to find a measure of peace with that alternative rationalization.

I would suggest that the secular or psychological response to not knowing the outcome and moreover, being unable to affect it—absolute helplessness in an intolerable situation—is exemplified in the response of Sisera's mother. One can imagine the worst or one can imagine the best. One can become deeply anxious and depressed, or one can perhaps delude oneself into accepting a more satisfying ending. Neither depression—anticipating the worst, nor delusion—anticipating the best, will affect the outcome. The outcome is beyond oneself, whatever one's temporary response is while waiting to hear what has ultimately transpired.

Contrast Sisera's mother's response to that which we can glean from the biblical text and commentaries regarding Sarah's response. Isaac has gone off with Abraham. The midrashic sources cited above relate varying hypotheses as to the depth of her foreknowledge. Certainly, at some point Sarah knows that Isaac is not home—and that she does not know when he will be home. How odd, it appears that the Bible relates the response of *Sisera's* mother to her son's absence, and *not* Sarah's response to her son's absence! Why should we learn of a heathen's response, and not the response of that of our Matriarch Sarah? I would like to suggest that perhaps Sarah's response *is* there. We only have to look carefully for it.

Perhaps the answer is her silence—the divine inspiration within her. It is this inspiration, this faith, that let her be led away—twice, into the bedchambers of kings. And it is this faith that now enables her to watch her son being led away by her husband. Sarah *knew* that her God would protect her, as she was led away by foreign kings, and as she now *knows* that He will protect her son.

Notwithstanding that most of the commentaries and midrashim state that Sarah knew nothing of Abraham's plans, and in fact relate her death to her hearing of the *Akeida*, I suggest that Sarah knew

everything about God's command to Abraham to take Isaac up that famous mountain and to bind him upon the altar. Sara and Abraham were partners. They converted multitudes of people to monotheism together; they travelled together; they welcomed and fed travelers in their tent together; they took action to have a family together. It is inconceivable that Abraham would not discuss God's ultimate command with his life partner, Sarah—seeking her wise advice, and listening to *all* that she would say, knowing that God Himself would accept his consulting with Sarah, and obeying her decisions.

So, where can we hear Sarah's words about the *Akeida*? Certainly not before Abraham sets out with Isaac early that morning—but then, we hear no words from Abraham either. God commands him to take his son and bind him upon the altar, and Abraham immediately obeys, in silence. He awakens early, saddles his donkey, splits the wood for the offering, and sets out with his son Isaac, and his two aides. Isaac looks at his father, questioningly, "Father?" "I am here, my son," Abraham answers. "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham answers, "God will show him—*lo*—the lamb for the offering, my son. And the two of them went together."

"God will show *him* the lamb for the offering, my son." These are the only words uttered by Abraham during the *Akeida*. The pronouns are confusing. Abraham does not say, "God will show *both of us*, or *you Isaac*, or *me*, the lamb; rather, Abraham says, "God will show *him* the lamb." Whom will God show? Given the confusion of the pronouns, several commentaries explicate the Hebrew word "*lo*" as reflexive—"God will show *Himself* the lamb for the offering." Perhaps that solves the problem, but I wonder if that interpretation adds to the confusion? How does God's showing *Himself* the lamb answer Isaac's question? I would suggest, with some trepidation, that perhaps the pronouns fit better if Sarah initially said this sentence to Abraham. Perhaps she said these words to him at the end of an all night discussion before his early morning departure with Isaac. Abraham's own faith intact, perhaps he discussed with Sarah how to answer Isaac if he asked *the* question. Sarah then answers—"God will show him—meaning Isaac—the lamb for the offering."

Sarah, then, knowing that God has commanded Abraham to listen carefully to the inner meaning of her words, comforts him with *her* faith—the faith that is strongest at those moments of existential crisis in her life. Sarah's faith is deep and strong. She is neither depressed nor delusional. She accepts that her son's fate is in God's hands, and she conveys this acceptance to Abraham. She knows it must end well, for God has promised that the covenant would be fulfilled through Isaac. "Don't worry about how to allay Isaac's fears," she may have told Abraham. "God will show him the lamb for the offering." It is perhaps her words of faith and encouragement that Abraham quotes verbatim to Isaac, as he answers his question—the words from *within* her, the words of divine inspiration—revealed to her husband Abraham as he sets out on the trial of his life.

As he approaches the mountain he orders his two aides to remain behind, and Abraham goes forward with Isaac. In silence, Abraham places his son on the firewood, and ties him to the altar. A voice cries out, ordering Abraham not to lay a hand on Isaac or hurt him in any way, for *now* God knows of *Abraham's* awe of God, that *he* has *yirat Hashem*. He too, has passed the test.