
And Abraham Said, “No!”

Lewis John Eron

AND IT CAME TO PASS ONE ROSH HASHANAH THAT GOD ONCE AGAIN DECIDED TO PUT ABRAHAM TO THE TEST. THE SCRIPT WAS WELL KNOWN. ALL THE PLAYERS HAD MASTERED THEIR PARTS. THE ministering angels had set up the stage on heaven above and on earth below. They had performed this play over three thousand times. They knew it cold.

But though the script, the stage, and the characters were familiar, the heavenly theater still shook with excitement. The chorus of cherubim was rehearsing one last time. The bright burning seraphim were dusting themselves off to cast their lights as shining spots on the stage below. The angelic actor who always played Satan, the accuser, was making sure his pyrotechnic tricks were flawless.

And on earth—for this was a multi-level production, often done in the round—there was a hustle and bustle. The actors playing Eliezar and Ishmael, two bit parts, were upstaging each other for publicity shots. The donkey who would carry the firewood and supplies was complaining that his pack-saddle did not fit right. “Every year it’s the same,” he complained. “I wear this contraption for three days straight and it always rubs. I’m sore for weeks. Get it right this year or you’ll hear from my agent.”

And as usual no one could find the ram. Finally the stage hands found him in the bushes taking a nap. “Don’t bother me,” he bleated, “I’m not on till the third act.”

And if the stage seemed excited, the audience was growing restless. All over the world Jews assembled in their synagogues to hear the famous story once again—not that they understood a word of it. But it would be

reviewed and explained to them this year as every year by their rabbis, eager critics seeking to impress them by their insights.

Yet, for some strange reason the show captured their imagination. So they sat, dressed up for the opening, and waited.

They did not have long to wait. Already the stage was being set for the presentation. There were only a few more vocal solos before the main feature and, thank God, they were short.

And then, all went quiet as the stage was unrolled before them.

AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT WHEN GOD DECIDED TO PUT ABRAHAM TO THE test, he called to Abraham and said, "Abraham, Abraham."

Abraham stirred from his nap, rubbed his eyes, stood up, shook his legs, stretched his arms, shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Hineni, Here I am."

And God said, "Take now your son."

And Abraham replied, "Which one? I have two, you know, Ishmael and Isaac."

So God responded, "Your only son."

But Abraham answered, "I told you I have two sons. Isaac is the only son of his mother and Ishmael is the only son of his mother. But I've got two."

Then God continued, "The one whom you love."

So Abraham replied, "The one I love! What kind of dad do you think I am? I love both my sons."

Finally God declared, "Isaac!"

And Abraham, being slightly upset at God's obtuseness, put his hands on his hips, looked up to heaven and said, "And where am I to go?" So God told him. "Go to the land of Moriah. There you will offer Isaac as a sacrifice on a hill that I will show you."

"What!" declared Abraham incredulously.

"Am I not being clear?" said God, taken aback by Abraham's response. "Listen to me! Go to the land of Moriah, I said. There you will offer him, your son, Isaac, as a sacrifice on a hill that I will show you."

And Abraham said, "NO!"

And God said, "WHAT?"

"NO," said Abraham, "I said, 'NO!'"

The whole heaven and most of the earth shook. This was something new. This was never in the script. For thousands of years and thousands of performances, the script never changed, Abraham always said, "YES!"

Even the audience was shocked. They had come to know the script by heart. Hearing the story year after year gave them a feeling of permanence and stability and steady rhythm in a tumultuous world that marched ahead with no particular beat. But now, Abraham said, "NO!"

Well, God, as you know, is patient, but he was not going to let this Abraham disturb his finely wrought creation by refusing to say his lines. So he faced Abraham and looking sternly down upon him declared in a heaven shaking voice, "What do you mean by 'NO!'?"

Abraham, being firm in his resolve, answered plainly, "No means no. I will not go. Not this time. Not this year."

"What do you mean, 'Not this time. Not this year?'" thundered the Divine One, causing his heavenly throne to tremble and his earthly footstool to shake.

"I mean just what I said," Abraham answered with the same conviction he had shown when he debated God over the dismal fate of the miserable inhabitants of Sodom. "Every year I take my son and the donkey and the two servants over there, Ishmael and Eliezar, and trudge all the way to Mount Moriah. I am going for a picnic, a barbecue? No way! I'm going to sacrifice my son. My heart is heavy with pain and sorrow. Isaac walks along knowing, yet unknowing. I can feel his fear. Then every year I have to assemble the altar out of heavy stones, an exhausting task for an old guy like me burdened with the fear that this time you might not hold back my hand at the last minute. And if and when you do so, I still have to pull the unfortunate ram out of the thicket to the altar for the sacrifice. Thank you, God, but I'm not going this year. Not me!"

The news of this dispute quickly flooded the heavens. Cherubim and seraphim, angels and messengers, the whole host of heaven gathered to witness the debate. Even Satan, who was hastily preparing his special effects by which he hoped to hamper Abraham and wow the audience, could not

believe what he was hearing. So he lay aside his work on the magical raging river that he always used to block Abraham's way, and, putting on the costume of an aged sage, ran down to see what was happening.

Satan could not believe what he heard and saw. After all these years of trying to beg, trick, deceive, cajole, and mystify Abraham into refusing to sacrifice his son, Abraham decided to make the choice himself. But Satan was not going to lose this sale, so he walked up to Abraham, extended his hand and said, "Congratulations, Abe. Finally it looks as if you made the right choice. I'm beside myself now that you spoke up. What guts—saying "no" to that celestial overlord."

Before Abraham could respond, Satan turned to God and continued, "He's finally found the weak link in your armor, God. Who do you think you are, asking Abe to do the unthinkable and still expecting him to walk in your ways and follow your paths? Unbelievable!"

"That's enough, Satan," interrupted Abraham. "How dare you think that I was following your deceptive advice? That I was convinced by your cheap philosophy? Frightened by your pyrotechnics and water tricks. Just you remember! I'm not denying God nor God's own Torah but this year I'm not going to Mount Moriah to sacrifice my son and that is that!"

At this point even God was surprised. Abraham was rejecting one of his commandments and, at the same time, proclaiming his loyalty to God and his Torah. The angels were agitated. They all started talking trying to figure it out.

So God asked once again, "Abraham, what do you mean?"

Abraham replied, "In the Torah you gave us a choice of life or death, as it is written, *Call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life if you and your family would live.* So I have chosen life this year.

"Every year, you assure us that you will look upon the sacrifice of Isaac with favor and my willingness to offer up my son will argue on the behalf of my sometimes less-than-faithful offspring, the people of Israel. So every year I wait to see what will happen to my children. Now some years are better than others and some years are worse. Every so often there are years that are utter disasters. You know—expulsions, riots, pogroms, religious persecutions, cultural intimidations, and attempts at extermination. For this,

I ask myself, for this, every year I drag my old body up Mount Moriah to sacrifice my son? Not this year, buddy. I will not go!"

Now all the fuss disturbed Sarah. She was inside the tent making a new robe for Isaac to wear when he matriculated into the Yeshivah of Shem and Eber so that he could be instructed in the ways and traditions of our people. Out she rushed and asked in a clear voice, "What is going on? There is so much noise. I can hardly think!"

God replied, "Oh, nothing is going on. Just go back to work. Don't worry."

"But there's too much noise for nothing," Sarah declared, putting her hands on her hips and looking sternly around to see if anyone would give her the correct answer.

For a moment all were silent. Then Sarah turned to Abraham and asked him, "Did God want you to go to Mount Moriah again this year and try to sacrifice Isaac?"

"Well, yes," answered the patriarch.

"And what did you say?" asked Sarah.

"I said, 'No!'" Abraham replied.

"Well, good for you," Sarah responded. "It's about time. Each year I die of grief when I hear from Satan that you have gone to sacrifice my child. By the time I learn that the whole thing was only a test, it's too late. You know that I wanted Isaac to be brought up in the ways of the Israel's Torah. But I wanted him to live by them and not die. For is it not written that *she is a tree of life to all who hold fast to her?*

"Every year it is the same story. Every year I have to accept my child's sacrifice and death. This year I will not do so. This year I, too, say No!"

Isaac heard Abraham and Sarah and God in heated argument and drew near. Abraham called to him, "Now then, what do you want, Isaac?"

Isaac answered, "I know that it will be written in the Psalms of King David, *The death of his faithful ones is grievous in the Eternal's sight.* So this year, I will show my faithfulness to God by not offering myself up as a sacrifice to him but by vowing to live by his ways."

So God turned to Isaac and asked sternly, "You, too, reject my commandment?"

And Isaac answered, "No, not at all, dear God. You know that I

accept willingly the heritage of Israel. I choose to live by its precepts and teachings. I bear witness to its understanding of the Divine and the human, but I will not die. I will live! Too many of us have died and still you have not sent redemption. My testimony to their memory this year will be to live by your commandments, not to die by them.

"You have given us Torah as a way of life in this world and it is not found beyond the portals of death. So, here I will live. My sacrifice, if it be a sacrifice, will be in living and not in dying. If death comes, it comes. You created me human and all people die. But until that time I will live, as it is written: *I shall not die but live, and proclaim the Eternal One's works.*"

"Then what shall we do?" asked God.

Abraham replied, "Let's not have the sacrifice this year. We will just try it once and see what will happen. Perhaps the promise of life entices people to repent more than the fear of death. Perhaps they will learn to sanctify your name in daily life instead of waiting for the odd chance of martyrdom. Perhaps they will learn that Israel's Torah is something to live by and not only to die for."

And Sarah added, "What do we have to lose? The world is not yet perfect. We will experiment this year. Who knows, things might just improve."

"It's only for a year," argued Isaac, "give it a chance."

"No, no," Satan imposed, "you cannot change the rules. I refuse to let you. I know this role too well, it is not for me to play another."

God took a deep breath and sat down on his throne of mercy. He pondered the arguments, looked deep into his heart, and with a sigh decreed that this year Abraham would not have to sacrifice Isaac.

Finally the ram crawled out of the bushes. "What is taking everyone?" he asked, "I am getting very lonely out there on the mountain." God turned to him and said, "You can return to your fields this year for there will be no sacrifice."

"No sacrifice, how can that be?" asked the ram. "I was created to be offered at this time. That was my purpose and my fate."

"But there will be no sacrifice," God said. "Abraham refuses to go, Sarah refuses to send him, and Isaac prefers to live."

"That is very good," said the ram. "You created them human. They

can reason and make choices. But you created me to be a ram. I have no such ability. I have no such skill. What am I to do?"

But Isaac answered, "Don't worry, as you were to be my substitute in death, you shall be my partner in life." So he cut off the ram's horns. He gave one to the archangel Michael to sound at the revelation of Sinai and the other to the archangel Gabriel to proclaim the end of the exile. Then Isaac sheared the ram's wool and placed it in heaven as a sign of forgiveness, as it is written:

Though your sins are scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they are dyed crimson, they will be like wool.

Finally, Isaac sent the ram back into the thicket where he was to wait as a reminder of the promise of the messianic period and was told only to come out at the promised time when, as it is written:

The wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, and a little child shall lead them... For they shall not hurt or destroy all my holy mountain; for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Eternal One.

So the play came to an end. The stage was rolled up, the scenery stored away for the next year's performance. The actors went home and God returned to his high and exalted throne.

Later in the day, when the shofar was sounded, God looked at Abraham and at Sarah and at Isaac and at all their descendants and the wool Isaac sheared from the ram. And all the people assembled called out:

This is the day of the world's birth. This day all creatures stand before you, whether as children or as servants. As we are your children, show us a parent's compassion; as we are servants, we look to you for mercy. Cast the light of your merciful judgment upon us, O holy and awesome God. God looked once again at the wool and declared, "All is forgiven."

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