

God will Provide the Lamb

by Nehama Leibowitz z"l

The story is familiar to us all. We know the nature of the appeal answered by the single, trisyllabic, Hebrew word *hineni* (here-I-am) of Abraham. We are aware of the demand involved and the response which followed the words: "upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."—

וַיִּשָּׂם אֲבִרְהָם בְּבֹקֶר
וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-חֲמֹרוֹ
וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ
וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ
וַיִּבְקַע עֵצִי עֲלֵה
וַיִּקַּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים :

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young me with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for a burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

There is no description of Abraham's state of mind or his feelings, no report of any speech or conversation. Without further ado, we find ourselves "on the third day." How are the events of those three days described in the Midrash by our Sages?

"ויקם וילך": קדמו השטן בדרך ונדמה לו כדמות זקן אי"ל לאן אתה הולך, אי"ל להתפלל אי"ל ומי שהולך להתפלל למה אש ומאכלת בידו ועצים על כתפו, אי"ל שמא נשהא יום או יומים ונשחט ונאפה ונאכל, אי"ל זקן לא שם הייתי כשאמר לך הקב"ה קח את בנך וזקן כמותך ילך ויאבד בן שנתן לו למאה שנה. (נוסח הילקוט: סבא! אבד לבד! בן שניתן לך למאה שנה – אתה הולך לשחטו?) אמר לו על מנת כן. אמר לו ואם מנסה אותך יותר מכך, תוכל לעמוד? אי"ל ויותר. אי"ל למחר יאמר לך: שופך דם אתה, ששפכת דמו אי"ל על מנת כן...

“And rose up and went” – The Satan accosted him and appeared to him in the guise of an old man. The latter asked him: Wither goest thou? Abraham replied: To pray. Said the Satan: If a man going to pray, why the fire and the knife in his hand and the wood on his shoulder? Abraham answered: Peradventure we shall tarry a day or two, slaughter, cook and eat. Said he: Old man! Was I not there when the Holy One blessed be He did say to thee: “Take thy son...” Notwithstanding an old man the likes of thee will go and put away a son vouchsafed him at the age of a hundred! (*Yalkut*: Gaffer! Thou’rt out of thy mind! Gone to slaughter the son given to thee at an hundred year!) Abraham replied: Just for this. – And if He tries thee more than this, canst thou withstand it? Said he: And more. The Satan retorted: Tomorrow He will tell thee, a shedder of blood art thou for shedding his blood! Abraham replied: Just for this.

כיון שראה שלא קבלו ממנו הלך ונעשה לפנייהם נהר גדול, מיד ירד אברהם לתוך המים והגיעו עד ברכיו. אמר לנעריו: בואו אחרי! ירדו אחרי. כיון שהגיע עד חצי הנהר, הגיע המים עד צוארו. באותה שעה תלה אברהם עיניו לשמים. אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, בחרתני הודרתני ונגלית לי ואמרת לי אני יחיד ואתה יחיד, על ידך יודע שמי בעולמי, והעלה יצחק בנך לפני לעולה – ולא עכבתי והריני עוסק בצוידך, ועכשיו באו מים עד נפש. אם אני או יצחק בני טובע – מי יקיים מאמרך? על מי יתייחד שמך? אמר לו הקב"ה: חייך שעל ידך יתייחד שמי בעולם! מיד גער הקב"ה את המעיין ויבש הנהר ועמדו ביבשה.

As soon as he saw that Abraham was not to be moved, he went and assumed the form of a large river. Forwith Abraham plunged into the waters which reached as far as his knees. He said to his young men, Follow me. They plunged in after him. As soon as they reached midway, the waters came up to his neck. At that moment, Abraham cast his eye heavenward and said before Him: Lord of the Universe, Thou didst chose me, and revealed Thyself to me and said to me: I am the one and thou art one. Through thee shall My name become known in My world, so offer

up Isaac thy son before Me for a burnt offering. I did not hold back and behold I am engaged in Thy command, but now the waters are endangering life itself. If Isaac or myself doth drown – who will fulfill Thy word? Said the Holy One blessed be He to him: By thy life! Through thee, shall the unity of My name be proclaimed in the world. The Holy One blessed be He forthwith rebuked the spring and the river dried up and they stood on dry ground.

(Tanhuma)

What is the significance of this dialogue which constitutes, as in many similar cases, a symbolic representation of an internal struggle? The voice of the tempter in the guise of an old man is none other than the promptings of Abraham's own heart during those three momentous days. One by one doubts assail him—the voice of the tempter. First his paternal instinct: “the son given thee at an hundred year?” The voice of conscience: “Tomorrow He will tell thee, A shedder of blood art thou...” The voice of the one who was familiar with the ways of serving his creator can be detected in the question: “If a man going to pray, why the fire and knife in his hand.” In other words, does prayer involve human sacrifice? These are all the promptings of the tempter. As soon as he saw that Abraham was not to be moved, he assumed the form of a large river. What does this signify? The objective difficulties that block a person's path. I wanted to do it, but I was prevented by circumstances beyond my control. The Sages pictured it as a natural obstacle— a river (in modern parlance: the bus or train was late etc.). Could Abraham have reached mount Moriah if a river stood in his path? But he who really desires to fulfill his duty is deterred by nothing, goes just the same “just for this,” and plunges into the river even as far as his neck.

But after we have understood the Midrash, we may well ask what prompted our Sages to fill in the outline of the Biblical text with such picturesque detail? The following excerpt from *Mimesis*¹ a study of the representation of reality in western literature in which the author contrasts the Homeric, Greek style of writing with the Biblical may help us to understand the problem:

Even this opening (i.e. Gen. 21, 1: “And it came to pass...” to end of verse) startles us when we come to it from Homer. Where are the two speakers? We are not told. The reader, however, knows that they are not normally to be found together in one place on earth, that one of them, God, in order to speak to Abraham, must come from somewhere, must enter the earthly realm from some unknown heights or depths. Whence does he come, whence does he call to Abraham? We are not told... Where is he? We do not know. He says, indeed: Here I am—but the Hebrew word means only something like “behold me,” and in any case is not meant to indicate the actual place where Abraham is, but a moral position in respect to God, who has called to him—Here am I awaiting thy command. Where he is actually, whether in Beersheba or elsewhere, whether indoors or in the open air, is not stated; it does not interest the narrator, the reader is not informed; and what Abraham was doing when God called to him is left in the same obscurity... and of Abraham too nothing is made perceptible except the words in which he answers God: *Hinne-ni*, Behold me here—with which, to be sure, a most touching gesture expressive of obedience and readiness is suggested, but it is left to the reader to visualize...

¹ The Representation of Reality in Western Literature by Erich Auerbach, Princeton University Press, 1953, Chap. 1, pp. 8-10.

After this opening, God gives his command, and the story itself begins: everyone knows it; it unrolls with no episodes in a few independent sentences whose syntactical connection is of the most rudimentary sort. In this atmosphere it is unthinkable that an implement, a landscape through which the travelers passed, the servingmen, or the ass, should be described, that their origin or descent or material or appearance or usefulness should be set forth in terms of praise; they do not even admit an adjective: they are serving-men, ass, wood, and knife, and nothing else, without an epithet; they are there to serve the end which God has commanded; what in other respects they were, are, or will be, remains in darkness. A journey is made, because God has designated the place where the sacrifice is to be performed; but we are told nothing about the journey except that it took three days, and even that we are told in a mysterious way: Abraham and his followers rose “early in the morning” and “went unto” the place of which God had told him; on the third day he lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

That gesture is the only gesture, is indeed the only occurrence during the whole journey, of which we are told; and though its motivation lies in the fact that the place is elevated, its uniqueness still heightens the impression that the journey took place through a vacuum; it is as if, while he traveled on, Abraham had looked neither to the right nor to the left, had suppressed any sign of life in his followers and himself save only their footfalls. Thus the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and

which yet is measured: three days! Three such days positively demand the symbolic interpretation which they later received.

They began “early in the morning.” But at what time on the third day did Abraham lift up his eyes and see his goal? The text says nothing on the subject. Obviously not “late in the evening,” for it seems that there was still time enough to climb the mountain and make the sacrifice. So “early in the morning” is given, not as an indication of time, but for the sake of its ethical significance; it is intended to express the resolution, the promptness, the punctual obedience of the sorely tried Abraham. Bitter to him is the early morning in which he saddles his ass, calls his serving-men and his son Isaac, and sets out; but he obeys, he walks on until the third day, then lifts up his eyes and sees the place. Whence he comes, we do not know, but the goal is clearly stated: Jeruel in the land of Moriah. What place this is meant to indicate is not clear... Just as little as “early in the morning” serves as a temporal indication does “Jeruel in the land of Moriah” serve as a geographical indication; and in both cases alike, the complementary indication is not given, for we know as little of the hour at which Abraham lifted up his eyes as we do of the place from which he set forth—Jeruel is significant not so much as the goal of an earthly journey, in its geographical relation to other places, as through its special election, through its relation to God, who designated it as the scene of the act, and therefore it must be named.

In the narrative itself, a third chief character appears: Isaac. While God and Abraham, the serving-men, the ass, and the implements are simply named, without mention of any qualities or any other sort of definition,

Isaac once receives an appositive; God says, "Take Isaac, thine only son, whom thou lovest."

If Auerbach is correct that the Torah deliberately leaves out details and concentrates only on what is essential to the purpose of the narrative, leaving the rest in obscurity, "thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches," then we have the answer to our question, why our Sages filled out the stark Biblical story with the homiletic embellishments introducing a dialogue between Abraham and the tempter and the latter and Isaac, and Isaac and his father.

As Auerbach states further, the Biblical narrative is multilayer and its characters' feelings which are never completely expressed have "greater depths of time, fate and consciousness" and are "fraught with background." "Doctrine and promise are incarnate" in these stories; for that very reason they are fraught with "background" and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning.

In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them.

We may not understand the reason prompting rabbinic interpretation. But we may still ask that if the meaning of the text is so mysterious and elusive, whence did our Sages elicit their data regarding Abraham's internal struggle, the whisperings of the tempter: "Gone to slaughter the son given thee at an hundred year"? We may answer that their description was prompted by the one conversation that is

reported to have taken place between father and son recorded for us in the chapter. During the whole of their gloomy and silent three day trek towards their goal:

ויאמר יצחק אל אברהם אביו ויאמר : אבי!
ויאמר : הנני , בני!
ויאמר : הנה האש והעצים ואיזה הששה לעלה?
ויאמר אברהם : אלהים יראה לו הששה לעלה בני.

**And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said,
My father:**

And he said, Here am I, my son.

**And he said: Behold the fire and the wood: but
where is the lamb for a burnt offering?**

**And Abraham said, My son, God will provide
himself a lamb for a burnt offering.**

(22:7-8)

In the whole chapter, as in this dialogue, Isaac is addressed by the same term “son.” Isaac who had begun to have a premonition of what was ahead grasped hold of his only remaining anchor, his father. Abraham tries to set his fears at rest and then obliquely alludes to the truth. Then follows the phrase, which forms a framework into which this dialogue fits. Before it comes the phrase: “and both of them went together.” Though their journey is weighed down with silence and gloom, the two making the journey are not yet possessed of equal knowledge. But after their exchange of words, the same phrase recurs, “and both of them went together,” this time, *both* of them fully and equally aware of the implications of the situation. In Rashi’s words בלב שווה “with equal heart.”