

The *Akedah* as an Anti-Ableist Test: Vayyera 5787

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The binding of Isaac—the *Akedah* (עֲקִידָה, “binding”) narrative told in Genesis 22—presents a troubling moral quandary: how could a supposedly compassionate God demand that a parent sacrifice their child?

Genesis 22:1 attests: “וַהֲאֵלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם” (“God tested Abraham”). In the following verse, God commands Abraham: “קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַהֲבָתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק” (“Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac”). In Genesis 22:12, a divine messenger appears to affirm that this whole episode was merely a divine test, designed to prove the patriarch’s fear for God.

But how could Abraham have unflinchingly accepted the Eternal’s demand here? Abraham had once pleaded vehemently for Sodom when daring to ask in Genesis 18:25, “הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט” (“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?”). Why did Abraham now, in Genesis 22, remain silent when it concerned his own son?

‘Crip reading’—studying texts through a sensitivity to disabilities—allows me to propose a radical reading of the *Akedah*: What if Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice his son reveals the patriarch’s inability to recognize Isaac’s full humanity in the face of Isaac’s differences? What if the divine test aimed precisely to expose this normative violence, this ease with which Abraham was prepared to destroy a body that did not conform to the standards he assumed were integral to the human experience? What if what God truly asked

Abraham to sacrifice was not Isaac, but ableist ideology itself? Was God asking Abraham to incinerate ablism—this false belief that holiness and humanity can only fully reside in those persons whose bodies and minds are most capable? That belief—a false idol unto itself—denies the doctrinal belief that all humans are created *betzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), “in the image of God,” as per Genesis 1:27), regardless of any body’s vulnerability, dependence on others, or difference from their neighbors.

Proposing an anti-ableist interpretation does not mean ‘correcting’ the Torah but inscribing oneself into the tradition. Many ancient and medieval rabbinic interpretations bear witness to a centuries-old hermeneutical struggle to wrest the narrative from its most violent readings. These texts refuse to expose what the Bible silences: the terror of the vulnerable body, the somatic cost of obedience, the possibility that God never wanted this sacrifice.

The contrast between Sodom and the *Akedah* is striking. For Sodom, Abraham bargains with God, inquiring if the city might still contain 50 righteous people (Genesis 18:24) or even ten (Genesis 18:32); Abraham pleads for the lives of utter strangers. In Genesis 22, Abraham could have protested against God’s order simply by invoking God’s promise in Genesis 21:12—“כִּי בְּיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע” (“that, through Isaac, offspring shall be summoned unto you”). Rather, Abraham hears God’s command and acts swiftly (even getting an early start in the morning, as per Genesis 22:3).

Despite God referencing Isaac as Abraham’s only son in Genesis 22:2, Abraham has another son, Ishmael, born of Hagar without miracle. When Sarah demands their expulsion, Genesis 21 :11 records : “וַיִּרְעַ”

הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ (“the matter was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son,” Genesis 21:11). Abraham did not want to do this; even in this dismissal, he manifests his love. Genesis 21:14 informs us that, when sending them off, Abraham gave something to eat and drink to Hagar and his son whom Genesis 21:20 calls “רֹבֵה קִנְשֵׁת” (“a shooting archer”). God, in Genesis 16:12, foretold the boy would become “פָּרָא אָדָם” (“a wild ass of a man”). Ishmael would become strong and autonomous, embodying an ideal of patriarchal masculinity. Meanwhile—designated in the *Akedah* narrative as הַנֶּעֱר (“hanna’ar, “the young man,” as in Genesis 22:12)—Isaac remains passive, silent, enigmatic; he is not known for any skillsets. Ishmael’s robustness is thus narrated as competence and establishment in the world, while Isaac’s vulnerability is narrated as dispossession of his capacity to act—as disability. During the *Akedah*, he asks only one question; his ask, in Genesis 22:7, is naïve, almost childlike: “וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה” (“where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”). He does not resist or flee. Is he unable to understand what is happening? Throughout the episode, the patriarch’s attitude conveys that Isaac falls short of an ideal ‘son of the covenant.’

Moreover, when God had ordered Abraham to send Ishmael away, God, in Genesis 21:13, promises: “אֶת־בֶּן־הָאֻמָּה לְגִוִּי אֲשִׁימְנוּ כִּי זֶרַעְךָ הוּא” (“I shall make into a nation the child of this maidservant, for he is your offspring”). The affirmation that Ishmael is Abraham’s offspring might mislead Abraham to believing that this wild son—not Isaac—is Abraham’s true heir.

If this reading has any validity, then the divine test takes on an entirely different meaning: God is not testing Abraham’s faith but setting a moral trap for him, revealing the ableist violence that inhabits his

heart. The angelic intervention—pausing Abraham at Genesis 22:12, with the words “אַל-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְאַל-תַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ מְאוּמָה” (“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him”)—does not reward Abraham; rather, this command stops Abraham’s murderous gesture and prevents him from committing the irreparable.

It is the idol of ableism that Abraham must place on the altar, not the sacred body of the disabled or the vulnerable. It is the fantasy of Ishmael, the lost perfect son, that Abraham must abandon to finally see Isaac as he is. That commandment “אַל-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ” (“do not lay your hand,” as per Genesis 22:12) becomes the first and most fundamental of all anti-ableist ethical commandments: you shall not harm the other—the vulnerable, the dependent, the different. In the *Akedah*, Abraham proved his faithfulness to God’s word but failed to demonstrate his faithfulness to the divine image and its countless diverse human manifestations.

This week’s Torah commentary, like all commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year, has been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.