



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

וירא תש"ף
Vayera 5780

**Negative
Capability**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

**Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty;
It is the courage to live with uncertainty.**



PARSHAT VAYERA IN A NUTSHELL

In this week's *parsha* three strangers pass by Abraham's tent. What Abraham and Sarah do not know is that they are in fact angels. Abraham offers them food and a place to rest. One of them tells Abraham that Sarah will have a baby, and Sarah, who is listening in, laughs because she believes she is far too old to have children.

Next, God tells Abraham about His plan to punish the people of Sodom because they are behaving so wickedly. Abraham is worried that innocent people in Sodom could suffer too, and argues with God that He must save the city if that is true. With real (and never-before seen) *chutzpah* he argues that God must take justice into account! God agrees that if ten innocent men can be found, He will spare the city

(but unfortunately, even this deal does not save Sodom). Two of the angels visit Abraham's nephew, Lot, in Sodom to rescue him and his family before the city is destroyed.

The baby promised to Abraham and Sarah is born and they name him Isaac. At the end of the *parsha* the Torah tells the famous story of the "Akeidat Yitzchak", also known as the "Binding of Isaac."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Where in this week's *parsha* can we see examples of Abraham's faith in God?



THE CORE IDEA

Why does God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? What does this test teach him, and us? Traditionally, we learn that this was a test of Abraham's love for God, above even his love for his son. But the Torah believes that child sacrifice is one of the worst of evils. Had the point of the trial been Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, then Abraham would have proven he was no better than the idolaters of his time, who often sacrificed children to the gods.

In fact, Abraham's very essence is to be a model father. The name Abram means "mighty father." God then changed his name to Abraham signifying "father of many nations." Abraham was chosen to be a role model of fatherhood. A model father does not sacrifice his child.

The classic interpretation that Abraham loved God more than he loved his own son, while powerful, contradicts all of

this. This trial tested Abraham's faith to the limit. But what was the true nature of the test?

Perhaps the true test was facing the contradiction between God's promises and the reality. God had promised Abraham that through Isaac, he would have many descendants who would become a great nation. And then God demanded he sacrifice him as a youth.

The trial was therefore *not* to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son. The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's word now, and God's previous promises. *Could Abraham live with uncertainty and maintain his faith?*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why does Rabbi Sacks believe that God was not testing Abraham merely to see if he would sacrifice Isaac?

2. What was God testing then, and what was the message Abraham (and we) must learn from it?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

This is the love story of a boy called Yisrael and a girl called Tziyona. Yisrael was new in town, he and his family came from far away. Tziyona was kind to the boy, helping him to settle in the new school and they very quickly became close friends. As young children, they were inseparable. They played together all the time, looked out for each other, and as they grew up, they gradually fell in love.

But then the devastating news arrived. Yisrael and his family had to move again to a new place, far, far away. Yisrael and Tziyona would have to face life apart. They did not know if they would ever see each other again. As they parted with tears in their eyes, they promised that they would never forget their love.

Yisrael and Tziyona never stopped thinking about each other and dreaming of the day when they might see each other again. They continued to hope and pray for the day when their paths would cross once more and they could be reunited. Over the years, their love did not lessen or die. No matter where their lives

took them, or what adventures they had while apart, they each continued to think of the other every day, and prayed to be together again.

This story has a happy ending! The prayers of Yisrael and Tziyona were answered and their hopes were realised. They found each other as adults, and fell in love all over again. Today Yisrael and Tziyona live happily together, once again united in their love.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think was the hardest aspect of their lives during the period when Yisrael and Tziyona were apart?
2. Who do Yisrael and Tziyona represent? What is the connection between this story and the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

One of the most perplexing features of the Abraham story is the disconnect between God's promises and the reality. Seven times, God promised Abraham the land. Yet when Sarah died, he owned not even a burial plot and had to buy one at an exorbitant price.

At the very opening of the story, God promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." Without protest or hesitation, Abraham left his home as instructed, and began the journey to the land of Canaan. He came to Shechem and built an altar there. He moved on to Bet-El and built an altar there as well. Then almost immediately we read that "There was a famine in the land."

Abraham and his household were forced to go to Egypt. There, he found that his life was at risk. He asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister rather than his wife, thus putting her in a false position, (conduct which Ramban intensely criticised). Where, at that moment, was the Divine blessing? How was it that, leaving his land and following God's call, Abraham found himself in a morally dangerous situation where he was forced to choose between asking his wife to live a lie, and exposing himself to the probability, perhaps certainty, of his own death?

A pattern is beginning to emerge. *Abraham was learning that there is a long and winding road between promise and fulfilment.* Not because God does not keep His word, but because Abraham and his descendants were charged with bringing something new into the world. A sacred society. A nation

formed by covenant. An abandonment of idolatry. An significant code of conduct. A more intimate relationship with God than any people has ever known. It would become a nation of pioneers. And God was teaching Abraham from the very beginning that this demands extraordinary strengths of character, because nothing great and transformative happens overnight in the human world. You have to keep going, even if you are tired and lost, exhausted and despondent.

God will bring about everything He promised. But not immediately. And not directly. God seeks change in the real world of everyday lives. And He seeks those who have the tenacity of faith to keep going despite all the setbacks. That is what the life of Abraham was about.

Nowhere was this clearer than in relation to God's promise of children. Four times, God spoke about this to Abraham:

[1] "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." (Bereishit 12:2)

[2] "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted." (Bereishit 13:16)

[3] "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Bereishit 15:5)

[4] "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will

make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.” (Bereishit 17:5-6)

Four ascending promises: a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky; not one nation but many nations. Abraham heard these promises and had faith in them: “Abram believed the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Bereishit 15:6).

Then God gave Abraham some painful news. His son by Hagar, Ishmael, would not be his spiritual heir. God would bless him and make him a great nation, “But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.” (Bereishit 17:21).

It is against this background of four promises of countless children, and a further promise that Abraham’s covenant would be continued by Isaac, that we must set the chilling words that open the trial: “Take your son, your only son, the son that you love – Isaac – and offer him up.”

The trial was *not* to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son. This was completely abhorrent to Judaism.

The trial was *not* to see whether Abraham had the strength to give up something he loved. He had shown this time and time again. At the very beginning of his story he gave up his land, his birthplace and his father’s house, everything that was familiar to him, everything that spoke of home. In the previous chapter, he gave up his firstborn son Ishmael whom, it is clear, he also loved. Was there even the slightest doubt that he would give up Isaac, who was so clearly God’s miraculous gift, arriving when Sarah was already postmenopausal?

The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God’s word now, and God’s word on five previous occasions, promising him children and a covenant that would be continued by Isaac.

He did just that. He prepared himself for the sacrifice. But he told no one else. When he and Isaac set off on the third day on

their own, he told the two servants who had accompanied them, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” When Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God Himself will provide the lamb.”

These statements are usually taken as diplomatic evasions. I believe, however, that Abraham meant exactly what he said. He was living the contradiction. He knew God had told him to sacrifice his son, but he also knew that God had told him that He would establish an everlasting covenant with his son.

The trial of the binding of Isaac was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Until it was over, Abraham did not know what to believe, or how it would end. He believed that the God who promised him a son would not allow him to sacrifice that son. But he did not know how the contradiction between God’s promise and His command would resolve itself.

The poet John Keats once wrote in a letter that Shakespeare’s greatness lay in his “Negative Capability” – that he was a person capable of sitting in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without irritably reaching after fact and reason. Shakespeare, in other words, was open to life in all its multiplicity and complexity, its conflicts and contradictions, while other, lesser writers sought to reduce life to a single philosophical frame. Perhaps what Shakespeare was to literature, Abraham was to faith.

I believe Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty. He had negative capability. Abraham knew that God’s promises would come true, so he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing how or when.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What uncertainty do you have in your life? How do you manage to maintain your faith despite this?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as He does not let go of us. It means realising that God creates Divine justice but only we, acting in accord with His word, can create human justice – and our very existence means that this is what God wants us to do.”

To Heal a Fractured World, p.199.



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think God had to test Abraham at all?
2. What do **you** think the message of the story of the “Akeidat Yitzchak”, the “Binding of Isaac” is?
3. Who do you think has stronger faith, someone who believes without question, or someone who lives in uncertainty and doubt?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. When considering this question with children, a good starting place is to ask what exactly faith is. This could refer to a general belief in God or a more specific belief that God will fulfill His promises. This latter approach fits with the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* that faith is the courage to live with uncertainty, and this frames the stories in the *parsha*. Examples of Abraham's faith despite uncertainty are the tests that we identify Abraham with, the ultimate of which is the *Akeidah* (Binding of Isaac).

THE CORE IDEA

1. According to Rabbi Sacks, it makes little sense that God would test Abraham with a task that is in opposition to a core value of the Torah (child sacrifice), and this is especially true in light of Abraham's destiny as a role model of fatherhood. He concludes that this must mean there is another message behind the test of the Binding of Isaac.
2. The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's previous promises and His command now. The trial was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Until it was over, Abraham did not know what to believe, or how it would end. He believed that the God who promised him a son would not allow him to sacrifice that son. But he did not know how the contradiction between God's promise and His command would resolve itself. The test was to see if Abraham would have the courage to live with uncertainty and maintain his faith.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. There are obviously many difficult aspects of living apart from a loved one. One of those, perhaps the hardest of them, is the uncertainty of never knowing if you will ever see them again, and have your "happy ever after". Certainty can allow for closure. Uncertainty requires hope and faith, and these take courage and emotional effort.
2. This love story is symbolic of the relationship between the people of Israel (Yisrael) and the land of Israel (Tziyona – the feminine version of the name Zion, another name for Jerusalem.) The story represents the long and winding road that led the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, and then after their expulsion from it, the two thousand year yearning to return during the exile years. Finally, the people and the land were reunited in 1948 with the establishment of the modern State of Israel. For two thousand years, the Jewish people lived in a state of uncertainty, not knowing if they would ever be able to return as a people to their land. It took hope and faith that one day we would return. It is easy to have faith when it is a dead cert. The challenge is to find the courage to have faith when there is uncertainty, as the Jewish people demonstrated during the long exile.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Encourage deeper thought than the basic uncertainties of everyday life (such as will I catch the bus, or will my team win). We live in a world of deep uncertainty, in our personal lives, on a national level, and in the wider world. This question asks for the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* to be applied in a very practical way to our lives.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Abraham's tests could not have been for God, if God has perfect knowledge (omniscience). Therefore, the tests must have been for Abraham to learn about himself. Without being pushed out of one's comfort zone, you will never know for sure what you can achieve. Alternatively, the tests could also be for later generations, so we can learn and be inspired from Abraham. Each test has a message and a value at its core. It is our job to uncover the message for us behind each.
2. All of the approaches explored in this week's *Covenant & Conversation* are valuable lessons and messages. Rabbi Sacks expresses his discomfort with the classical approaches and explains the source of his discomfort. However, he does not delegitimise these approaches. As he mentions at the outset, he has tried to find alternative interpretations in past editions of *Covenant & Conversation*. This year the approach he shares, that the test is to see if Abraham has the courage of faith in the face of uncertainty, is a novel approach. Perhaps the people around your Shabbat table have their own ideas.
3. This is a discussion worth unpacking around your Shabbat table. Which is stronger? Pure blind faith (where all challenges to faith need to be written off and explained away) or faith in the face of uncertainty, where there are no clear answers (because the answers so often given for the most difficult questions are simply inadequate) yet faith is maintained? Rabbi Sacks believes the latter shows more courage. But is that the same as having stronger faith?