

kol chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

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Always Listen for Angels

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

"Do not send your hand forth against the lad; Do not do him any harm." Every year at this time we tremble in suspense as Avraham raises the knife, then sigh in relief when the angel calls out in time to save Yitzchak. We rejoice both at our forefathers' willingness to obey God no matter what He demanded and at God's unwillingness to genuinely demand unethical obedience.

What are we to do, though, when the lessons of the Akeidah conflict? What are we to do when the Divine command embodied in Halakha seems unethical, when the call of Jewish conscience seems to contradict the command of Jewish law? On one level or another, every observant Jew faces these questions, whether as a halakhic decisor facing a difficult case of *mamzerut*, as an individual navigating relationships with non-observant family or non-Jewish friends, or as part of a community struggling to give all women full religious expression within a genuine and authentic Halakha.

Let me answer first in midrashic fashion, with another story. And then in Talmudic fashion, with more questions.

Once, several thousand years ago, God appeared to a God-fearing man who had one beloved son, and said to him: "Take, please, your son, your unique son, whom you have loved, and go bring him up as an *olah* on a mountain which I will show you." The man was troubled by the Divine command, which seemed so uncharacteristic of the compassionate God he knew, but he was nonetheless prepared to obey. He awoke the next morning, chopped wood, and set out with his son toward the place and reached it on the third day. He took the *olah* wood and placed it on his son, but he carried the knife and flame himself. After a while, his son turned to him and asked: "Father, here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the *olah*?" He replied: "God will see for Himself the sheep for the *olah*, my son." They walked on together. When they came to the place God picked out, the man built an altar. He arranged the wood, then tied up his son and placed him atop the wood. Then he reached out and picked up the knife with every in-

attention of slaughtering his son. But as he lifted the knife, he suddenly realized that the word *olah* didn't necessarily mean "wholly burnt offering," although that was the standard meaning; it could also possibly mean "something brought up." He thought to himself: "The God I worship would never ask me to kill my son; He certainly meant only that I should bring him up to the altar." So he untied his son, and they walked home together.

This story is not true, but it might have been. Rashi tells us that Avraham was aware throughout the Akeidah that God's command contradicted His promise that Yitzchak would sire his true descendants. Avraham did not ask the question, though, until after the angel's call ended his test. God then explained that he had meant by *olah* only that Yitzchak should be brought up, not that he should be burnt. We are left to ask: Should Avraham have thought of that interpretation before the angel spoke? Should the angel's intervention have been necessary?

There are always more or less plausible ways of rereading halakhic texts so as to align them with conscience. But "My thoughts are not your thoughts," and God does not always mean what we want Him to mean. In the post-prophetic age, none of us can be sure that even our deepest convictions reflect the will of God, especially when those convictions seem to contradict the most plausible interpretation of His word. But neither can we assume that sincere religious obedience will never lead to evil, that an angel will stop us before we fulfill an honest but immoral understanding of what God wants.

The story of the Akeidah teaches that moral conviction does not justify acting against Divine command. But it also teaches that religious commitment does not diminish the need for moral reflection, that we are responsible not only to the Torah but for its content. This week's parashah tells us that God chose Avraham because he would teach us to "observe the path of Hashem" while "doing righteousness and justice." (Genesis 18:19) May we find the strength to observe that path with perfect integrity while listening attentively for the voices of our better angels.

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