



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

What we hear in the silence

Our focus this week is Gen.22:1-19. The horror of the narrative grabs our attention and draws us into the text with understandable questions and objections: Why would God ask a father to kill his own son? This reading appears each year in the Christian Easter Vigil and is part of the weekday morning service in many Jewish prayer books. What is so important about this passage to warrant its prominent placing in the liturgical traditions of both Jews and Christians? Read Gen.22:1-19, then join the sages in a close reading of verses 3-4.

“Abraham rose early, saddled his donkey, chopped wood for the burnt offering, took Isaac his son and his two lads, and set out for the place that God had spoken of to him. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar” (Gen.22:3-4).

Our Torah passage speaks of a three day journey from Abraham’s home to the point where he can see his God-given destination. Do you notice anything odd about this part of the text?

Perhaps you noticed that the Torah offers no detail about the journey. Details about his

preparation are aplenty: saddling his donkey, chopping wood, etc. But from the moment he is on his way: the text suddenly falls silent. Like the fast forward button on a video player, the story skips to the end: “On the third day..”

Think about that. Abraham has just set out with a horrific task: the killing of his own son. He has three days, in the presence of his son, to consider what he is about to do. Surely, those days must have been filled with anguish! Surely he must have undergone feelings of bewilderment, anger, doubt, pain... surely! And yet the text records nothing about the journey. No dialogue, no thoughts or feelings, no events, no geographical or human point of note. Prayerfully ponder this. How do you interpret the Torah’s silence? Are there some things that are ‘unspeakable’? Do they need to be voiced at all?

This silence bothered the sages deeply. In fact, in the midrash we find imaginative stories filling up the silence of those three days.

According to one midrashic tradition—one that perhaps depicts the internal struggle of conscience—Abraham is visited during his journey by a satan, a tempter, who hurls at him one reason after another as to why he should abandon his journey. Abraham persists.

Another tells how Abraham comes to a river crossing. The waters are dangerously high and Abraham has every excuse to turn around and go home. Instead, he plunges in up to his neck, and the waters recede. We are drawn to reflect on the “legitimate” excuses that deter us from pursuing God’s call to its final conclusion.

Thus the midrash prevents us from treating the story of Abraham’s faith as blind, robotic obedience and leads us to a deeper, more sensitive contemplation of the human struggle involved in discerning and following God’s call. Far from being fanciful storytelling, the midrash voices the questions and insights of generations of believers as they relate to God’s living Word. •

Table topic: Join in the conversation of the sages. How does the text’s silence stimulate your engagement with the Torah? If you were to tell your own midrashic story about what happened during those three days, what would you say?

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitsky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY: Schocken Books, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: JPS, NRSV.