בני זמננו

Modern Commentaries

THE NETZIV

Why did God test Avraham after all his earlier blessings?

Ha'amek Davar on Genesis 22:1

The binding of Yitzchak (Akeidah) comes as the culmination of a long progression in which God gradually elevated Avraham through successive blessings—land, seed, circumcision—until this final test, after which no further communication or growth was needed. The term "nissa" (tested) does not merely mean an examination of Avraham's existing righteousness, like testing a jug's strength, but, as the midrash of the banner (nes) teaches, actively raised and rooted a new level of potential within him, a quality that became permanently embedded in the character of the Jewish people for all generations. God called to Avraham and waited for his calm reply, "Hineni" (Here I am), so that he would receive the momentous request with a settled mind rather than respond improperly out of confusion. AI SUMMARY

“Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.””

And after these events: — It is clear that this section has a relationship to the section before it. As otherwise, the expression, "after these events," is not fitting. Though the manner of the relationship is explained in Rashi's commentary according to the aggadah in Sanhedrin (89) - if it is so, they are distant in time from one another, according to the tradition that Yitzchak was thirty-seven at the time of the binding. And there are some that explain that it is a punishment for the covenant he made with Avimelekh. But this is also not proximate in time - for behold that the matter of the covenant was at that [same] time, of Yitzchak and the expulsion of Yishmael. In truth, there is an argument in the Midrash if, "after (achar)" is proximate, and "following (achrei)" is remote, or the opposite.

However it appears that the explanation of, "after these events" [here], is after all the utterances and statements that there were between the Holy One, blessed be He, and Avraham. And He had raised him - little by little - higher and higher: From the beginning of His blessing him with the Land of Israel and with seed like the dust of the earth; and afterwards with the increase of children like the stars of the sky - meaning people of great worth - and afterwards, He blessed him at the time of the circumcision that the would be a father to many nations. That is that he would have the ability to have even the nations of the world - who would be called by the name, nations, and would not completely convert - recognize the God of the world. However there was still a particular that was missing, as will be explained. And the matter of the binding was after all of these things. For with this, the greatness of Avraham, our father, and his seed was completed, such that nothing more was needed. So from then on, the Holy One, blessed be He, did not speak with him; and there was no more content and addition to the goal that had been desired.

And because of that. it is written, "and God tested (nissa) Avraham." As even though the text does not depart from its straightforward understanding, which is the matter of a test - according to its straightforward understanding alone, it is superfluous. As we surely see that it is a test. And

this is even though we should not ask why God, who knows everything from the beginning, needs a test - as it is a question of [divine] knowledge and [human] choice, which is loftier than human knowledge. So we should [just] know that the ways of God are above our ways, as are His thoughts [above] our thoughts.

However there is another meaning to this, as it is found in Rabbah (Bereishit Rabbah 55:1) on this: Nissa is from the usage, "You have given a banner (nes) to those who fear You, that it may be displayed (lehitnosess)" (Psalms 60:6) - meaning He raised him upon a banner. The Sages, may their memory be blessed, explained that with this test, He extended the power of Avraham, our father, and raised him to the purpose of the Israelite nation, as will be explained.

And the Sages, may their memory be blessed, in Rabbah there, have already drawn a metaphor about the content of the test with three analogies: 1) To a good jug that a buyer knocks, as opposed to a bad one. 2) To good flax that he hits much; so that the more he hits it, the more it improves, as opposed to bad flax. 3) He adds much to the load of a good donkey, and examines it [to determine whether] it can carry more. And the matter of the three analogies is to teach us that a test comes for three aspects. On one occasion, it comes like the analogy of the good jug, about which the knocking is not in order to improve it, but rather to know how strong the jug is. And on [another] occasion, it comes like the analogy of the flax, about which the knocking does not come in order to know [its] strength, but rather to improve [it]. And on [a third] occasion, it comes like the analogy of a donkey, about which it does not come in order to know [it] or in order to improve [it]; rather when its owner has a large load, he is testing his donkey [whether] it can carry more, which will be good for him. And the owner will add to its nourishment afterwards according to the additional load that his donkey carries.

Likewise on one occasion, a test comes to know the power of a person's righteousness, and that is considered an examination. On [another] occasion, a test comes in order to add to his righteousness. As even though this action rests in a person's potential, so long as the action has not come to him and he has not actualized the potential, this potential has nevertheless not become rooted within him. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings him to this test; and he [then] strengthens himself to actualize his potential and roots this potential inside himself. And on [a third] occasion, a test will come for the iniquity of the generation. So He will place them - a load of afflictions - upon the righteous one, and he will receive his full reward afterwards.

From here, the midrash on this section teaches us that we should not think that this test came about only like the first analogy of the jug, as an examination. For if so, Avraham, our father, did not become elevated with this. It is not so. Rather the Holy One, blessed be He, raised the power of our father Avraham's holy being with this action. And that is the meaning of, "[God] nisa Avraham, from the usage, "You have given a banner (nes) to those who fear You, that it may be displayed (lehitnosess)." And with that which this potential was rooted into Avraham's being, this action remained rooted in the Israelite nation for [all] generations - as will be further explained on verse 17 (Haamek Davar on Genesis 22:17). And see Exodus 16:4 and Deuteronomy 8:2 and 9:7.

Furthermore, it should be explained that which, "test," is not also written about Yitzchak - as behold, he was already thirty-seven years old! However it shall be explained below that the purpose of this act upon Yitzchak was on account of the settlement of Israel upon their land, [such that] their bread was fixed by way of the daily sacrifices. So it was particularly fit that it would be so through Yitzchak, since this principle came out to the world with his birth, as I wrote earlier [on] 21:3 (Haamek Davar on Genesis 21:3). So it was not for the purpose of a test; and it was then like the other tests through which Avraham was tested, and about which it was [also] not written that it was a test. However, that which the Holy One, blessed be He, hid the intent from Avraham, our father - that was only in order to be a test.

Avraham; and he said, "Here I am": — The Holy One, blessed be He, did not say at once, "Avraham, please take [etc.]." Rather He waited for him, until Avraham's mind became settled and he understood

that the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to speak to him [about] a great thing; and he answered, "Here I am." And this was so that he would not be [too] confused to hear, and [then] answer something improper, God forbid. Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, waited until his mind became settled.

