חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

KRAKOW · MAOR VASHEMESH, VAYERA

Why did Avraham and Yitzchak disagree about how the world should be run?

Maor VaShemesh

Drawing on the midrash that God first arose in thought to create the world with din (judgment) and then joined it to mercy, the author reads the Akedah as resolving the opposing attributes of Avraham, who sought the world's conduct through chesed (lovingkindness), and Yitzchak, who sought it through gevurah (strength, severity). Each tzaddik (righteous one) doubted the other, and after three days Avraham concluded that Yitzchak bore the liability, so that Yitzchak's severities were sweetened into chesed, as the Zohar teaches that fire is included in water. AI SUMMARY

"And Avraham arose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, etc. And he split the wood for the burnt offering, and he rose and went to the place of which God had told him, etc. And Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering and placed it upon Yitzchak his son, etc. And the two of them walked together."

Several points require careful examination. First, it should have said, "and he split wood for the burnt offering." Further, why did he place the wood of the burnt offering on Yitzchak his son, and what does the Torah teach us by this? Also, what is the meaning of the phrase "God will see for Himself the lamb," when it would have sufficed to say, "God will see the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"? And also, regarding the phrase "and you did not withhold" (lo chasachta), it should have said "and you did not hold back" or "and you did not cease."

It appears as follows. It is known that Avraham our father held, in his root, the attribute of chesed (lovingkindness), and he was constantly eager that the world be conducted with chesed. Even for the wicked of his generation, the people of Sodom, he prayed. So too we find in a midrash (rabbinic teaching) that Avraham said to HaKadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy One, blessed be He), "You hold the rope by both ends, etc. If You do not yield, tzivchar, there is no world that endures." From this it is plainly seen that his whole aim was that the world be conducted with chesed, so that the world would endure.

Yitzchak his son, however, wanted the world to endure through gevurah (strength, severity) and dread: that a person who sins against his God should bear his sin and be punished immediately, so that all creatures would know that there is judgment and there is a Judge. He wanted this because he saw that it was because Hashem Yitbarach (God, may He be blessed) had conducted His world with abundant chesed before the generation of the Flood that they broke through the fence of the world. Therefore it is better that the world be conducted with the attribute of dread.

Now we find in a midrash, cited by Rashi, of blessed memory, on "In the beginning God created": at first it arose in thought to create the world with the attribute of din (judgment), and He saw that the world could not endure, so He joined the attribute of mercy to the attribute of din, and created the world. To understand this: how could a change of will before Him, may He be blessed, be possible, God

forbid? The truth, however, is that His will did not change and will not change, and everything was revealed before Him, may He be blessed.

In truth it arose in His primordial thought to create the world with the attribute of din, so that those who come into the world would see before Him and His awe would be upon their faces, that they not sin. And immediately His wisdom, may He be blessed, saw that if the judgment were, God forbid, decreed against everyone who sins, that he be punished at once, the world could not endure. Therefore HaKadosh Baruch Hu joined the attribute of mercy to the attribute of din; that is to say, Hashem has mercy on the sinner and is slow to anger, so that perhaps he will repent, return, and be healed. This is what is meant by joining the attribute of mercy to the attribute of din. But His will did not change at all, God forbid, for "whoever says that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is lenient, etc." Rather, His wisdom, may He be blessed, immediately saw that the world could not endure without patience.

And so we in fact find that HaKadosh Baruch Hu said, "Bring atonement for Me for having diminished the moon." At first glance this is not understandable, for Hashem acted justly, since the moon had lodged a complaint, as is explained in the words of our Sages, of blessed memory. According to what we have said, however, it is understood properly: the atonement is for having punished her immediately, without patience.

Let us return to our subject. Avraham and Yitzchak his son were opposed in their attributes in this matter. Avraham longed, and his whole aim and desire was, that Hashem conduct the world with chesed; and Yitzchak his son wanted the world to be conducted with gevurah, to make the world fear and dread, so that they would improve their deeds and not be punished.

Now when Hashem told Avraham about the Akedah (the binding of Yitzchak), that he should offer his son as a burnt offering, we find in the books, and we have already spoken of this, that a burnt offering comes to atone for the neglect of a positive mitzvah (commandment) or for sinful thoughts. At first glance this is very difficult: what sin did Avraham or Yitzchak his son commit that they should owe a burnt offering? They fulfilled the whole Torah, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said.

According to what we have said, it can be understood: each of these two tzaddikim (righteous ones) had misgivings about the other. Avraham had misgivings about Yitzchak's attributes, that he wanted to conduct the world with din. This was hard in his eyes, for he feared for his soul lest, God forbid, the world not endure, and in his opinion it was fitting that the world be conducted with chesed. And Yitzchak also had misgivings about the attributes of his father Avraham, for in his opinion it was better that Hashem conduct His world with gevurah and dread, so that they would fear Him and not sin.

Now that Hashem told Avraham to offer Yitzchak his son as a burnt offering, Avraham was in doubt as to which of them had thought improperly and so incurred the burnt offering: whether he was the one liable because his son Yitzchak was right and he was wrong, or whether the law was with him and Yitzchak was the one who incurred the burnt offering. In the end Avraham decided that Yitzchak was the one who incurred the burnt offering, because his own words were more correct than his son's.

The proof is from what HaKadosh Baruch Hu said, "Bring atonement for Me for having diminished the moon." In truth, the moon had sinned, so why should atonement be brought for Him? It must be that even though she sinned, He, may He be blessed, should have dealt with her with chesed and not punished her. From this it is proven that Yitzchak is the one who incurred the burnt offering.

Now we come to the explanation. "And he rose early, etc., and he split the wood [atzei] of the burnt offering": that is to say, he split the counsel [etzah] concerning the burnt offering, namely, who was the one liable for the burnt offering. The matter was in doubt for him in two ways, whether he was liable or his son, as we said. This is the sense of "and he split": he split the counsel in two, for the matter was evenly balanced in his mind and he was in doubt about it throughout the three days. After the three days he decided, from the fact that HaKadosh Baruch Hu commanded that atonement be brought for Him,

that his words were right and that his son was the one liable for the burnt offering because of his thoughts.

Then "Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering and placed it upon Yitzchak his son": that is to say, he placed upon him the verdict that he was the one liable. Then "Yitzchak said to Avraham, etc., 'Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'" That is to say, where is the proof? From what did you prove that I am the one who is liable? Perhaps it is not so, father, for my words are more correct than yours.

To this Avraham answered him, "God will see for Himself the lamb, etc." That is to say, from the fact that Hashem commanded that atonement be brought for Him, it is proven that my words are right. This is made precise by the word "for Himself" (lo), in keeping with what our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Bring atonement for Me." And from the fact that "God will see for Himself the lamb," that is, on His own behalf, it is proven that my words are right. Then "the two of them walked together": that is to say, Yitzchak agreed with his father's reasoning.

"And they came to the place, etc., and he bound Yitzchak his son": the gevurot were included within the chasadim, as is said in the holy Zohar, that fire was included in water. Therefore in the future Yitzchak will plead for mercy on behalf of the Children of Israel, as is stated in the Gemara in tractate Shabbat, that Yitzchak will argue, "How many are the years of a person, etc." From this it is seen that Yitzchak's gevurot were sweetened.

"And the angel of Hashem called to him, etc. 'Now I know that you fear God, and you did not withhold your son.'" That is to say, you feared that the world be conducted with din, as your son held, and you girded yourself with your own attribute to sweeten the gevurot, so that the world would not be conducted with gevurah, which is hinted at by choshech (darkness). This is the meaning of "you did not withhold [lo chasachta]."

"And the angel of Hashem called a second time, etc. 'Because you have done this thing, etc., and have not withheld, etc., I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven.'" That is to say, measure for measure: because you did not allow the world to be conducted with gevurah, which is hinted at by choshech, therefore your children will shine like the stars of heaven, which illuminate the world and have no flaw or darkness in them, as is known.

"And like the sand on the seashore": the meaning is that your children will be defenders against din, like the sand that stands against the sea, so that it does not go beyond its boundary and flood the world, God forbid. So too your descendants will be defenders against the dinim, sweetening them at their root. "And your descendants shall inherit the gate of their enemies": that is, the dinim and gevurot will fall upon the enemies of Israel, and Israel will inherit the gate of their enemies. Amen, speedily in our days, amen.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5.5)