

*Vayeira*: “‘A time to keep silent and a time to speak out’ (Eccl. 3:7) –  
Abraham’s moral dilemmas”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

One of the many mystifying aspects of the Akedah episode is the problem of Abraham’s passivity — such as not uttering a single word of objection or appeal when God tells him to take his own son (22:2-3) — as contrasted by his apparent moral inconsistency when he condemned God for His decision to destroy the Sodomites! (18:23-25).

A similar reticence to act on Abraham’s part occurs when God asks him directly why Sarah had laughed at the news that she was to bear a child in her old age:

13. God said to Abraham: “‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I truly bear a child in my old age?’ 14. Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? At the same season next year, I shall return to you, and Sarah shall have a son.” 15a: But Sarah lied, saying, “‘I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. 15b: But *He* said, “‘Not so, for you did laugh!”’ (vv. 18:13,15).

Abraham surprisingly ignores God’s criticism of Sarah, offering not a word in her defence. This was surprising given that her extenuating circumstance could well have justified her reaction.

Now, the subject of v.15b (**Va-yomer**: ‘But *He* said’) is left vague. Most translations and commentators assume that this was God’s retort (hence our capitalisation), and

that He was directly chastising Sarah. However, the situation may well have been that Abraham reported God's criticism (vv. 13-14) to Sarah, and it is to Abraham, therefore, that she makes her denial (15a). If so, the identity of the subject pronoun in the continuation (15b), 'but **he** replied...' refers to Abraham.

I am inclined to the latter view, rather than reading the verse as an interjection by her into the dialogue between God and Abraham, with God responding, 'Not so, for you did laugh!' Apart from the gross impropriety of such an interruption on Sarah's part, had that been the case the verse would surely have required the necessary clarification by supplying the name of the speaker – 'But **God** replied...' This consideration compounds our question as to why Abraham—who was under no illusion as to Sarah's guilt— ignored God's disclosure to him and His initial question regarding Sarah's behaviour. secondly, why Abraham did not put up a spirited defence of his wife who, truly, had every reason to laugh!)

On an earlier occasion, after the Egyptian King Pharaoh is severely punished by God for having taken Sarai into his harem, he retorts by blaming Abram for not having said at the outset that she was his wife (12:19), Abram keeps his silence rather than seizing the moral high ground and chiding the king for his wicked practice of murdering the husbands of any beautiful women he desired. But, we may wonder why Abram squandered that golden opportunity, given that the king knew that the afflictions he and his household had suffered were a direct divine retribution for his action and was suitably remorseful (vv.17-18).

On a later occasion Abraham had no qualms about denouncing the Philistine king Avimelech for the fact that his servants had stolen one of his wells (21:25), and yet

he returns to form and doesn't utter a word of condemnation of the king for his far more heinous crime of having seized his wife, leaving it to God to express horror and indignation and to threaten dire punishment if she was not released immediately and unharmed (20:3). Furthermore, Abraham allows himself to be portrayed as the one responsible for her seizure by having misled the king into thinking that she was his sister (see v.5). This is the only occasion, however, when Abraham feels constrained to break his silence and provide an explanation of his action (vv. 11-13). It is possible that he was placed in this situation, however, on account of the fact that the king had not only been prevented by God from even touching Sarah (v.6), but had apologised for his 'great sin,' and responded with contrition to God's censure (v.9).

It is ironical that, in this context, the king's expression of outrage at the charge God had levelled at him — *Adonai, ha-goy gam tzaddik taharog*, "Lord, will You slay even a righteous nation?" (v.4) – is an almost identical paraphrase of Abraham's own critique of God's plan to destroy Sodom: *ha-af tispeh tzaddik im rasha* — "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (18:23).

Significantly, in the case of Isaac and Rebekah, when a parallel situation was played out and Isaac was denounced by the king for having falsely claimed that Rebekah was his sister (26:7-11), he similarly fails to seize the moral high ground and condemn Abimelech for his double standards in having blamed him for lying (albeit in order to save his life: see vv.7, 9) while having no qualms himself regarding the seizure of a married woman! This also calls for an explanation.

We take the view that both Abraham's and Isaac's silence may be attributed to the fact that their own consciences were far from clear regarding that matter, having both

compromised their own wives. In such a situation, one's objectivity becomes clouded and one's ability, or even right, to criticise another's actions may be regarded as forfeited. This is exemplified by the famous Talmudic story of the heathen who, after having been rebuffed by Shammai, came to Hillel with the identical request that he be accepted as a convert 'after having been taught the Torah while standing on one foot'). Hillel converted him, adding the famous response, "What is hateful to you, never do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn."<sup>1</sup>

And this would explain Abraham's contrasting responses when it came to criticism of God's judgment of the Sodomites and denunciation of Avimelech for his servants' theft of his well, on the one hand, and his silence in the face of the impending Akedah, on the other.

In the case of the Sodomites, Abraham felt confident that he could objectively assess – from a human perspective - the justice or otherwise of God's decision to destroy their cities since he had no personal or trade involvement with any of the inhabitants. Sodom was the morally wayward territory where his nephew Lot had chosen to live, and Abraham had made it clear that he wanted no truck with him or his compatriots there (see Gen. 13:6-13). There was thus no 'conflict of interest' when it came to calling into question the divine justice.

As regards Abraham's denunciation of Avimelech for his servants' theft of his well of water, his moral outrage was more than justified, given that he could never countenance either theft or the receipt of benefit from that which belonged to

another. This he demonstrated clearly by his refusal to accept the king of Sodom's offer that he accepts all the booty from 'the battle of the kings' (ch.14) wherein Abraham's participation secured victory for Sodom and its allies. Abraham's integrity was manifest in his response: "I shall not keep anything that is yours. I will not keep even a thread or a sandal strap so that you cannot say, "I made Abram rich' (v.23).

In the case of the Akedah, on the other hand, Abraham's obvious lack of objectivity in relation to his son disqualified him as an intercessor or critic of God's actions. Hence, not a word escaped his lips when God commanded him to take his son to the Akedah.

The Torah refers directly to that self-imposed silence of an interested party in its description of Aaron's reaction to the peremptory divine execution of his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, for the offence of bringing 'strange fire' into the sanctuary (Lev. 10:1-3). It states, *Vayyidom Aharon*, 'And Aaron kept silent,' and the sages state that, as a reward for his silence, God addressed a message directly to him alone (see v.8), instead of following the usual process whereby divine communications were mediated either through Moses or through Him and Aaron conjointly.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to the above, the rabbis have a pithy maxim: *Adam karov eitzel atzmo*, 'A man is his own near relative,'<sup>3</sup> in other words, when emotions or family interests are involved, we cannot lay claim to objectivity.

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Samuel David Luzzato (Italian commentator, 1800-1865) points out that the sacrificing of one's firstborn to Moloch or to other local gods was the norm at that time among the idolatrous peoples of the East. They believed that it represented *the* most supreme expression of love and submission. This meant that the surrounding peoples would have mocked Abraham when they heard of his failure to carry out his God's command! In their eyes this would have greatly diminished his status as a religious pioneer and visionary.

Thus, Luzzato claims, it was not the ready offering up of his son to the Akedah that was Abraham's greatest trial. That was the universally-expected response. Quite the contrary: It was his loss of face at having had to return home in the company of his *unsacrificed* son, having failed to fulfil his God's command. In the public perception, such failure demonstrated not only that Abraham was lacking pure faith, but that the faith itself was flawed and should be rejected.

He thus found himself between a rock and a hard place: Either to lose his son or to fail to attract people to the worship of the One God. Not surprisingly, in his sadness and confusion, Abraham felt unable either to protest when God demanded his son as an Akedah offering or to express relief and offer thanksgiving when commanded to desist! For Abraham silence was not golden!

## NOTES

1. Tal. *Shab*.31a.
2. Mid. *Vayyik. Rab.* 12:1; Rashi on Lev.10:3.

3. Tal. *San.* 9b; *Makk.* 5a.

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**Shabbat shalom,**

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