

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Balak

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yom Tov *ben Dovid a''h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Watch Yourself

In a previous article (*Acharei Mos-Kedoshim 5770*), we cited the supreme trial with which our forefather Avraham was tested, describing it at the time in the following manner:

“*Akeidas Yitzchak*. For many people, the mere mention of this event conjures up an image of intense drama. We picture an emotion-laden scene in which our forefather Avraham was called upon to render the ultimate sacrifice: to offer up his beloved son Yitzchak on the *mizbeach* (altar). So gut-wrenching and moving was this act that even the *malachim* (angels) were brought to tears, as Rashi recounts (*Bereishis 27:1*).”

Misnomer?

That particular piece proceeded to deal with an issue that related both to the trial narrative, as well as to a matter of interpreting a verse in parshas Kedoshim. Here, we would like to focus on one notion that seems very basic to this event, but perplexing all the same: namely, its title.

“*Akeidas Yitzchak*,” of course, does not mean “sacrifice,” but rather “binding” of Yitzchak, referring to the fact that while preparing to perform the sacrifice, Avraham bound up his son. As the narrative recounts: “And they came to the place... and Avraham built the altar there, he arranged the wood, bound his son, Yitzchak, and placed him upon the altar, above the wood” (*Bereishis 22:9*). The Torah proceeds to relate how Avraham lifted the knife to perform the slaughter, at which point he was halted by an angel of Hashem, who informed him that he had passed the test.

Now, from a cursory glance at the verses, it does appear that the “binding” was but one detail in the procedure of the sacrificial preparations. The principal feature of this event – seemingly – was its climax, wherein Avraham was poised to bring the knife down on his son. Yet, throughout the literature of Chazal, as well as the prayer liturgy, the event always refers to the act of binding. Why, indeed, was this detail singled out and elevated to such prominence? Why not refer to the event as the “sacrifice” of Yitzchak? And if it was deemed appropriate to select one of the preliminary actions, why focus on the binding specifically? Maybe it should be called “The Arranging of the Wood” or “The Placing of Yitzchak upon the Altar”?

As we shall soon see, a verse in this week’s *parshah* may be instrumental in clarifying the issue.

Careful!

Summoned by King Balak for the celebrated power of his imprecations, Bilam ends up blessing B’nei Yisrael instead of cursing them. At one point, he issues the well-known statement praising the Israelite encampment: “How goodly are your tents, O (sons of) Ya’akov” (*Bamidbar 24:5*). What prompted this particular tribute? According to the Medrash, Bilam was referring to the extraordinary arrangement of their encampment,

predicated on a sensitivity for chastity and privacy. “No one would look toward his neighbor’s wife... even with the multitudes in the desert, they retained this modesty, whereby no one set up his entranceway facing another” (*Yalkut Shimoni* § 771).

R’ Reuvein Grozovsky (*Ma’amrei R’ Reuvein*) explains that the Torah here is stressing an essential aspect of Divine service: namely, the notion of *shemirah* (guarding). This can best be understood in light of the civil laws pertaining to the *shomer*, the watchman charged with safeguarding his neighbor’s possessions. One pertinent example of the obligations of the *shomer* can be found in the Mishnah in Bava Metzia (7:10), which discusses a watcher caring for his friend’s animal:

עֲלֵתָהּ לְרֵאשִׁי צוֹקִין וְנִפְלְאָה וְמָתָהּ, הָרִי זֶה אָנֹס. הֶעֱלָהּ לְרֵאשִׁי צוֹקִין וְנִפְלְאָה וְמָתָהּ, אֵינּוּ אָנֹס.

“If (the animal) ascended to the tops of the crags and fell to its death – this is considered a faultless mishap. (However), if he himself brought the animal up to the crags, whereupon it fell to its death – he is not faultless.”

The Mishnah here demonstrates the extent of the *shomer*’s duty to preserve the wellbeing of his charge. With the animal near him on level ground, he need not be overly concerned about the animal’s sudden careening off of a cliff; hence, in the event that the animal unexpectedly bolts up a mountain and propels himself from the peak, the *shomer* is not at fault. But when the *shomer* leads the animal up the slopes, the danger of a fall increases exponentially, thus demanding that the watchman step up his vigilance.

The greater the danger – explains R’ Reuvein – the greater the need for enhanced *shemirah*. The stakes are never higher than when dealing with the Torah laws and prohibitions, especially an area where the power of the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination) is more apparent. B’nei Yisrael were well aware of this concept and took it to heart. Thus, they conducted themselves with extreme caution, arranging their tents to prevent even the slightest hint of impropriety.

This notion was at play by the *Akeidah* as well. Why, in fact, was Yitzchak bound in the first place? According to the Medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 56:8), this was actually Yitzchak’s idea. Knowing what was about to happen, Yitzchak became very concerned; he was not bothered over his fate, but was concerned that he might resist and flee the scene! “Father,” he said, “I am worried that my fear upon seeing the raised knife could cause me to squirm, thereby causing a blemish and invalidating the sacrifice. Therefore, please tie me up very well.” In other words, Yitzchak anticipated and appreciated the upcoming trial; rather than waiting until confronted with the actual temptation to wrestle with it at the time – a risky prospect – he took preventative measures to ensure he would not succumb.

It is very revealing – concludes R’ Reuvein – that the whole event is known for this one “detail.” For generations, when in need of great merit, the Jewish people invoke the memory of the “binding” of Yitzchak. This shows the supreme importance attached to the idea stated above. Aside from the observance of the commandments themselves, there is apparently a real premium placed on the concept of *shemirah* – taking concrete steps to ensure that temptation will be avoided and that Torah observance will be safeguarded. So precious is this quality to the Almighty that it is accorded central status, as evidenced by the title that reflects such measures – *Akeidas Yitzchak*.

As stated, the greater the danger and temptation, the greater the imperative to adhere to such safeguards. And the danger has perhaps never been greater – likewise, the need for *shemirah* – as in our times, as we shall explore next week, *im yirtzeh Hashem*.