

Message from the Haftara

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Loyalty to God and Family

VAYEIRA

Dedicated in memory of my brother-in-law Moish Kranzler z"l on the occasion of his first grandson Eitan Zeffren's bar mitzva. Moish lived the values of loyalty to God & family and his legacy will live on through his children and grandchildren and the thousands he inspired

The dramatic and emotionally powerful haftara of Parshat Vayeira tells the story of a barren Shunamite woman who performs the kindness of welcoming the prophet Elisha into her home. When Elisha asks how he might repay her, his servant Geichazi volunteers that the woman has no children, and Elisha commits to aiding her. He promises – just as the angels in the parsha promise Sara – that she will bear a son “next year at this time” (Melachim Bet 4:16; see also B'reishit 18:14).

The parallel stories of the prayer and promise of children are, on the surface, the reason that this parsha and haftara are paired. However, there is another, less obvious

common message in both the parsha and the haftara, one that speaks to the deeper meaning of the promise of children and the nature of religious devotion that is as important today as it was in biblical times.

In the parsha, after Yitzchak is born, God famously commands Avraham to offer his only son as a sacrifice. Avraham, the selfless devotee, answers HINEINI, “here I am,” indicating his presence and willingness to do whatever is commanded of him (22:1). The same word appears again shortly afterward when, as Avraham and Yitzchak walk together toward the site of the sacrifice, Yitzchak innocently inquires as to the animal to be offered. “Father”, Yitzchak opens, and Avraham answers: HINENI V'NI, “here I am, my son” (v. 7).

Those reading quickly will likely miss a small but significant difference between the word HEI-NUN-NUN-YUD as it appears in these two contexts. In the first instance, the word is spelled with a TZEIREI mark under the first NUN. In the second, the same letter is marked, unusually, with a SEGOL. This very small phonetic difference conveys a nuanced distinction: the TZEIREI (HINEINI) indicates the self-abnegating fidelity that we show to God, while that with a SEGOL (HINENI) denotes the readiness and attention

that we show to those we love. This second form appears only twice in the Torah, both times spoken by a father to his son (see also 27:18).

The moral and emotional crisis at the heart of the story of Akedat Yitzchak raises an important question about the relationship between these two different states of mind: Can someone possess both HINEINI and HINENI at the same time? Does God's command to sacrifice Yitzchak convey a forced choice between our love and devotion to Him on the one hand, and the responsibilities and affection to our families on the other?

Surface readings of some biblical sources hint that there is indeed a zero-sum game at play here. We see that after the Akeda, Avraham leaves the site of that dramatic event himself, unaccompanied by Yitzchak. Even if Yitzchak was not physically sacrificed, it is possible that the relationship between them was ruptured by that traumatic episode. Thus, Avraham was forced to pay a steep interpersonal price for his act of devotion.

In many ways, we as observant Jews have internalized this dynamic. Parents routinely educate their children about unconditional loyalty to God, even at great personal cost. But the parsha and the haftara together teach that there need be no contradiction between loyalty to God

and loyalty to family. Our haftara, like the parsha, focuses on an episode where the long-awaited child almost dies. But in the haftara, as in the parsha, God ultimately shows that He has no actual desire that the child be sacrificed. Hearing that the Shunamite woman's son has taken ill and died, Elisha hurries to her house and miraculously resuscitates the child, reuniting him with his mother. The idea of resuscitation echoes in the rabbinic tradition surrounding the Akeda.

The Talmud (Zevachim 62a) speaks of the physical ashes of the sacrifice of Yitzchak being found on the Temple mount, hinting that Yitzchak may have actually been sacrificed and resurrected again. Similar imagery can be found in many of the numerous piyutim composed on the subject of the Akeda, as well as in Rashi's commentary on our parsha (22:14).

The shared theme of resuscitation in these two stories conveys a powerful lesson: Our devotion to God does not require that we sacrifice the family relationships most dear to us. On the contrary; true devotion to God demands that we invest in those relationships.

This is despite the fact that many figures throughout Jewish history may have given us this impression that religious commitment requires

sacrifices around relationships, and tension between these two spheres is a commonplace feature of Jewish life. In the past two years, we have seen countless young men and fathers with many children going off to war, leaving their families behind to defend our people and making tremendous sacrifices – even, sometimes, the ultimate sacrifice – for a higher good. Yet the message of both Avraham and the Shunamite woman reminds us that God does not want estrangement, but rather wholeness.

In fact, God desires our devotion not merely as individuals, but as families. He requests that we serve him not merely through personal sacrifice, but by the act of building a better future together for our family, our community, and our people. Serving in the IDF, away from one's family, is one way of doing this.

At the same time, the raising, loving, and nurturing of children is one of the highest levels of divine service that it is possible to pursue. When faced with tensions and difficult decisions that seem to pit our religious observance against love of family, such as engaging with a child whose path is different from our own, we must always remember that loyalty to our loved ones is itself a religious value. If we do, we will make wiser decisions and build a more enduring

Jewish way of life.

And standing before God, we will be able to proclaim not only HINEINI, but also HINENI. 