Message from the Haftara

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Here I Am, My Son

VAYEIRA

Parshat Vayeira and its haftara tell two stories of a child granted through a miracle, brought to the brink of death, and ultimately returned to his parents. In a year when so many Israeli parents have watched their children go out to the front lines, these stories become our own in a way that is both excruciating and uplifting.

On the plain reading of the Akeda, Yitzchak was not killed; it came terribly close, but the act did not take place. Yet other texts in our tradition suggest otherwise. The Gemara (Z'vachim 62a) offers the visceral image of Yitzchak's ashes gathered on the altar, and in another tractate, it speaks of God remembering those ashes (Taanit 16a). The Shibolei HaLeket, a 13th century compendium of Jewish law, invokes the same image (Tefilla 18), as do the kinot of Tish'a b'Av and the Ashkenazi Rosh HaShana piyutim. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra rejects the idea outright (see commentary on B'reishit 22:19), but other commentators including Rashi (22:14), still hint that Yitzchak was, in fact, sacrificed and then revived.

One explanation for such a fantastic tradition may be historical. Many who concluded that Yitzchak was killed and then came back to life lived in the shadow of the First Crusade and in the face of its unimaginable violence, slaughtering of and attempts to forcibly convert Jews. They looked to the Torah for a hero who embodied that price. The same historical experience may also have shaped how later generations remembered Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom: some of the Talmud's most vivid descriptions of his death entered Talmudic manuscripts only after the Crusade.

But there may be a deeper meaning to interpreting the story as involving the death, then revival, of Yitzchak. Such a view reflects the struggle to live within two commitments at once – the willingness to sacrifice for God and the willingness to sacrifice for our children. When God calls Avraham, he answers, "Here I am" (22:1). HINEINI is vocalized here with a TZEREI vowel under the first NUN, and in that form it is addressed upward: I am here for whatever You ask of me, God. What God asks is that Avraham offer up his only son. And so Avraham saddles his donkey (v. 3) – a gesture that in Tanach often fore-

shadows a journey whose original purpose will never be realized.

Father and son walk on together, YACHDAV, of one mind. Then Yitzchak speaks, and Avraham answers, “Here I am, my son” (v. 7). It is almost the same word, but now the first NUN carries a SEGOL vowel (27:18) – a vocalization found only twice in Tanach, both times in B'reishit, both times when a father speaks to his son. In this form, HINENI means: I am here for you, my son. The central question of the Akeida is whether Avraham can hold both commitments at once – being wholly present for God, ready to pay any price, while remaining faithful to his child.

The haftara asks the same question through the eyes of a mother. The Shunamite woman, who asks nothing for herself, prepares a room for the man of God. The prophet Elisha promises her a son “at this time next year” (Melachim Bet 4:16), echoing the angel’s promise to Avraham in the parasha (B'reishit 18:14). The child grows, but takes ill one day in the fields. He is carried home and dies on his mother’s knees at noon.

One can only imagine the crisis of faith burning in his mother’s heart as she lays her child on the bed of the man of God and closes the door. Is this God’s will? Is this the sacrifice she is meant to make? Possessed by inspiration, she refuses to accept that this is how the story must end. Like Avraham, she saddles a donkey (v. 24) and rides out to Mount Carmel. To those who ask, she offers only a word – SHALOM, “All is well” (vv. 23, 26).

Only at the prophet’s feet does her anguish break through: “Did I ask my lord for a son?” she said. “Did I not say, ‘Do not lead me on?’” (v. 28). She will not accept the loss, and yet she will not let go of the prophet: “As the LORD lives, and as you live, I will not leave you” (v. 30). Her faithfulness to God and her faithfulness to her son are not two contradicting loyalties, but one unrelenting devotion. Perhaps it is this unimaginable strength of conviction that provides the spiritual power that allows Elisha to bring the boy back to life.

That, I believe, is the message of Yitzchak’s ashes. The willingness to give everything for God has carried enormous power throughout our history. But recent generations have taught us that commitment to God and commitment to our children need not stand in contradiction. One can say HINEINI to God and HINENI to one’s child, and mean both.

We can be wholly committed to God and the duty and responsibility to send our children to war to protect Israel, but we can also acknowledge the pain and risk in that and desper-

ately hope our children will survive, physically, mentally and emotionally? Yitzchak's ashes stand for all who have sacrificed in this war – the fallen, the wounded, and those who carry spiritual and emotional scars invisible from the outside. The lesson is not that the loss of a child is a sacrifice that parents must accept without question, but that devotion to God does not require parents to suppress their love for their children. We are both in a state of HINEINI and HINENI. We are privileged to raise such children, and our commitment to God strengthens both them and us as we confront the risks and sacrifices this moment demands. A parent can be shattered by the possibility of loss and still draw strength from faith.

The Shunamite woman shows us how to stand in that place: to support our children as they defend our values, to refuse despair, and to hold fast to the hope that their lives and sacrifices will continue to inspire future generations. As Avraham told his son on the way up the mountain, "'God will see to the lamb, for the burnt offering - my son.' The two of them walked on together" (B'reishit 22:8).