



RABBI AARON Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Re-staging *Akeidat Yitzchak*

“You must redeem the firstborn of a person...when he is one month old, for the value of five silver shekels” (Bamidbar 18:15-16).

Once, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l was contacted by a local Catholic priest in Boston who requested from him to explain the Jewish view of redeeming the first born son. The Rav responded in a letter with great detail describing the actual ritual and philosophical underpinnings. From this letter we are privileged to learn the Rav’s deeply profound explanation of this unique and perplexing Torah law.

The Rav expounded on the notion that all that exists in this world belongs to the Creator. The earth is God’s domain. “No one else has a share in the world. Nobody may press claims either to the cosmos as whole or to its minutiae” (Community, p. 296).

As humans we serve only as guardians. God entrusted his world to our care. A striking example of this is evinced every time one recites a few simple words of a *bracha*; with every blessing we recite we,

in essence, are declaring that the world belongs to His majesty.

In a similar vein, the Rav asked why when we conclude the day of Yom Kippur with the Neilah prayer we employ the phrase, *le’maan nechdal me’oshek yadeinu*, with which we point our sins to theft and stealing. Is this really our most glaring sin which needs to be addressed in the minutes of the day? The Rav answered that it is necessary because it refers to a profound transgression man is guilty of. In truth any sin committed by man constitutes larceny - it is a theft from God. All of man’s talents, endowments and qualities are owned by God. To use them in a way which is counter to God’s directive is misappropriating these gifts that are on loan from God. (*Noraot Harav*, Vol. 16, pp.82-84).

Judaism calls upon us to sacrifice in many areas often (i.e. with our time, finances, and our very selves). Acts of sacrifice bear witness to the fact that what we ostensibly perceive as being our own property or domain, in truth, belongs to the Almighty. The act of sacrifice prods us to perceive this deeper truth. Although we often erroneously assume that we are the owners of our bodies, our wealth, and our own decisions belong to us. We are meant to be more cognizant of the fact that God is the *Adon Ha’olam*, the Master of the Universe.

One brings this notion to life “by engaging in a movement of recoil from himself, by retreating from the position of illusory strength he is prone to take up at certain times, by withdrawing from attitudes of arrogant self-regard and self-centeredness...”(Community, p. 299).

With this background, the Rav explained the secret embedded in the law of consecration and redemption of the first-born son. A child is arguably the greatest gift granted to man. At first glance it appears obvious to the parents that this child is their most precious possession. And yet, this child is only entrusted in man’s custody “without granting any property rights to them.”

The Rav wrote: “Man must acknowledge this irrevocable though bitter truth; he must be ready to lose everything, if losing is what God demands. He must always answer the call summoning him to perform heroically the movement of withdrawal from **the most tightly knit and natural community on earth...**” (Ibid. p.300).

It is at this point in the Rav’s explanation to the priest that he introduced the fascinating notion that *pidyon haben* is a virtual re-staging of the *Akeidah Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac).

The parents of the thirty day old child symbolize Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu, the baby plays the role of Yitzchak, and finally, the *kohen*, so to speak, represents none other than the Almighty. The five silver coins are comparable to the ram that replaced Yitzchak.

Akeidah Yitzchak inculcated the concept

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that, as proclaimed by King David (Psalms 24:1-2): “*Lashem ha'aretz umelo'ah, tevel v'yoshevei vah.*” Everything in this universe is owned by God, including all its inhabitants, by His having created the world. By placing Yitzchak on the altar, Avraham Avinu acknowledges that his precious child truly belongs to God. “He [God] wanted Abraham to abandon all pretense of possessiveness, all claims of unity and identity, all hopes of self-perpetuation and immortalization through Isaac and return him to Whom he belongs” (Community, p. 300-301). ■

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