



5784 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schreier Parashat Vayera / פרשת וַיֵּרָא

The Akeidah and Jerusalem's Pillar of Holy Fire

The famous story of the *akeidah* is familiar to us: *Avraham Avinu* is called upon by God to bring his beloved son *Yitzhak* as a sacrifice. While *Hashem* tells *Avraham* to sacrifice *Yitzhak* on a mountain "which I will tell you", there is never any indication in the *pesukim* that God told *Avraham* where the place of sacrifice would be. Instead, the *Torah* tells us that *Avraham* traveled for three days and saw this designated place from a distance. But how did God inform him that this was the proper location for the *akeidah*?

The *Midrash (Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer 31)* informs us that *Avraham* witnessed a supernatural phenomenon that made *Hashem's* will clear: a pillar of fire rising from the top of a mountain up into the heavens. *Yitzhak* also witnessed this same awesome phenomenon. In the words of the *midrash*, it is then that "*Avraham* understood that the lad desired to ascend." *Avraham* then turned to his accompanying attendant, identified by *Hazal* as *Yirshmael*, and asked him whether he witnessed anything strange in the mountains ahead. *Yishmael* saw nothing. Concluding that *Yishmael* was unattuned to the awesome spirituality of this special *makom* and did not deserve access to the top of the mountain, *Avraham* tells him to stay with the donkey below. Just as the donkey was oblivious to its surroundings, so too, *Yishmael* was unable to perceive that which was lofty, pure, and true.

As the *Rambam* points out (*Hilkhot Beit HaBehirah 2:1-2*), the *akeidah* took place in the center of Jerusalem, at the future location of the altar in the *Beit HaMikdash*. *Hashem* told *Avraham* to bring *Yitzhak* to *Eretz Hamoriya*, and the verse in *Divrei Hayamim (2, 3:1)* is explicit that *Shlomo HaMelekh* built the holy temple on the mountain of *Moriya*. The pillar of fire that *Avraham* and *Yitzhak* witnessed together was a symbol of Jerusalem's spiritual destiny, the place where Jews would sacrifice to God and ascend to the highest levels of spirituality as they united heaven and earth through their sincere service.

However, this fire represented something even more profound to *Avraham*. In this week's *parsha* when interceding with God on behalf of *Sodom*, *Avraham* refers to himself as "dust and ash". As *Rashi* notes on the spot, *Avraham* was already miraculously saved from the fires of *Nimrod*. If not for God's intervening hand, *Avraham* would have become ash in the fires of *Ohr Kasdim*. For *Avraham*, the fire ascending from Jerusalem represented the willingness to sacrifice everything for the truth of God and to walk in His ways, much like *Avraham* had already done in his youth. *Yitzhak's* spiritual ability to see this fire testified that he was also ready to become "ash", to take up the spiritual mantle of his father and wholeheartedly sacrifice everything to God under the covenant of *Avraham* and everything he stood for. The *midrash* attests the "ashes of *Yitzhak*" permanently sit in view of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, reminding Him of our forefather's willingness to sacrifice everything to sanctify *Hashem's* name in this world.

Yishmael had also proven his ability to sacrifice by willingly undergoing circumcision at the age of 13. However, his inability to see the holy fire of Jerusalem proved his inadequacy and warped view of what



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sacrifice for God means. *Shevu lachem po im hahamor*. *Yishmael's* warped sense of self-sacrifice expresses itself in destructive moral debauchery, barbarous cruelty, and a sick disregard for the value of life. He becomes the opposite of *Avraham's* legacy. In contrast, *Yitzchak's* descendants inherited the selfless desire to sacrifice everything on behalf of goodness, to sanctify God's name, and protect the vulnerable and downtrodden. Again and again, they have risen from the ashes to rededicate themselves to the glory of *Hashem's* name. Truly, they are ready to ascend onto the holy mountain.

May we witness *Yishmael* being cast away from his undeserved place at the base of the pillar of fire. *Yitzchak's* descendants will again take up their destiny of sacrifice in the holy temple, speedily in our days.

