

What we Hear in the Silence

Our focus this week is Gen.22:1-19. The horror of the narrative grabs our attention and draws us into the text with understandable questions and objections: *Why would God ask a father to sacrifice his own son?*

Many Catholics are familiar with this reading as part of Easter Vigil, and it also appears as part of the weekday morning service in many Jewish prayer books. What is so important about this passage to warrant its prominent placing in the liturgical traditions of both Jews and Christians? Read Gen.22:1-19, then join the sages in a close reading of verses 3-4.

“Abraham rose early, saddled his donkey, chopped wood for the burnt offering, took Isaac his son and his two lads, and set out for the place that God had spoken of to him. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar” (Gen.22:3-4).

Our Torah passage speaks of a three-day journey from Abraham’s home to the point where he can see his God-given destination. Do you notice anything odd about this part of the text?

Perhaps you noticed that the Torah offers no detail about the journey. Details about his preparation are aplenty: saddling his donkey, chopping wood, etc. But from the moment he is on his way: the text suddenly falls silent. Like a fast-forwarded video, the story skips to the end: “On the third day...”

Think about that. Abraham has just set out with a horrific task: the sacrifice of his own son. He has three days, in the presence of his son, to consider what he is about to do. Surely, those days must have been filled with anguish! Surely, he must have undergone feelings of bewilderment, anger, doubt, pain... surely! And yet the text records nothing about the journey. No dialogue, no thoughts or feelings, no events, no geographical or human point of note. Prayerfully ponder this. How do you interpret the Torah’s silence? Are there some things that are ‘unspeakable’? Do they need to be voiced at all?

This silence bothered the sages deeply. In fact, in the midrash we find imaginative stories filling up the silence of those three days.

According to one midrashic tradition—one that perhaps depicts the internal struggle of conscience—Abraham is visited during his journey by a *satan*, a tempter, who hurls at him one reason after another as to why he should abandon his journey. Abraham persists.

Another tells how Abraham comes to a river crossing. The waters are dangerously high and Abraham has every excuse to turn around and go home. Instead, he plunges in up to his neck, and the waters recede. We are drawn to reflect on the ‘legitimate’ excuses that deter us from pursuing God’s call to its final conclusion.

In this way, by being attentive to what is ‘absent’ in the text, the midrash prevents us from treating the story of Abraham’s faith as blind, robotic obedience. It leads us to a deeper, more sensitive contemplation of the human struggle involved in discerning and following God’s call. Far from being fanciful storytelling, the midrash voices the questions and insights of generations of believers as they encounter God’s living Word. •

Table topic: Join in the conversation of the sages. How does the text’s silence stimulate your engagement with the Torah? If you were to tell your own midrashic account about what happened during those three days, what would you say? Can you imagine Jesus wrestling with this sacred story as part of his own discernment and desire to do the will of the Father?

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitsky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda, 1994). Scripture: JPS, NRSV.

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