

The Resurrection Motif in the Midrash on the Akedat Yitzchak¹

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The story of the *Akedah*,² the binding and near sacrifice of Yitzchak, is the high point in Avraham's life. The event is described in the Torah in quick short strokes, however, these nineteen sentences give rise to an enormous body of *Midrash*.³ Much of this *Midrash* is very perplexing; the content is very strange, the associations are inexplicable and the message is sometimes unintelligible.

Midrash is a genre of Rabbinic literature which is spread throughout the Talmud and collected in numerous anthologies. As a result, many of the same comments or stories, *Aggadot*,⁴ are repeated in many places, in different books of *Midrash* or in more than one tractate of *Talmud*. Therefore, when dealing with *Midrash*, it often makes sense to speak of a motif. A motif is a single plot line or a specific logical argument consisting of a number of basic elements which appears a number of times.⁵ In general, the expression of the motif is not always the same, and as a result we find variants on a standard theme. It is often the differences between the variants which say more than the similarities.

Of all the motifs in the *Midrash* on the *Akedah*, the most puzzling is the resurrection motif. Even a cursory reading of the *Akedah* story reveals that God did not allow Avraham to harm Yitzchak at all. In fact, the reader is informed from the very beginning that the divine command to sacrifice Yitzchak is only a test: "It was after those things, that the *Elohim* tested Avraham."⁶ Even though Yitzchak is not mentioned explicitly in the last verse, it is obvious that he is still alive. "Avraham returned to his lads; they arose; they went together to Be'er Sheva; Avraham dwelled in Be'er Sheva."⁷ Indeed, only Avraham is mentioned because he is the hero of the tale and the narrative focuses almost exclusively on his actions.⁸ Thus, it is more than a little strange that there exists a Midrashic motif which seems to state that Yitzchak died on the altar, only to be resurrected!

¹ An early version of this essay appeared in *Be'er Yitzhak*, Student Organization of Yeshiva (University): New York, Vol. 1, 5732, pp. 1-7.

² The *Akedah* appears in *Berayshit* 22:1-19.

³ *Midrash* is defined as any comment, explanation given or story told by the Rabbis of the Talmudic period (approximately 330 b.c.e. to 600 c.e.) concerning the Biblical text.

⁴ *Aggadot* is the plural of *Aggadah*, i.e. a Rabbinic story about a Biblical character or event. Sometimes the word is used to describe a story the Rabbis tell about themselves, as well.

⁵ There are times, a motif will appear only once in *Midrashic* literature.

⁶ *Berayshit* 22:1.

⁷ *Ibid.* 22:19.

⁸ Rashi ad. loc. quotes the *Midrash* and says that Yitzchak is not mentioned because he did not return home with his father. Rather, he went off to study in the "yeshiva" of Shem, son of No'ach. Even in Rashi's understanding Yitzchak is very much alive.

The Resurrection Motif Texts

The Midrashic motif which asserts that Yitzchak died and was resurrected during this episode includes the following basic elements:

- A. Yitzchak is bound and placed on the altar.
- B. Yitzchak dies.
- C. Yitzchak is brought back to life, i.e. resurrected.
- D. The blessing of *Mecha'yay HaMaytim* (He Who resurrects the dead)⁹ is recited.

The motif appears in four different places in Rabbinic literature. The first variant to be presented comes from the *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer*,¹⁰ an Aggadic retelling of most of the Bible. This *Midrash* anthology, dating from the 7th century, was widely known throughout the ages and has been printed many, many times.

ר' יהודה אמר: כיון שהגיע החרב על צוארו, פרחה ויצאה נשמתו של יצחק. כיון שהשמיע קולו מבין שני הכרובים ואמר, "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער," חזרה הנפש לגופו. והתירו ועמד על רגליו. וידע יצחק תחיית המתים מן התורה, שכל המתים עתידין להחיות. באותו שעה פתח ואמר, "ברוך אתה ה' מחיה המתים."¹¹
Rabbi Yehudah said: Once the knife reached Yitzchak's throat, his soul fled.¹¹ When God spoke from between the two *Keruvim*¹² and said, "Do not raise your hand to the boy!" the soul returned to his body. He untied him and he stood on his feet, [then] Yitzchak knew that the resurrection of the dead was insured by the Torah, that in the future all the dead will be resurrected. Then he opened up and said, "Blessed are You, God, Who resurrects the dead."

The next source where this motif appears is in the *Midrash HaGadol*,¹³ a large collection of Midrash that was edited in Yemen in the 13th century but reflects Yemenite Midrashic sources going back to Talmudic times. This anthology was unknown outside of Yemen until the late nineteenth century when the rest of the Jewish world reestablished its connection with the Yemenite community.

ר' אליעזר אומר: כיון שהגיע החרב על צוארו של יצחק, פרחה ויצאה נשמתו. וכשהשמיע הקדוש ברוך הוא קולו מבין שני הכרובים ואמר, "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה," חזרה נפשו לגופו. והתירו ועמד על רגליו. וידע שכך המתים עתידין להחיות. ופתח ואמר, "ברוך מחיה המתים."

⁹ This blessing is the end of the third *Berakhah* of the *Shemonah Esray*. The relevance of this blessing to our theme will be revealed later on.

¹⁰ *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 31.

¹¹ Literally, "exited and flew away."

¹² The *Keruvim* were the two golden cherubs atop the Ark of the Covenant which sat in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

¹³ *Midrash HaGadol, Berayshit*, Mossad HaRav Kook: Jerusalem, vol. I, p. 355.

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Rabbi Eliezer said: Once the knife reached Yitzchak's throat, his soul fled. When God spoke from between the *Krúvim* saying, "Do not raise your hand to the boy!" the soul returned to his body. He untied him and he stood on his feet, and Yitzchak knew that in the future all the dead would be resurrected. Then he said, "Blessed [are You, God,] Who resurrects the dead."

The third record of this motif comes from a fragment of *Midrash* that remained in manuscript until it was first published in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ The fragment is called, *Midrash VaYosha*, because it contains Rabbinic comments on the "song of the Sea," *Shemot* 14:30-15:21, the introduction to which begins with the word, *VaYosha*.¹⁵

באותו שעה בכו מלאכי השרת במר נפש... ונפלו דמעותיהם על הסכין עד שעמד ולא שלט בצוארו של יצחק. מיד פרחו נשמתו. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למיכאל, "מפני מה אתה עומד? אל תניחנו לשוחטו!" מיד קרא מיכאל לאברהם ואמר, "אברהם! אברהם!"... "ויירש זרעך את שער אויביו." מיד הניחו וחזרה נשמתו בו ועמד על רגליו וברך, "ברוך אתה מחיה מתים."

At that time the heavenly angels cried very bitterly... and their tears fell on the knife so it would not affect Yitzchak's neck. Immediately his soul fled. Then God said to [the angel] Michael, "What are you standing for? Don't let him slaughter him!" So Michael immediately called out to Avraham and said, "Avraham! Avraham!... And your descendants will possess the gates of their foes." Immediately, he let go of him and his soul returned to him. Then he stood up and said, "Blessed [are You, God,] Who resurrects the dead."

The last variant is found only in one source: The *Shibbolay HaLeket*, written by Tzedki'yah *HaRofay* (the Physician), who lived in Rome in the mid-thirteenth century, is a halachic anthology which incorporated *Midrashic* material to preface and embellish the halacha. This variant is part of a very long *Midrash* which associates each blessing of the *Shemonah Esray* with a historical event. The significance of the fact that this is the only source for this variant cannot be overstated, for this means that this version of the motif was purposely kept out of print. This provides us with another, peripheral puzzle connected with these *Midrashim*.¹⁶

ותניא: שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה. מצאתי אגדה: מאי על הסדר? זה סדר עולם. שכך מצינו "ח ברכות של תפילה מעולם היו מתוקנות זו אחר זו. כיון שבאו אנשי כנסת הגדולה כללום ותקנום כסדרן. כשניצול אברהם מאור כשדים, פתחו מלאכי השרת ואמרו, "ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם." כשנעקד יצחק על גבי המזבח ונעשה דשן, והיה אפרו מושלך על הר המורה, מיד הביא עליו הקדוש ברוך הוא טל החיה אותו. לפיכך אמר דוד, "כטל חרמון שיורד על הררי ציון."¹⁷ כטל שהחיה בו יצחק אבינו. מיד פתחו מלאכי השרת ואמרו, "ברוך אתה ה' מחיה מתים."

¹⁴ *Midrash VaYosha* appears in Adolph Jellinek, *Bayt HaMidrash*, reprinted by Wahrman: Jerusalem, 1967, vol. I, pp. 35-57. The quotation is from p. 38.

¹⁵ *Shemot* 14:30.

¹⁶ Rabbi Tzedki'yah *HaRofay*, *Shibbolay HaLeket*, Laws of the *Shemonah Esray*, ch. 18.

¹⁷ *Tehilim* 133:3.

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A *Baraitah*:¹⁸ Shimon *HaFakuli* arranged the *Shemonah Esray*, the "Eighteen Blessings," in order for Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh.¹⁹ I found an Aggadah:²⁰ What is "in order?" This means the order of the world. For we find that the "Eighteen Blessings" were always in existence. Then the Men of the Great Assembly gathered them and set them in order. When Avraham was saved from the furnace of Kasdim, the angels said, "Blessed are You, God, the shield of Avraham."²¹ When Yitzchak was bound to the altar and became ash, and his ashes were scattered over Mount Moriah, God immediately brought dew down on him and resurrected him. Therefore David said, "Like the dew of Hermon which falls on the hills of Zion."²² Like the dew with which He resurrected our father Yitzchak. Then the angels of heaven said, "Blessed are You, God, who resurrects the dead."²³

How is one to understand this motif? Is the story to be taken literally? Did Yitzchak die on the altar? To answer, "Yes," would be to admit that what the Torah almost explicitly tells us did not happen did indeed take place. But if the story of this motif is *not* to be understood literally, then what is it saying?

One possible explanation is that the *Midrash* is telling us in rather graphic terms that Yitzchak's reaction to seeing the knife approach his throat was to faint. When he awoke, he realized that he was not dead, and to him it was as if he were resurrected. Apparently, the Rabbis put a blessing which was very familiar to their audience into Yitzchak's mouth, thus, allowing them to immediately understand Yitzchak's profoundly religious reaction to what just happened to him.

All would be well and good with this interpretation, except that it does not explain the variant which appears in the *Shibbolay HaLeket*. It is very hard to interpret being reduced to ashes as fainting! Is there then an interpretation of this motif which takes into account all the variants?²⁴

¹⁸ A *Baraitah* is a "piece" of Rabbinic material which dates to the period of the *Mishnah*, but was not included in the *Mishnah*. The *Gemara* is filled with *Baraitot* (the plural of *Baraitah*).

¹⁹ After the destruction of the Second Temple it was necessary to reconstitute a great deal of Jewish life. The job fell to Rabban Gamliel, the successor to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the one who succeeded in moving the *Sanhedrin* and the vast majority of scholars from the besieged Jerusalem to a small town called Yavneh.

²⁰ Rabbi Tzedki'yah reports that he found the following in a manuscript.

²¹ This is the end of the first *Berakhah* of the *Shemonah Esray*.

²² *Tehilim* 133:33.

²³ This is the end of the second *Berakhah* of the *Shemonah Esray*.

²⁴ Rabbi David Luria, in his commentary on the *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer*, tries to synthesize the two variants found in the *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer* and the *Shibbolay HaLeket*. After pointing out that Avraham was 137 years old, according to the *Midrash*, he describes what happened: Avraham makes Yitzchak climb up onto the altar and then he binds his son, hand and foot. Realizing that he moves very slowly, he's very old after all, Avraham lights the fire in one far corner of the altar, thinking that by the time he goes and gets the knife and returns and slaughters Yitzchak the fire will have spread and will very shortly consume Yitzchak. However, after Avraham takes hold of the knife, the angel engages him in a long conversation, the details of which are provided by the *Midrash*. As a result, the fire

The Deeds of the Fathers Are a Sign for the Children

The key to understanding these *Midrashim* is a concept which is applicable to every episode in *Sefer Berayshit*. *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim*, the deeds of the fathers are a sign to the children, is a classic Rabbinic tool used to derive the message implicit in the patriarchal stories. There are three different ways of interpreting this concept, each representing a deeper level of meaning. In other words, *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim*, is a three tiered construct in which each level adds deeper meaning to the idea.

The plain sense explanation of the phrase says that what the forefathers did should be an example to us, the children. As we read of Avraham tending to his three guests, we must learn how to follow in his footsteps. The sensitivity and tenderness employed by Avraham in relating to Sarah is a model which we must adopt. In short, the forefathers and their families serve as ethical and moral models that we must emulate.

On second, deeper, level, the Ramban²⁵ states that this concept indicates historical precedent. What happened to the forefathers will happen to the children. A clear example of this is presented by the Ramban and the *Berayshit Rabbah* on episode involving Avraham and Sarah's descent to Egypt.²⁶ There are numerous parallels between their adventure in Egypt and the later exile of the nation of Jews in Egypt. It is a famine which drives Avraham and family down to Egypt and a similar event drives Ya'akov and family down there as well. Avraham's fear that the Egyptians will want to kill him and leave Sarah alive is realized when Pharaoh decrees that the male babies should be drowned in the Nile and the infant girls be allowed to live. God saves Sarah from Pharaoh's clutches by plaguing him and his household and the Jews exit Egypt after God pries them loose with the famous ten plagues.

There is yet a third explanation of *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim*, the Kabbalistic one.

In the Kabbalah, the patriarchal stories are treated in a very unique manner. Each of the forefathers is identified with a particular *Midah*, i.e. an attribute or quality, or *Sefirah*.²⁷ In a sense, the forefather becomes the personification of that *Midah* and is the embodiment of that spiritual force in the world. Avraham is associated with the *Midot* (plural of *Midah*) of *Chesed*, loving-kindness and *Rachamim*, mercy or compassion. Yitzchak is the *Midah* of *Gevurah*, meaning discipline,²⁸ or *Din*, judgment. Ya'akov is *Tiferet*, beauty, the beauty of *Emet*, truth, which is the combination of *Din* and *Chesed*.

spreads and Yitzchak is consumed by the flames while Avraham talks with the angel. Thus, God had to resurrect Yitzchak.

Unfortunately, this retelling of the tale is almost laughable. Even if the assumption that the *Midrash* account is an accurate description of the historical event -- an assumption rejected by the Rambam, his son Rabbenu Avraham, Rabbi Moshe Cha'yim Luzzatto and the Maharal of Prague, to name just a few -- it is absurd to think that Avraham and/or the angel would actually continue an insignificant argument which Yitzchak howled in excruciating pain but a couple of meters away!

²⁵ See Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, on *Berayshit* 12:6.

²⁶ See Ramban and *Berayshit Rabbah* on *Berayshit* Genesis 12:10-20.

²⁷ See Appendix: *A Basic Outline of the Kabbalah*.

²⁸ In *Pirkay Avot* 4:1, the rhetorical question of "Who is a *Gibor*, i.e. one who acts with *Gevurah*?" is answered with "The one who conquers his evil impulse." Thus, *Gevurah* is really self-control and discipline.

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Therefore, the forefathers, by simply living their lives with their own particular personalities, planted these *Midot*, these qualities, into the Jewish personality. Aside from this process of personality or spiritual genetics which is implied by this idea, there is another ramification: The way the forefather interacted among themselves, with other people and with God can also be understood as the interaction of specific spiritual forces and powers. This spiritual interplay resulted in the establishment of transcendent relationships between the Jews and the people of the world and between the Jews and God. So *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim* is not only ethical example or historical precedent, but it is also the system whereby the forefathers set into motion spiritual processes and everlasting relationships between the Jews and the world around them and between the Jews and God.

Interpreting the Akedah

It is with this understanding that the *Akedah* story is explained by Rabbi Mordekhai Yaffe in his commentary on the Kabbalistic *Chumash* commentary by Rabbi Menachem Ricanati:²⁹

כי ירמוז שמדת החסד לקח אש ומאכלת בידו ועקד הפחד שלא ישלוט גבורתו ותכלה את העולם.

For it hints that the *Midah* of *Chesed* took fire and knife in his hand and bound the *Pachad* (literally fear) so that his *Gevurah* would not rule and destroy the world.

Avraham, the personification of compassion and mercy, the *Chesed*, binds Yitzhak, the personification of *Gevurah*, symbolized in this case by the awesome *Pachad* - fear of judgment. Had Avraham failed his test, had he not bound his son, the *Midah* of *Gevurah*, restraining him and overcoming him, then the power of *Chesed*, of love, in the world would have been weakened while the force of strict law and awe-inspiring discipline would have been strengthened. The cataclysmic result would have been eventual destruction of the world. Humanity would have self-destructed under the relentless pressure of *Din*, law, with so little hope for forgiveness, hope and love.

The process set into being by Avraham as he bound his son, Yitzhak, is that whenever judgment tries to reign, it is overcome, limited, tempered and bound by mercy, compassion and loving kindness. At this point, the system of *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim* intersects with another set of spiritual processes, known collectively as *Zekhut Avot*, the merit of the forefathers. The *Akedah* results specifically in creating a large measure of *Zekhut Avot*, called *Zekhut HaAkedah*, the merit accrued by Avraham and Yitzhak on that quiet hilltop so many centuries ago. Thus, *Zekhut HaAkedah* is a process whereby God allows His *Midah* of *Chesed*, of loving kindness, to overcome and limit the functioning of the *Din*, His *Midah* of judgment and discipline.

Therefore, to recall the *Akedah* is to invoke this merit. Mention of the *Akedah*, recitation of the *Akedah* text, pointing to the *Akedah* is a *Siman*, a sign, to God that He must dip into our self-replenishing account of merit called *Zekhut HaAkedah* and treat, us, the "children," with love and kindness.

²⁹ Rabbi Mordekhai Yaffe, *Even Yekarah*, commentary on *Perush HaRicanati*, p. 21a.

The Application of Zekhut HaAkedah

It is difficult to imagine the far-reaching influence of this concept until a broad survey of Midrashic and Talmud literature is made. *Zekhut HaAkedah* has affected numerous historical events: God promised to bring about the Exodus,³⁰ God passed over the houses of the Jews in Egypt on the night He killed the first born of the Egyptians,³¹ God defends the Jews against the onslaught of the Egyptians,³² God splits the reed sea,³³ God reveals Himself to the Jews on Mt. Sinai,³⁴ God gives the Jews manna in the desert,³⁵ God forgives the Jews for the sin of the Golden Calf,³⁶ God saves the Jews from the curses of Bilaam,³⁷ God saves the Jews from the clutches of the evil Haman,³⁸ God assists the Jews in building the Second Temple,³⁹ and God is comforted after the destruction of the Temple⁴⁰ all because of the merit of the *Akedah*.

During each of these events, the Jewish people were faced with a threat or problem which they did not deserve to overcome or solve on the basis of their own collective merit. Only after God remembered the *Akedah* were they saved or helped. An instructive example comes from the Talmud:⁴¹

בשלמא בית, מינכרא צורתו. אלא, מזבח, מנא ידעי? ... ור' יצחק נפחא אמר: אפרו של יצחק ראו מונח באותו מקום.

Granted, the building, its foundations could be recognized, but the altar, how did they know? ... Rabbi Yitzchak Nafchah said: They saw the ashes of Yitzchak resting on the spot.

Rashi explains that the Men of the Great Assembly had no trouble figuring out where to build the Second Temple. They did some basic archeology and discovered the foundations of the First Temple. The altar, however, had no foundations buried under ground-level. So how did they know exactly where to build the altar? The answer given by Rabbi Yitzchak Nafchah seems unintelligible! Did they actually see a pile of ashes lying on the ground? And how could they have known that these were the ashes of Yitzchak? And since when did Yitzchak turn to ash on the altar!?! Once we apply the concept of *Zekhut HaAkedah*, Rabbi Yitzchak's answer is clear. God assisted them in their time of need even though they did not deserve it.

³⁰ *Mekhilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, VaAyrach*.

³¹ *Mekhilta, Bo* 11:76.

³² *Mekhilta, BeShalach* 14:6.

³³ *Berayshit Rabbah* 55:8; *Zohar*, vol. II, *Terumah*, p. 170b.

³⁴ *Zohar*, vol. II, *Yitro*, p. 81a.

³⁵ *Shemot Rabbah* 25:5.

³⁶ *Shemot Rabbah* 44:5 & 10.

³⁷ *Mekhilta, Beshalach* 14:6.

³⁸ *Berayshit Rabbah* 56:1.

³⁹ *Talmud Bavli, Zevachim* 62a.

⁴⁰ *Petichtah to Aychah Rabbah* no. 24; *Talmud Bavli, Berakhot* 62b.

⁴¹ *Zevachim* 61a.

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The list continues: The offerings of silver for the building of the *Mishkan*, the portable desert tabernacle;⁴² the contributions of rams' hides for the *Mishkan*⁴³ and the sacrificing of rams when the *Mishkan* was consecrated⁴⁴ were all meant to invoke the *Zekhut HaAkedah*. The major purpose of the *Mishkan* and later the Temple was to atone for the sins of the Jews. Thus, the very construction of these holy places was based on the merit of Avraham and Yitzchak which insures atonement and forgiveness in times of need.

By the same token, numerous sacrifices are connected in Rabbinic literature with the *Akedah*, thus deepening their impact based on the power of the *Chesed*, love, to overcome the *Din*, the judgment of law. They include: The daily sacrifice,⁴⁵ the *Olah* burnt offering,⁴⁶ the *Pesach* sacrifice,⁴⁷ the sacrifice of the first-born of a *clean* animal⁴⁸ and the *Olah* burnt offering on *Yom Kippur*.⁴⁹

The Rabbis connected specific *Mitzvot* with the *Akedah*. Thus, in performing the following *Mitzvot*, the *Zekhut HaAkedah* was invoked: The permanent fire on the Temple altar,⁵⁰ the priestly blessings,⁵¹ ritual slaughter (*Shechitah*),⁵² blowing the *Shofar*⁵³ and public fast days.⁵⁴

The connection between the *Akedah* and public fast days is most unique. According to the Talmud, when ever the Jewish community is in real danger from a drought or an impending invasion of a foreign army, a public fast day is decreed. One of the rituals of such a fast is to parade in public with *Makleh* ashes on ones head. The purpose of wearing the ashes is a subject of controversy in the *Gemara*, where one Rabbi says explicitly that the goal is to remember the *Akedah*. But just what does the word, *Makleh*, imply? Rashi says that specifically these kinds of ashes are symbolic of the *Akedah*. Why? He does not say, but the *Tosafot* state that these are the ashes resulting from the burning of human bones. How else can these ashes properly represent the ashes of our father, Yitzchak?

In general, say the Rabbis in numerous sources, *Zekhut HaAkedah* becomes the basis for the deliverance by God from any and every kind of threat or problem.⁵⁵ The Rabbis learn from the *Akedah* that the people of Israel are not in danger for more than three days in a row.⁵⁶ Indeed, on *Rosh HaShanah*, the *Akedah* becomes a veritable font of forgiveness.⁵⁷ In fact, the germ of this idea of *Zekhut HaAkedah* is to be found in a *Midrash* concerning *Rosh HaShanah*. In the

⁴² *Shemot Rabbah* 49:2.

⁴³ *Midrash Aggadah* part I

⁴⁴ *Yalkut Shimoni* vol. I, no. 614.

⁴⁵ *VaYikra Rabbah* 2:11.

⁴⁶ *Tanchumah, Tzav* no. 13.

⁴⁷ *Shemot Rabbah* 15:12.

⁴⁸ *VaYikra Rabbah* 27:9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 21:11.

⁵⁰ *Zohar* vol. III, *Tzav*.

⁵¹ *Tanchumah, VaYechi*, no. 7.

⁵² *Berayshit Rabbah* 56:3; *Tanchumah*, Buber edition, *VaYerah*.

⁵³ *Berayshit Rabbah* 56:9; *Midrash HaGadol* on *Berayshit* 22.

⁵⁴ *Mishnah, Ta'anit* 2:4; *Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit* 16a.

⁵⁵ *Talmud Yerushalmi, Ta'anit* 2:4; *Midrash Tehilim* 29:1; *Tanchumah, Shelach* no. 14; *VaYikra Rabbah* 29:9.

⁵⁶ *Esther Rabbah* 9:2.

⁵⁷ *Tanchumah, VaYerah* no. 23; *Yalkut Shimoni* vol. I no. 782.

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VaYikra Rabbah,⁵⁸ the *Midrash* conjures up for us the way Avraham must have responded to God after the ram was offered in place of Yitzchak. In doing so, this process of *Zekhut Avot* is almost spelled out completely:

"ויאמר בי נשבעתי נאם ה' " (בראשית כב:טז). מה צורך היה לשבועה? ר' ביבי בר אבא בשם ר' יוחנן אמר: עמד אברהם אבינו בתפלה ותחנונים לפני הקב"ה ואמר לפניו, "רבונו של עולם, גלוי וידוע לפניך בשעה שאמרת לי, 'קח נא את בנך את יחידך' (בראשית כב), היה בלבי מה להשיבך והיה בלבי מה לאמר. אתמול אמרת לי, 'כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע' (בראשית כא:יב), ועכשיו אתה אומר לי, 'העלהו שם לעולה'. אלא כשם שהיה לי מה להשיבך וכבשתי את יצרי ולא השבותיך -- 'כחרש לא אשמע וכאלם לא יפתח פיו' (תהלים לח:יד) -- כך כשיהיו בניו של יצחק באים לידי עבירות ומעשים רעים תהא מזכיר להם עקידת יצחק אביהם, ועמוד מכסא הדין לכסא רחמים, ומתמלא עליהם רחמים ותרחם עליהם, ותהפוך להם מדת הדין למדת רחמים." אימתי? "בחדש השביעי" (ויקרא כג:כד).

"And He said, 'By myself I have sworn,' declares God."⁵⁹ What need was there for this oath? Rav Bibi bar Abba in the name of Rav Yochanan said: Avraham, our father, stood in prayer and petition before God. He said to Him, "Master of the world: It is well known to You that when You said to me, 'Please take your son, your only son,' I had what to answer You and I had in my heart what to say. Yesterday You said to me, 'For in Yitzchak will descendants be called to you.'⁶⁰ and now You tell me, 'Offer him as a burnt offering'!?!' But just as I had what to answer You and I overcame my desire and did not answer You -- 'Like a deaf one will I listen, like a mute one who does not open his mouth.'⁶¹ -- so when Yitzchak's children come to do sin and bad deeds, remind them of the binding of Yitzchak and rise from the throne of judgment and sit down on the throne of mercy." When? "In the seventh month."⁶²

This speech, which the Rabbis of the *Midrash*, placed in Avraham's mouth is amazing in many respects. In its overall content and thrust, it reflects the kind of response we would have expected from Avraham. We react to Avraham silent acquiescence to God's awesome request with surprise. Where is his spirit of fight? Why doesn't he point out the inconsistencies in God's behavior? This *Midrash* is sensitive to these questions and answers them by showing us how Avraham strikes a wonderful bargain with God, specifically because he did not fight the request to sacrifice Yitzchak, his only son, his beloved son.

The end of the speech makes reference to the thrones of mercy and judgment: "Remind them of the binding of Yitzchak and rise from the throne of judgment and sit down on the throne of mercy." Here is the seed of the Kabbalistic understanding of *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeVanim* as it is translated into the on-going process of *Zekhut HaAkedah*, the everlasting merit of their deed.

⁵⁸ *VaYikra Rabbah* 29:9.

⁵⁹ *Berayshit* 22:16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 21:12.

⁶¹ *Tehilim* 38:14.

⁶² *VaYikra* 23:24.

Resurrection and Zekhut HaAkedah

The link between the resurrection and *Zekhut HaAkedah* is found in the *Pesikta DeRav Kehanah*, an early collection of *Midrash* arranged according to the cycle of holidays of the Jewish calendar.⁶³

בזכות יצחק שהקריב עצמו על גבי המזבח, עתיד הקדוש ברוך הוא להחיות מתים,
שנאמר, "לשמוע אנקת אסיר."⁶⁴

In the future God, will resurrect the dead because of the merit of Yitzchak, who sanctified himself on the altar, as it is written, "To hear the cry of the bounded one."⁶⁵

The resurrection of the dead will take place because God has mercy on His people, not because they are deserving of such redemption. Resurrection of the dead will be one of the results of the process set into operation by the *Akedah*.

This idea is contained in the second blessing of the *Shemonah Esray*:

מכלכל חיים בחסד, מחיה מתים ברחמים רבים.

You sustain the living with loving-kindness (*Chesed*): You revive the dead with great mercy (*Rachamim Rabim*).

The first three blessings of the *Shemonah Esray* correspond to the three forefathers, Avraham Yitzchak and Ya'akov. The first blessing actually ends with the words, "*Magen Avraham* - מגן אברהם, the shield of Avraham." Aside from introducing a whole array of themes which permeate the entire *Shemonah Esray*, this blessing highlights God's *Chesed* and love for His people, which is the *Midah* associated with Avraham. The third blessing, which deals with the theme of sanctity, is the blessing of Ya'akov; *Kedushah*, being the dynamic relationship between man and God, as demonstrated by Ya'akov throughout his life.

The second *Berakhah* (blessing), though, is Yitzchak's. It begins the theme of *Gevurah*, discipline and law, which is the *Midah* of Yitzchak: "You, Lord, are mighty (*Gibor*) forever." To be mighty as a *Gibor* is to act with *Gevurah*. However, the line quoted above from the continuation of this blessing specifically states that "You revive the dead with great mercy (*Rachamim Rabim*)." Why is the idea of resurrection tied to the *Midah* of Avraham in the blessing which is Yitzchak's!?! The answer comes from the very *Midrashim* we are examining. In the first three variants quoted above, from the *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer*, the *Midrash HaGadol* and the *Midrash VaYosha*, Yitzchak stands up after being untied and announces personally that he now realizes that all the dead will eventually be resurrected. Yitzchak, himself, recites the *Berakhah* of "Blessed are You, God, Who resurrects the dead." The new dimension which these *Midrashim* add to the concept of *Zekhut HaAkedah* is not only the idea of resurrection as a result of this spiritual process, but also the idea that Yitzchak, as the embodiment of the *Midah* of *Gevurah*, actually admits that the process is in place and that the greatest of all miracles will

⁶³ *Pesikta DeRav Kehanah*, Buber edition, p. 200b.

⁶⁴ *Tehilim* 102:21.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

be performed when God invokes this measure of the accumulated merit of the forefathers, *Zekhut Avot*.

As a side note, it is now possible to conjecture as to why the variant of this motif which was saved in the *Shibbolay HaLeket* was not previously published. One level, it is clear that the casual, uninitiated reader would not be able to explain being turned to ashes as fainting. At the same time, on a deeper level, it is the angels who pronounce the blessings in this version and not the protagonists, such as Yitzchak. This effectively removes the *Chidush*, the new dimension, which these *Midrashim* are meant to add, that the individuals themselves, such as Yitzchak, agree with the interaction of the *Middot*, spiritual powers, present in these new *Zekhut Avot* processes.

A Final Word and a Final Text

The chapter in the *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer*⁶⁶ which describes the *Akedah* ends as follows:

ר' חנניא בן דוסא אומר "אותו האיל שנברא בין השמשות לא יצא ממנו דבר לבטלה. אפרו של איל הוא יסוד על גבי המזבח הפנימי. גידי האיל אלו עשרה נבלים של כנור שהיה דוד מנגן בהם. עורו של איל הוא אזור מתניו של אליהו ז"ל, שנאמר, "ויאמרו אליו איש בעל שער ואזור עור אזור במתניו" (מלכים ב א:ח). קרניו של איל, של שמאל שתקע בו בהר סיני, שנאמר, "ויהי במשך בקרן היובל" (שמות יט:ט), ושל ימין שהיא גדולה משל שמאל שהוא עתיד לתקוע בה לעתיד לבא, שנאמר, "והיה ביום ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול והיה ה' למלך על כל הארץ" (ישעיהו כז:ג).

Rabbi Chaninah ben Dosa said: Nothing went waste from that ram. His ashes became the foundation of the inner altar, as it is written, "Aharon will make atonement on its horned corners once a year."⁶⁷ The sinews of the ram are ten, corresponding to the ten strings of the lyre on which David played. His hide became the girdle around the thighs of Eliyahu [the prophet], as it is written, "They said to him, 'A man, full of hair, with a girdle of hide wrapped around his thighs...'"⁶⁸ The horns of the ram: The left one's voice was heard on Mt. Sinai, as it is written, "There was the voice of the *Shofar*."⁶⁹ And the right horn, which is larger than the left, will be sounded in the future when the exiles are gathered, as it is written, "It will be on that day that He will blow a large *Shofar*."⁷⁰

The ram which Avraham offered in place of Yitzchak is also symbolic of *Zekhut HaAkedah*. It is connected with the rituals of atonement of *Yom Kippur*, which rely heavily on God's mercy overcoming His strict law and judgment. The rams sinews are part of the small harp played by King David, the great-grandfather of the *Mashi'ach*. His hide clothes Eliyahu the prophet who

⁶⁶ *Pirkay DeRabbi Eliezer* ch. 31.

⁶⁷ *Shemot* 30:10.

⁶⁸ *Melakhim II* 1:8.

⁶⁹ *Shemot* 19:19.

⁷⁰ *Yeshayahu* 27:13.

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will announce the coming of the *Mashi'ach*. His left⁷¹ horn were used as the *Shofar* to announce the giving of the Torah, another act of *Chesed* on God's part. And the right horn will be the *Shofar* which announces the end of days, the onset of Messianic times, the in-gathering of the exiles.

Thus, the brave act performed by Avraham and his beloved son, Yitzhak, on a lonely, wind-swept hill has ramifications and impact on practically every aspect of Jewish religious life and history. In fact, it continues to leave its mark on our life as we invoke the *Zekhut HaAkedah* through our prayers and Mitzvah observance. And the *Akedah* will continue to affect us, help us and sustain us until the very coming of the *Mashi'ach*, himself.

⁷¹ The left side according to the Kabbalah is the side of *Din*, judgment and law, which is the essence of Torah observance, i.e. the halacha.