

A Very Strange Commandment

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By Rabbi Yaakov Paley

They shake their heads and fume: How could Abraham have been so eager to obey G-d's command to kill his own son in cold blood? Taking a human life is an absolute no-no. So what if G-d commanded him—that's no excuse! We cannot allow religion to trump life. Murder is murder.

Mr. Abraham may deserve a Nobel Prize for extreme philanthropy and hospitality under the most trying circumstances. He may deserve applause for the brave rescue of innocents from the expansionistic aggression of a tyrannical empire. For his legendary honesty, charity, and his undying campaign against immorality and idolatry, Abraham is a commendable fellow, indeed. But none of this excuses his willingness to obey to G-d's instruction to kill his son!

So goes their argument. Are they missing something?

If our utmost goal is the prevention of human life, even at the expense of disobeying an explicit and personal command from our Creator, than who or what are we worshiping? The human being, of course! Our absolute obedience has been sworn to ourselves; our mind and emotions. If we ignore G-d's direct instruction because we decide that His command is unacceptable, then our own decisions rule.

Now, perhaps that doesn't sound too bad. But ideas are given to evolve and devolve. What happens when our reason dictates that in certain places it would be the height of compassion, to an individual or the rest of society, to end a human's life? Euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion, "assisted suicide." Should we look to G-d's instructions or should we obey our own inner-gods?

Let's say we chose the latter. Our own feelings are now deciding who should live and who should die, when taking a life is unforgivable murder and when it is just and compassionate.

What's wrong with that?

Well, what if we decide or are convinced that it is just and necessary to take the lives of every Gypsy, Jew, and dark-skinned person in our universe? Not too long ago, a few million rational, educated, cultured and scientific minds took only a few years to reach that conclusion.

Possibly a few million minds currently entertain the concept that our planet must be rid of infidels. Are they being unreasonable or barbaric? They don't think so. Their reasoning tells them they are acting in the interest of mankind.

In short, we cannot rely on our own rationale or emotions to guarantee the correct decisions in such matters. For that very reason, our Creator told the first humans, and reiterated it at Mount Sinai: "I made you, and My instructions are in your best interest. I know, 'cause I read the Manual for the Successful Inhabitation of Planet Earth. In fact, I wrote that manual!"

G-d gave mankind seven universal laws which guarantee our survival and success. They involve interaction between us and Him, each other, and our environment. The prohibitions against thievery, murder, and adultery, all introduce a respect for

human life and property. The prohibition of cruelty to animals implies care for all of G-d's creatures. Establishment of court systems and enforcement agencies, provide that these basic laws and their ramifications are encouraged and enforced, preventing the collapse of society.

To ensure that these laws are not modified by ever-rational and ever-compassionate, yet ever-changing, minds, we are told to believe in one

G-d Who commanded all seven laws, rendering them unchangeable. One G-d created everything, knows what is best for all He created, and has no rival to challenge His wisdom. The prohibition of blaspheming G-d instills a respect for Him and His seven basic laws.

Much as we love human life, we do not worship it. Our G-d-given gifts of intellect and emotion bow before their Creator. So, as Abraham weaned ancient peoples off thievery and thuggery, he explained that these actions were not only an offense to mankind; they were an offense to G-d.

Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son in obedience to the only G-d seemingly flew in the face of his entire life's efforts to eradicate human sacrifice, cruelty and idolatry. In truth, however, it actually highlighted the underlying and indispensable backbone of all of the seven laws and all of Abraham's teachings—the absolute obedience to G-d's command, regardless of its compatibility with human logic and feeling. Sure, it was a "strange" request (to say the least), but if G-d can be ignored in one area, He can be ignored in others areas too, and the world eventually reverts to chaos.

And what was the end of the story? "G-d said: Do not lay a hand on the lad; do not harm him at all! For now I know that you are a G-d fearing person" (Genesis). Not only was this a grand G-dly denouncing of sacrificing or harming the innocent, but it was an eternal demonstration of necessity of "irrational" obedience.

In return, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac—who apart from receiving an expanded package of commandments and deals, were also charged at Sinai to continue spreading this legacy to all of mankind—are able to recite the portion from Genesis that recounts the story of Isaac's binding in their daily morning prayers, and add: "Sovereign of the universe! Just as Abraham our father suppressed his compassion for his only son to do Your will with his whole heart, so may Your compassion suppress Your wrath against us; and may Your mercy prevail over Your attribute of stern justice."

We say to G-d: Maybe we're not matching up to Your expectations, but we're trying. Submitting to a higher authority doesn't always come easy to us thinking and feeling human beings, Y'know. So please occasionally ignore Your "logic" and "feelings" too, and help us nonetheless!