



Who Does God Desire?

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The Jews have every reason to believe Moshe will never come back.

We've seen this play before, the last time with a father and son: a three day journey into the wilderness for sacrifice (the story that Moshe tells Pharaoh) at some unknown place, which turns out to be a mountain. We know this story, but the last time we saw it told, the main characters were Avraham and Yitzhak:

בראשית כב:ב-ד	שמות ג:יח; יט:ג, טז
²וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר אֹהֲבָתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ לְךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִי: ³וַיִּשְׁכֹּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמורוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אֹתוֹ וְאֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּבְקַע עֲצֵי עֹלָה וַיָּקֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים: ⁴בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשֶׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק:	^{3:18}וַאֲמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו ה' אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִיִּים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ וְעַתָּה נֵלְכָה נָא דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְנִזְבְּחָהּ לָהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ... ^{19:3}וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הָהָר... ^{19:16}וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיט הַבֹּקֶר וַיְהִי קֹלֶת וּבָרָקִים וַעֲנַן כָּבֵד עַל הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק מְאֹד וַיִּתְּרֵד כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:
Bereishit 22:2-4 ²“Take your son, your favored one, Yitzhak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah,	Shemot 3:18; 19:3, 16 ^{3:18}“And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, God of the Hebrews, appeared to us. Now let us go a



and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” ³So early next morning, Avraham saddled his donkey and took with him two of his servants and his son Yitzhak. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. ⁴On the third day Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar.¹	distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God.” ... ^{19:3}And Moshe went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain. ... ^{19:16}On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.
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The long awaited son, the hope for the future of the people, ascends the mountain, leaving others behind with promises to return:

בראשית כב:ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ לָכֶם פֹּה עִם הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱר וְנִלְכָּה עַד כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם: Bereishit 22:5 Then Avraham said to his servants, “Wait here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”	שמות כד:יג-יד ¹³וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִשְׁרָתוֹ וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַר הָאֱלֹקִים: ¹⁴וְאֵל הַזִּקְנִים אָמַר שְׁבוּ לָנוּ בְּזֶה עַד אֲשֶׁר נָשׁוּב אֵלֵיכֶם וְהָיָה אַהֲרֹן וְחֹזֵר עִמָּכֶם מִי בְעַל דְּבָרִים יִגֹּשׁ אֵלֵהֶם: Shemot 24:13-14 ¹³Moshe got up, and Yehoshua his attendant; Moshe went up the Mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us until we return to you. You have Aharon and Hur with you; let anyone who has a legal matter approach them.”
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This time, though, rather than taking along fire and a devouring knife (*ma'akhelet*), the mountain is already topped by a devouring fire (an *eish okhelet*):

¹ Rashi on this verse makes the parallel even stronger: “[Avraham] saw a cloud attached to the mountain.”

בראשית כב:ו וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵצֵי הָעֵלֶה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת הַמֵּאֲכָלִת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו: Bereishit 22:6 Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Yitzhak. He himself took the firestone and the devouring knife; and the two walked off together.	שמות יט:יח, כד:יז ^{19:18}וְהָר סִינַי עָשָׁן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׁנוֹ כְּעָשָׁן הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיִּתְרַד כָּל הָהָר מְאֹד: ... ^{24:17}וַמֵּרָאָה כְּבוֹד ה' כָּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: Shemot 19:18, 24:17 ^{19:18}Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ... ^{24:17}Now the Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of Benei Yisrael as a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.
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And so when Moshe doesn't return, the Jewish people think they understand. They were extras in this story, just like the servants and the donkey that accompanied Yitzhak and Avraham to Har ha-Moriah so many years before. It was Moshe that God wanted all along. This time, they think, God didn't change His mind at the last moment. This time, God took His human sacrifice—His *olah*, both the word used for the intended sacrifice in the story of the Akeidah and an echo of the language Moshe uses to describe his ascent up the mountain. And they, servants and donkeys, are left alone, without a leader and without the God Who, they believe, only ever cared about Moshe.

It's a devastating read of reality, not only because they believe Moshe will never return to them, but because it means that they believe, in their hearts of hearts, that it was never them, never the people as a whole, that God wanted at all. Everything—God's promises to Avraham, the descent to and destruction of Egypt, the plagues and the miracles—leading not to the birth of a people, but to the choice of one man. In this moment, the Jewish people betray their own deep-seated sense of worthlessness: what can they, born and raised as slaves,

possibly have to offer God compared to a prophet raised as an Egyptian prince?

While we might think ourselves immune to Benei Yisrael's mistake, the truth is that it is all too easy to fall into their way of thinking. It is easy to think of ourselves as extraneous, as extras in the drama of religious life. Sometimes, the quiet voice of doubt that tells us that we cannot possibly matter to God or Judaism begins to shout and, try as we might, we cannot silence it.

This is why, immediately after Moshe ascends the mountain, God reminds us just how much God needs each of us:

שמות כד:יח-כה:ב

^{24:18} וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֶנָן וַיַּעַל אֶל הָהָר וַיְהִי מֹשֶׁה בְּהָר אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה:
^{25:1} וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר: ²דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל אִישׁ אִשׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת
 תְּרוּמָתִי:

Shemot 24:18-25:2

^{24:18} Moshe entered into the cloud and ascended the mountain. Moshe was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

^{25:1} God spoke to Moshe saying: ²Speak to Benei Yisrael and take for Me gifts; from each person, as their heart compels them, you shall receive My gifts.

In describing the donations that are to be given for the *mishkan*, God's dwelling place on earth, God emphasizes that gifts are to be given from each person who chooses to give, as their heart moves them. God here expresses a need that can only be fulfilled by each individual acting in accordance with their particular sensibilities. God needs the gift of each particular heart: not just of the greatest and most righteous, and certainly not just of Moshe's. In order for God to dwell among us, each of us must recognize that we are worthy, chosen, and needed.



This is what the Torah is saying when it conveys command to take the *terumah* (gift) to build the *mishkan* immediately after narrating Moshe's departure: understand that when Moshe ascends the mountain, it is not because God wants him as an *olah*, a sacrifice, literally, an elevated one. It is because God wants to descend to you—to all of you.

Understand that there are no extras in this story that you and God are writing together.

Understand that in this love story, you are a partner—and that you will never, ever be left behind.

