

Three stories in this parasha function as a lead-up to the Akedah. In two of them we learn that God knows what Sarah and Abraham think; in one we learn that Abraham knows what God thinks. These stories are rich with **dramatic irony**.¹ That's what makes them great. **We in the audience know what everyone is thinking**. But in the Akedah, we do not. In the Akedah there is no dramatic irony. Therein lies its power. It haunts us still. Here are three stories that lead up to it.

1. Sarah Laughed to Herself and God Heard.

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי הֵיטָה לִּי עֲדָנָה וְאֵלֹהֵי זָקֵן.
 וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָהָם: לָמָּה זֶה צִחַקְתָּ שָׂרָה... (בר' יח: יב-יג)

Sarah laughed within herself, saying: After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me? And my lord is old! But God said to Avraham: Now why does Sara laugh... (Gen. 18:12-13)

Sarah has been eavesdropping on the conversation that Abraham was having with the three visitors. When she overhears them tell Abraham that she will have a son she laughs to herself. She then speaks to herself.² **God overhears what she says to herself the same way she overhears what the visitors say to Abraham. And we in the audience see and hear everything**. God reveals a modified version of Sarah's innermost thoughts to Abraham³ causing a minor spat between them.⁴

2. God Speaks to Himself and Abraham Heard.

וְה' אָמַר הַמִּכְסָּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה. וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיָּה
 לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעַצְמוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ. כִּי יִדְעִתִּי לַמֶּעַן אֲשֶׁר
 יִצְנֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אֲחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָדָה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה
 וּמִשְׁפָּט לַמֶּעַן הִבִּיא ה' עַל אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלָיו. (בר' יח: יז-יט)

Now God said: Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right, in order that God may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (Gen. 18:17-18)

We don't know to whom God is speaking here. Could he be speaking to himself? Absolutely.⁵ **We hear what God is thinking**. But does Abraham hear it? Will God reveal his plan for Sodom and Gomorra directly to Abraham? Let's continue reading:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' - זַעֲקֵת סֹדִם וְעִמְרָה כִּי רָבָה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כְבֹּדָה מְאֹד.
 אֲרֹדָה נָא וְאַרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עָשׂוּ כָלָה וְאִם לֹא אֲדַעָה.
 וַיָּסֹפּוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיָּלְכוּ סְדָמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדְנָו עִמָּד לִפְנֵי ה'. וַיִּגַּשׁ
 אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵפָה תִסָּפֶה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע. (בר' יח: כ-כג)

Then the LORD said, “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached me; if not, I will take note.” The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before God. Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? (Gen. 18:20-23)

In my reading of this passage, Abraham is escorting two of the three guests to their point of departure as they set their destination for Sodom. While he is escorting them, Abraham indeed overhears God saying to himself, **Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?** Because of that, he understands that he is in God's presence. God is as palpable and real to him in that moment as the air he is breathing. Thus, when the text then reports to us that God says - **the outcry in Sodom - how great it is!** - without telling us explicitly who God is speaking to, it is logical to read it again as God speaking to himself and Abraham overhearing. Many commentators assume that God is speaking directly to Abraham or speaking to Abraham through the visitor.⁶ But the text is opaque here. **Having just read of an instance of God hearing human thoughts, could we not read this as an inversion: a human being hearing God's thoughts? Just as God overheard Sarah's inner thoughts, Abraham is overhearing God's inner thoughts!** To support this reading, I would cite the story of Abraham's sojourn in Gerar in just two chapters where God explicitly describes Abraham as a **נְבִיא**-*prophet*,⁷ the first time we see

¹ Dramatic irony is the storytelling technique in which the audience knows something that the characters do not.

² Not out loud. This is supported by commentators Ibn Ezra, Hizkuni, Radak, Reggio, and Steinsaltz (among others).

³ Sarah said, **And my lord (Abraham) is old!** and God made it seem that Sarah said, **now that I (Sarah) am old**.

⁴ **Sara pretended [otherwise], saying: No, I did not laugh. For she was afraid. But he said: No, indeed you laughed** (Gen. 18:15).

⁵ But note the irony here. Up until now, God has indeed concealed many things from Abraham. For example, when God first called Abraham to **Go forth** (Gen. 12:1), he did not disclose the destination. When God revealed to Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved **in a land not theirs** (Gen. 15:13) he does not disclose what land that will be.

From the beginning of the story until now, almost 25 years, God has promised Abraham many descendants, but only now does God tell Abraham definitively that he will have a son in a year.

⁶ Rashi, Ramban, Haamek Davar, Radak, all assume that God is speaking to Abraham directly. Others like Reggio, Shadal, and Rashbam, think that this was said to Abraham by the third messenger, the one that did not go on to Sodom, in the name of God.

⁷ The context is significant. When Abraham goes to sojourn in Gerar he and Sarah present themselves (a second time) as brother and sister. Avimelekh, king of Gerar, takes Sarah into his house and although he refrains from approaching her sexually, God still appears to Avimelekh in a dream and warns him that he will die on the account of this woman.

this term in the Bible. While we tend to understand a prophet as someone to whom God speaks, here we understand a prophet, Abraham, as someone who can hear what God thinks! *A prophet is someone who is so attuned to God that he is able to apprehend God's thoughts, not only God's words.* To use the radio metaphor, the prophet has such a highly developed spiritual 'receiver' that he can



detect God's thoughts rather than only God's words. As people of faith, we believe that God knows our thoughts.⁸

But only prophets can know God's thoughts. *We know what both Abraham and God are thinking.*

3. Abraham is Distressed and God Speaks to Him

וַיֵּרֶע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֲדֹת בְּנוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם אַל יֵרֶע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל אֲמָתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֱלֹהִי שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיחָזֵק יִקְרָא לָהּ זֶרַע. וְגַם אֵת בֶּן הָאֲמָתָה לְגֹוי אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ כִּי זֶרַעָהּ הוּא. (בר' כא: י"א-יג)

The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed." (Gen. 21:11-13)

After witnessing Ishmael engaging in behavior which Sarah deems transgressive, Sarah orders Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the household. Abraham is distressed to the point that he was morally opposed to this.⁹ For good reason. He didn't think Sarah's enmity for Hagar and Ishmael's behavior were grounds for expelling her from the family. Moreover, by doing this he would compromise one of his most important values, his intense loyalty to kin. But Abraham never communicates this to God in a formal objection. God however, sees his distress and understands what he is thinking. *And so do we.* God acknowledges Abraham's moral discomfort but overrules his non-articulated objection instructing him to acquiesce to Sarah. As painful as this is for Abraham, this is the way it must be. Nevertheless, as compensation, God promises Abraham that Ismael will become a nation himself. In effect, while

Whereupon Avimelekh proclaims his innocence. God knows he has done nothing wrong but instructs him nevertheless, to return her to her husband because, **he (Abraham) is a prophet** *כִּי נָבִיא הוּא* (Gen. 20:7).

⁸ This is a common idea in Psalms and elsewhere.

Examples: **God knows the thoughts of humankind, that they are nothing** (Psalm 94:11). **O God, You have examined me and know me.** (Psalm 139:1). **For God searches all minds and discerns the design of every thought;** (1 Chron. 28:9). This is even more developed in rabbinic literature and Jewish liturgy. Take the Mahzor's introduction to the **Viduy**, the confession of sins: **You know**

Ishmael loses his father, he gains fatherhood for himself. God knows what Abraham is thinking. *And so do we.*

4. The Akedah: When God Speaks Abraham is Silent.

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךָ אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר אַהֲבָתָ אֵת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ לָךְ אֶל אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִי. וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֹקֶר ... (בר' כב:ב-ג)

And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." Abraham woke up early in the morning... (Gen. 22:2-3)

Once we get to the Akedah, we have been primed by the three earlier stories to know what all the characters are thinking. But after the first line of the Akedah, when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, we don't know what anyone is thinking. What was God thinking when he was told Abraham to sacrifice his son? *We don't know.* We don't know what went through Abraham's mind in the moments afterwards. I suggest placing a pause between the instruction and the response to highlight the fact that *we don't know what Abraham was thinking in that instant.* (I represent that pause here with a musical notation, , known as a *fermata*.) As the story unfolds, *God knows what God is thinking. But we do not. God knows what Abraham is thinking. But we do not. Abraham knows what Abraham is thinking. But we do not.* And that, in my opinion, is part of the experience of reading the Akedah after reading all of these other stories. Knowingly or unknowingly, the other stories prepared us emotionally to have an intense reaction to the Akedah. Having been privy to all the inside information of the previous stories, we feel honored and esteemed as an audience. The narrator has flattered us. We feel important because we know what all the characters were thinking. But when we get to the Akedah we are in the dark. We don't know what anyone is thinking. The Akedah is devoid of dramatic irony. Therein lies part of its literary power. It makes us think. It leaves us wondering. And, more importantly, it restores us to our humility. **Shabbat Shalom!**



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the mysteries of the universe, and the hidden secrets of every individual. You search all our innermost thoughts and probe our mind and heart. There is nothing hidden from You, and there is nothing concealed from Your sight.

⁹ The precise language of his opposition, *וַיֵּרֶע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם*, is the language of moral opprobrium. Onan elicits God's moral opprobrium for being unwilling to maintain his brother's name, *וַיֵּרֶע בְּעֵינֵי ה'* (Gen. 38:10). Joseph is morally opposed to Jacob elevating Ephraim above Manasseh, *וַיֵּרֶע בְּעֵינֵי*, (Gen. 48:17).