

Study Guide for “The People Versus Abraham Aveinu”

Background

The Akedah remains one of the most puzzling stories in Genesis after centuries of discussion by historians, commentators, poets, and lyricists. What was Abraham thinking? What was Isaac thinking? How old was Isaac? What did Sarah know and when did she know it? Why did G-d test Abraham in this way? Did Abraham actually sacrifice Isaac? If not, why didn't they come down from Mt. Moriah together? Where did Isaac go? And the questions go on and on, through eternity.

This play does not attempt to deal with any of those puzzling questions. In fact, the main characters (with the exception of the True Judge), are not even here. Rather, the construction of this courtroom drama around the Akedah's placement in the Rosh Hashannah liturgy attempts to determine whether Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, was a good role model for parents. Hannah shelSheva, the advocate for Jewish Parents Against Child Sacrifice on behalf of the Jewish people throughout history, argues that he is a terrible role model, and for this reason, the Akedah should be purged from Rosh Hashannah liturgy and reassigned to Tishab'Av.

Some of the characters paraphrase or speak straight from their own text (Philo, Maimonides), while Hannah and Rabbi Chanina speak from the author's imagined rendering of what they might say or expound if probed. They certainly are not the only characters who could appear to argue this case in the Heavenly Court! If you or your students think of others, include them in the conversation, by all means.

Suggested Activities for Study Session

There are a variety of ways to use this activity in a study session, depending on what themes you want to underline. Here are some suggestions.

- 1) Assign parts in advance, so that the actors can better get to know the historical people represented.
- 2) Stop the play at some of these junctures to allow others in the group to insert their own questions for cross examination:
 - a. Stop after Hannah finishes questioning Maimonides
 - b. Stop after Maimonides gives his soliloquy about the excellence of her actions
 - c. Stop after Rabbi Chanina's story
- 3) At intermission, have participants try to guess what the verdict might be.
- 4) Have participants insert their own favorite commentators, writers or historians as witnesses for or against Abraham.

Additional Study Questions

- 1) Abraham as a Role Model for Parents

- a. What kind of parental role model do you think Abraham sets in this story?
- b. If his act is one of faith and he sets a positive role model, what kind of role model does he set as a husband?
- c. If his act is one of child sacrifice and a negative role model, what makes him a great Patriarch, worthy of becoming the “Father of Nations?”
- d. What stories do you know from Jewish history about parents sacrificing children? Why would parents like Hannah follow Abraham’s model by sacrificing children?
- e. The Torah admonishes parents only to “teach your children.” What do you think Abraham taught Isaac by his actions at the Akedah?

2) Did Abraham Pass the Test?

- a. The text says that G-d put Abraham to a test. What was it?
- b. Maimonides says that G-d puts us all through tests not for G-d’s sake, but for our own. What do you think G-d wanted Abraham to realize? Did he realize it?
- c. Was the test more for Abraham or Isaac?

3) Imagining the Akedah

- a. The author here draws on the imaginings of the sages to imagine that Abraham’s tears had the power to physically change the elements. What do you imagine about that moment?