

11/02/2017

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Abraham, Kierkegaard, and the "Knight of Faith"

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Ethan Lipson ('16) recently graduated from Veritas Preparatory Academy in Phoenix Arizona. He is a freshman at Tufts University enjoying the freedom of a Liberal Arts college (aka he has no idea what he wants to study). He loves poetry, sentimental movies and albums, and hiking.

For those of you who know me, this will be no different from any private philosophical conversation that we have had. It will start esoteric, confusing, and a little bit lost. Then, shift to sentimental and conclude with an A. A. Milne reference.

Once a year at reform Hebrew school, my teachers would tell me the story of Abraham and Isaac. I did not interact in depth with Vayera, however, until I researched and wrote my high school senior thesis. Biting off much more than I could chew, I tried to make sense of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* by juxtaposing Kierkegaard's asceticism to Maimonides and Aristotle's rationalist understanding of ethics.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses Abraham as an example of his "Knight of Faith:" the purest form of the aesthetic man. The "Knight of Faith" is not an ethical man. This is not to say that the "Knight of Faith" is anti-ethical. Rather, he must have a perfect and complete understanding of ethics in order to understand the

gravity of suspending them. He suspends ethics so as to be completely ruled by passions. In this way, he is not constrained to the universal idea of what it means to live, and purely unique.

Abraham is the “Knight of Faith” because when God commands him to sacrifice Isaac, he takes the leap. Abraham knows exactly how ethically wrong it is to kill his son, yet he realizes the importance of the action in order to establish Faith. The “Act of Faith,” as Kierkegaard names it, is a teleological suspense of the ethical and results in an abrogation of universality. Faith is the tool that man can use to surpass the common idea of man’s potential. This leap into the “knighthood” completely isolates the Knight of Faith because no one else can possibly understand the mentality required: estrangement from moral comfort. Yet the “Knight of Faith” takes this leap because he has a greater purpose. Kierkegaard states the “Knight of Faith’s” purpose quite beautifully, “to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely.”

Consumed by making sense of Kierkegaard’s cryptic writing, my senior year became an ascetically-directed story filled with lens-flare scenes, and backed by digitally-created ambiance tracks. Every experience that I encountered needed to be read from the perspective of an existentialist and ascetic. I didn’t wake from this mindset until four days before my thesis was due.

My grandfather passed away.

It was my first time seeing death. I was no longer reading about death like some sort of theoretical. In a swift strike, the gravity of Vayera’s narrative hit me. In the same way that a childhood bully’s face will forever be the face of every fictional bully, I could no longer read through Abraham’s story without feeling every heart-breaking emotion that I tasted in those days immediately following my grandfather’s death. I became irate at the Torah for creating the concept that we should glorify the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son. But the Torah didn’t create that idea, did it? Did the rabbis? Did Kierkegaard? Rather than try to find someone to blame, I decided to find a new perspective.

11/02/2017

My Ancient Greek teacher offered the idea that God is distinguishing Himself as kind and merciful by supplying a ram while Pagan Gods routinely asked the sacrifices of children. A peer of mine also took on Kierkegaard for her thesis, yet she focused not on the ethics v. aesthetics, as I did, but on the implication of actions in regard to the circumstance surrounding the action. This caught my attention.

Abraham's ability to become the Knight of Faith is rooted in the fact that the sacrifice of Isaac is such a grand request. It is grand because of Abraham's relationship to Isaac. The Binding of Isaac means nothing if Abraham was an absentee father and husband. We see the emphasis on relationship in the rhetorical use of repetition in the verse: "[Offer] Your son, your only one, who you love, Isaac." (Gen 22:2). It hit me. Maybe a moral of the story isn't "be willing to kill someone meaningful to you." It is, rather, telling us to create such quality relationships that only an order from God, an order worthy of creating the concept of faith, could make you separate from that person.

Coming to terms with the loss of my grandfather has been the most difficult chapter in my life so far. But I can't help but feel some consolation that I did something right, otherwise I wouldn't miss him so much. We should build loving families. We should make true friendships. We should fall vulnerably in love. For how will we ever have something to guard as precious as Abraham if we live with our hearts guarded from others?

A. A. Milne put it best. In the words of that little bear, "How lucky I am, to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

Continue the conversation. Send Ethan your thoughts:

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11/02/2017



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