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*Bible study 2*

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**The absurdity of choice in the system and God above and  
beyond the system in the story of Abraham's test**  
(Gen 22:1-14)

In the following biblical account we will study a text on the sacrifice of Isaac in the light of "Médecine de la Personne" (MdP). We will also examine the meaning of our main theme "patient without capacity" using our biblical text. How will we do this?

First of all, we will look at the accounts of the different personalities in the text. Secondly, we will go through the story verse by verse, interpreting it in the optic of "Médecine de la Personne". Finally, we will see how, given the circumstances, when the patient is without capacity and the system does not allow choice, the doctor will not have everything under their control and they should do the best they can. There may yet be different lambs to sacrifice, and God may yet see other possibilities. (God is above the system.)

## **Narrative Perspective**

Abraham represents the character of parents, father, family, nurse, psychiatrist or doctor. He is the key person in the whole action. He makes the decisive decisions, acts and conducts the dialogue. Isaac represents the role of the patient without capacity. Isaac is under Abraham's control and dependent on God's decision to set a cruel test for Abraham. Before the decisive scene of the whole dramatic story (verses 11-12), Isaac asks Abraham questions, but he does not receive a truthful answer to any of his questions. Isaac is more or less passive and somehow he is bound even before being physically tied up with a rope. The servants of Abraham are obedient to him. They are subordinated to Abraham, like most of the hospital staff. God has two roles here: the old oriental despotic God and God as a person of covenant and justice (TÓRA). In the text, God represents circumstances, random events, disorder, rigid order, despotic tyranny and on the other hand intervention, paradox, hope, grace and liberation - the person. The narrator stands for continuity and meaning at the time. This combination of characters creates a unique narrative called the Story of Isaac's Sacrifice.

## **The story step by step**

**Verse 1:** After all the previous encounters between God and Abraham, God wants to do a test. In other words, Abraham has already made a covenant with God and also his story has already been partly written by God who called him out from Ur - a world which had different "warring" gods. Despite this fact, God basically sets a test for Abraham. Sometimes word (n-s-hj) is translated as temptation. In this interpretation we will interpret it as test. Why did God do it? My

interpretation is: God wants to demonstrate and make clear to Abraham once and for all that he does not require man to be sacrificed, but after he has made his covenant, Abraham is his partner who is able to conduct a dialogue with God, as one can see in the history of Sodom and Gomorrah where God and Abraham "bargain with each other". It is almost a dialogue between equals.

We can interpret this first verse in the context of MdIP as a time when something enters our lives - chance event, sickness or chaos. It is at such times that we must face the test of our personality and values. Life asks questions of us. Despite the reality of the chance event, Abraham answers with his 'I am here' (hine nij). Abraham as a helper (doctor), is ready to be successful in any future test. Abraham must trust in order, in tradition, in his experience with God and in his own abilities (similar to a doctor).

**V. 2:** A great deal of emphasis is placed in this verse on who is to be sacrificed - your only son Isaac, whom you love; and the method of sacrifice - burnt offering.

In the context of MdIP, we can take this to mean that, whenever there is a patient without capacity, any chance event or illness is very personal. Families or doctors can lose someone who is loved. The patient's first and last name is very significant. Name always carries the meaning of person and family.

**V. 3:** Abraham goes down the path needed to get the task done. Doctors and family must go all the way and follow the process of healing, preparation (for surgery), maintenance of health or palliative care, etc.

**V. 4:** On the "magical" third day, when the time has come (KAIROS), Abraham takes full responsibility for what he is doing. A doctor is fully responsible for the patient and gives of his best. Patient and doctor (family) enter the special time and circumstances - a place where it is very personal. Especially when the patient has the misfortune to lack capacity.

**V.5:** Abraham explains his action as worship and confesses that they will come back. Does Abraham have faith or is he lying? Our text is not clear. I prefer the interpretation that Abraham has some hope. Like the doctor who, despite the circumstances, has the possibility of healing, maintaining health or helping their patient to die well.

**V. 6:** Why does Abraham put wood on Isaac? In our context (MdIP) there can also be a plausible explanation. Abraham plays the role of manipulator (doctor, parent) and Isaac the role of victim. In other words, between Abraham and Isaac there is a certain kind of dehumanization similar to God's command in the first part of the story which seems to be representing despotism and rigidity.

**V. 7-8:** Dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. Is Abraham lying or is it his faith? Is Isaac mystified by Abraham? Within the framework of the MdIP, father and son are alone. Father (parent, doctor) must face reality in order to make sacrifices. The character does his best, keeps up his hope. On the other hand, Abraham is not honest with his son. If there is long suffering without capacity, should we act in silence, be active in silence, or break the silence? Is not the obedience of doctors sometimes too rigid, following the examples of gods who are despotic and require human sacrifice?

**V. 9-10:** Abraham prepared everything for the burnt offering in order. He works a little like a machine. It is a picture of our routine focus on fragments of essential information about the small technocratic details which makes the entire medical system begin to look like a vending machine or a factory.

**V.11:** At the last moment Abraham is again called into God's presence. Abraham is called by name. And Abraham answers. It means that he remains answerable to God and in God's presence (hine nij). In this presence and mutual encounter comes God's intervention. Abraham passes the test and there is no need to bring a human sacrifice. There is another way. There are new possibilities, because God is the God of possibility - another solution, another future.

**V.13-14:** In the experience of suffering, where there are moments of joy or capacity for those who endure patiently, there can come also "space and time" (KAIROS), which can change the meaningless situation to the place where "God sees".

## Conclusions

In our life and practice we can encounter a situation that can be defined as having the good fortune of leaving us the capacity to decide. It is a time where we are called to face a particularly significant situation. Something must be done where there can be no good outcome and it is very risky. So the patients have the good fortune to have the capacity to choose, and their doctors (families) as well. So everyone around the patient is fortunate to have the capacity to choose. In the biblical story, Abraham has good fortune with capacity, but so do all the other characters in the story even "God". Circumstances or chance events appear very cruelly as ancient oriental gods who needed human burnt offerings. But as doctors (nurses, etc.) we must somehow first face the destiny, the continuity or the irony of the patient who lacks capacity. We see ourselves opposing the nonsense, the pain and the 'emotional ocean'.

Despite this fact, it is important to go with the patient to where we need to go, and first to follow orders as did Abraham. It means the classical healing or palliative procedure, a journey similar to that of Abraham. On the other hand, it is also very important to bear in mind the possibility of paradox and definite hope. Abraham is very obedient in this story in contrast to the story about Sodom and Gomora. I see in this story Abraham's happiness at being freed from the old customs that he still carries with him from his birthplace - Ur. What I mean is that Abraham still has a very strong image in his life of an oriental despotic God. This final test must show him and all other generations that God is different and opposed to human sacrifice - he is the God of life and covenant.

Our story also tells us how some circumstances can be powerful, especially concerning patients without capacity who push us to our limits, and make us think about our rigid system or our method of healing. I believe that in these "borderline situations" we must always learn to leave the rigid path and hear the God who can see differently. Without the initial distinctive situation the other steps leading to liberation cannot be taken. So I would say this is the test we have to take if we want to understand or accept "more" of God's paradox or grace. Our guideline system serves us as a good guide in the beginning, but eventually the guidelines have to be cleared away and 'we can use the guides to go on to the second floor where God is different and man is too'. It sometimes means accepting an absurd situation, staying in paradox, having hope and accepting the reality of the whole system and then the moment of the new revelation can come - God breaks through the rigid system with new possibilities. Then we can confess: "God sees".