

TORAH READING, SECOND DAY

The Akedah/Binding of Isaac and Its Interpreters

For the most part, rabbinic literature praises Abraham for his faithful obedience to God's command, though some rabbinic texts indicate ambivalence regarding Abraham's unqualified acquiescence. This was also the perspective of the 19th-century Christian theologian Søren Kierkegaard, who understood Abraham's action as a "teleological suspension of the ethical," a demonstration of such unwavering faith that it superseded a father's love for his son as well as the prohibition of murder. But many post-Holocaust Jewish writers are increasingly reticent even to appear to validate violence in the name of religious faith, and instead suggest that Abraham failed the test and should have raised a protest against God's instruction, just as he raised a protest against the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18).

GENESIS 22

First Aliyah ¹ Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him, "Abraham." He answered, "Here I am."

² "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."

³ So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.

And the Two Walked Together

Later Jewish tradition saw the binding of Isaac as a symbolic precedent for all Jewish martyrdom. In accord with this thinking, Isaac is portrayed as a willing participant in his own sacrifice; in one version of the story, Isaac is understood to have died on the altar and been restored to life by the angel. Later Jewish martyrs could not believe that their own sacrifice was greater than that of the forebears of the people.

"Do Not Raise Your Hand Against the Boy"

Abraham Joshua Heschel describes how he studied the Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac, with his heder rebbe (teacher) in Poland.

Here is the experience of a child of seven who was reading in school the chapter which tells of the sacrifice of Isaac on the way to Mt. Moriah with his father. "He lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: 'Abraham, lay not your hand upon the lad, for now I know that you fear God.' And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. 'Why are you crying?' asked the rabbi. 'You know that Isaac was not killed.' And I said to him, still weeping, 'But, Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?' The rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late."

An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be.

Second Aliyah 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. 7 Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" 8 And Abraham said, "It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

Third Aliyah 9 They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. 11 Then a messenger of ADONAI called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am."

12 "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

Where Is Sarah?

Where is Sarah? The Rabbis answer: after Abraham and Isaac leave, Sarah goes to Hebron, looking for them.

Satan—the tempter, the Adversary, the Alter Ego—appears to her and reveals that Abraham intends to sacrifice her son; hearing this, her heart breaks from sorrow and she dies, as it is written: “Sarah died in Kiryat Arba—now Hebron” (23:2). But others teach that Satan reveals to her that Abraham has spared her son from his knife; and her heart bursts with joy. Such is the anatomy of a mother’s heart.

—ELLEN FRANKEL

Heritage

The ram came last of all. And Abraham did not know that it came to answer the boy’s question—first of his strength when his day was on the wane.

The old man raised his head. Seeing that it was no dream and that the angel stood there—the knife slipped from his hand.

The boy, released from his bonds, saw his father’s back.

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed. He lived for many years, saw what life’s pleasures had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring. They are born with a knife in their hearts.

—HAYIM GOURI

¹³ When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. ¹⁴ And Abraham named that site *Adonai-yireh*, whence the present saying, “On the mount of ADONAI, there is vision.”

Fourth Aliyah ¹⁵ The messenger of ADONAI called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, “By Myself I swear,” ADONAI declares: “Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, ¹⁷ I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. ¹⁸ All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.” ¹⁹ Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

Fifth Aliyah ²⁰ Some time later, Abraham was told, “Milcah too has borne sons to your brother Nahor: ²¹ Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; ²² and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel”— ²³ Bethuel being the father of Rebecca. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. ²⁴ And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore [sons]—Tebah, Gaham, and Tahash—and [a daughter,] Maacah.

The Real Existential Threat

Iran's bomb, Israel's soul, and the future of the Jews
by **Daniel Gordis**

The dramatic change in Jewish self-perception that Israel has wrought can perhaps be best appreciated by recalling two photographs—each, in its own time, the iconic representation of what it meant to be a Jew. The first, taken in the Warsaw Ghetto, depicts a terrified young boy, his arms raised helplessly in the air, as a Nazi points a submachine gun in his direction. This little boy, a victim in every way, is dressed in his finest but seems likely to die. He is alone; no adults have come to his aid, and even if they chose to, of course, there would be nothing they could do in the face of the armed Nazis standing just feet away. To be a Jew is to be a victim.

Flash-forward to June 1967, when the Israeli photographer David Rubinger photographed three paratroopers at the Western Wall shortly after they had captured it from Jordan during the Six-Day War. It was the virtual undoing of the condition reflected in the Warsaw Ghetto photograph. The boy in the photograph is alone; these three men are surrounded by comrades. The boy is pure victim; the Israeli soldiers are victors. The gun in the former photograph belongs to the Nazi; there are no weapons in the 1967 picture, but had there been, they would have belonged to the Jews. The boy in the Warsaw Ghetto seems certain to die; the victory these soldiers had just wrought would breathe new life into the Jewish state, inspiring Soviet Jews (who almost immediately demanded permission to emigrate) and American Jews (who took a sudden great pride in the Jewish state and expressed it more openly and unabashedly than at any time before) to new heights of Zionism.

Interestingly, the paratroopers in this photograph have their heads uncovered, and they face away from the Wall, not toward it, as would be the case were they praying. There is one combat helmet, and though it is visible, it has been doffed. Rubinger's is neither a religious nor a military image. It is, instead, the image of the "new Jew" that Israel had created, the Jew who could shape his or her own destiny rather than waiting for it to be shaped by others.

This notion of Jews as the masters of their own destiny, as defenders of their own lives, is the deepest core of the Jewish state. In the space of eight days each spring, Israel commemorates Holocaust Memorial Day, then Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers, then Independence Day. It is a period of profound national consciousness, punctuated with public rituals neither political nor religious. Each and every year, the speech delivered by the head of state, Israel's president, on Holocaust Memorial Day boils down to one simple claim: had Israel existed then, this would not have happened.

On the evening of Holocaust Memorial Day and then, a week later, on both the morning and evening of Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers, the nation freezes in place as a siren is sounded—cars come to a halt on highways, their drivers stand at attention just outside their vehicles, and people on sidewalks become immobile. All that can be heard is the harrowing groan of the air-raid siren as the nation mourns its thousands upon thousands of sons and daughters, soldiers who died in defense of the country. Coming as it does a week after Holocaust Memorial Day, the calendrical point requires no emphasis. Better we should die on battlefields, armed and defending our homeland, than be shepherded into camps in someone else's country, utterly defenseless. For better and for worse—better because it's true, and worse because the society established on this basis is of necessity extraordinarily complex and fraught—*that* is the point of the Jewish state.

Periodically, as my 21-year-old son heads back to the army at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning after a weekend at home, I'll kid with him as he's walking out the door with all his gear, mimicking conversations we might have had when he was a teenager. I'll ask, in a falsely harsh tone, "Just where do you think you're going at this time of the day?" To which he'll smile and say, "To defend the homeland."

It has become ritualized family banter, but only because the first time my son responded that way, he did so without thinking, without humor, and without irony. It was, in point of fact, exactly where he was headed. He was going to defend the homeland. The thousands upon thousands of young Israelis who serve their country this way, some of whom volunteer for roles more daunting than could possibly be described, do what they do, day after day and

year after year, because they *believe themselves* capable of defending the homeland. On land, in the air, and at sea, they have proved decade after decade, war after war, that periodic failings notwithstanding, they can keep the country safe. They leave their homes behind, and risk life and limb to ensure the safety of their parents, their grandparents, their siblings, and often their children.