# Twisted tales

## Shammai Engelmayer

We are to believe, according to the Documentary Hypothesis and based on what we saw in the “two Noah Flood tales,” that the Redactor is a genius of the highest type, able to cut up two complete stories, then knit together them in such a way as to make a whole new version of the story, with either losing any words, or adding any.

Yet we are also supposed to believe that he makes spectacular blunders time and again, including the very next time he tries to combine two texts into one. It involves Genesis 18, where we find one of the strangest episodes in the life of Abraham—the visitation by the three individuals who suddenly appeared before him as he sat in his tent under the oak trees of Mamre. Supposedly, the tale was created by weaving together two different stories, although not very artfully, if you accept the premise of two texts existing here. R (the Redactor) must have been having a bad day, it seems.

Much debate has been heard over this incident. Who were these visitors? In Genesis 18, they are referred to as *anashim*, men. In the next chapter, however, they are called *malachim,* which could mean “angels,” or “messengers.” The preferred identification of the three, because of subsequent events in Sodom, is that they were “angels” of the Lord[[1]](#footnote-1). Whatever they were, the text does have them speaking in God’s Name.

Another point of debate is how many individuals there were. The text says three in Genesis 18, but only two leave Abraham and head for Sodom, while Abraham stands talking to God Himself.[[2]](#footnote-2) Was the third individual really God, or did the third visitor quietly depart after finishing his divine mission, which was to inform Abraham and Sarah that they were to give birth to a child in their old age?

If the latter, when did God arrive, for the text makes clear He was surely on the scene[[3]](#footnote-3)? Did He reveal His presence to Abraham before the three arrived (this can be supported by the text), or while they were dining on the food prepared by Abraham? And why did He make a personal appearance, considering He had already sent the three “men” there to do His bidding (and also considering that He had already informed Abraham about Sarah’s impending pregnancy at the end of Genesis 17, making this visit unnecessary)?

The biblical critics were not the first to notice these problems. Indeed, judging from the rabbinic literature alone, it is safe to say the anomalies and ambiguities found in Genesis 18 have been the subjects of speculation and debate for almost as long as people have been studying the text. It is, perhaps, constructive to compare how the Rabbis dealt with textual problems to the way the biblical critics handle them. To the rabbinic commentators, after all, the text was sacred and could not be in error. If anomalies and ambiguities existed, they were placed within the text deliberately to teach its readers something. The challenge is to divine their purpose.

The rabbinic commentators were bothered, first, with the “arrival” of God at Abraham’s tent, which seems to be heralded in 18.1. Most of the talmudic sages, but certainly not all, consider this “appearance” by God to be merely a metaphor, the purpose of which is to point the way to a righteous deed not otherwise specified in Torah law, namely the commandment to visit the sick. Thus, citing Genesis 18.1 as his prooftext, “Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina also said…: ‘[As] the Holy One, blessed be He, visited the ill…, so must you also visit the ill.’” (See BT Sotah 14a.)

That Abraham was ill at that point is derived from the events at the end of Genesis 17, where Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself—a very difficult surgery for any adult, and certainly for someone who is 99 years old at the time. That Abraham was ill, therefore, means he was recovering from that surgery when Genesis 18 opens. By connecting the opening verse of Chapter 18 to the end of Chapter 17, the Rabbis deduced the obligation to visit those who are ill. If God can do it, so can we. How fortunate it was for humankind that the Rabbis were unaware of the fact that P (the Priestly author) wrote Chapter 17 and J (the Yahwist author) wrote Chapter 18.

In any case, what bothered the Rabbis was not God’s arrival, for God can do whatever He wants, but the events that unfold beginning in the next verse: Abraham looks up and sees the three “men” coming at him. He gets up from his seat and goes to greet them. In other words, *Abraham walks away from God to greet the men!* Since Abraham could do no wrong in the eyes of these commentators, and since in any case God is not offended, some of the commentators concluded that “hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence.”[[4]](#footnote-4) It also prompted one rabbi, Eleazar, to marvel at how superior God’s conduct is to the conduct of mortals. A “lesser person cannot say to a greater one, ‘wait here until I come to you,’” but God, who is greater than anyone, clearly has no problem being told just that[[5]](#footnote-5) by Abraham.

Not everyone agrees that the opening verse refers to God, however, since in all of biblical literature God never just drops in for a visit[[6]](#footnote-6), and His “appearances” are never so personal. In each case, a message, a command, or a blessing immediately follows the announcement of His appearance. To those who hold this view, the “God” in Genesis 18.1 actually refers to the three “men” whom Abraham sees beginning in verse 2. That verse 1 specifically says it was God who appeared to Abraham presents no problem to these co

mmentators because God Himself says of an angel on a Divine mission[[7]](#footnote-7), “My Name is within him.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, God’s messengers come in His Name and all they say and do is in His Name; for the moment, then, they are Him, for “a person’s agent is as himself.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Still others accept that God is meant in verse 1, but insist it was merely a vision that Abraham had, since God only appears to people in visions and dreams (with the exception of Moses, as He reminds Aaron and Miriam in Numbers 12.6-7); by the time Abraham looks up and sees the “men” walking towards him, the vision has ended.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Maimonides, on the other hand, insisted that the whole of Genesis 18 was “a vision of prophecy,” not merely the appearance of God in verse 1. In such a vision, “the prophet sometimes sees God speaking to him..., and sometimes an angel speaking to him; sometimes he hears somebody speaking to him without seeing an individual who is speaking, and again sometimes he sees a human individual who speaks to him, and afterwards it becomes clear to him that he who spoke was an angel.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

This comment infuriated Nachmanides, as so many of Maimonides’ statements did. Nachmanides argued that it made no sense for Abraham to have a vision that included such mundane scenes as angels who eat human food, Sarah kneading dough, Abraham running to and fro getting the meal prepared, and Sarah arguing with one of the angels about whether she laughed at the notion that she could have children at her age. “[W]hat is the purpose of showing him all this?” the commentator asks.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Ramban, as Nachmanides is known, has a point. Maimonides’ argument does not seem to hold water here, especially in light of Genesis 19, where two of the visitors show up at Lot’s door in Sodom. It is too much of a stretch to claim Lot actually dreamed the whole series of events leading up to his family’s escape and the destruction of the city.

On the other hand, if the “men” were truly men sent on a mission from God, that mission could have included a visit to Abraham to reaffirm to him what is about to occur. After they leave, Abraham could have fallen asleep. That was when he had a vision of God being present during the visit and of their arguing over the fate of the Dead Sea communities.

That God’s “visit” includes the scene announcing Isaac’s birth and Sarah laughing poses no problem. In fact, it was Abraham who laughed when he first heard the news (Genesis 17.15-22). Its appearance in this vision could be the result of Sarah’s reaction when Abraham told her about the earlier vision. Perhaps it was meant as further reassurance that the promise would be fulfilled despite Abraham’s surgery and the advanced ages of Abraham and Sarah.

In any case, Nachmanides insists God really did visit with Abraham (he often takes a literal view), but that verse 1 actually belongs at the end of Genesis 17. He deduces this from the fact that verse 1 states, “The Lord appeared to him by the oak trees of Mamre,” rather than “The Lord appeared to Abraham.” The verse is attached to this chapter, however, because “Scripture wishes to give an account of the honor that was bestowed upon him [Abraham] at the time he performed the circumcision....”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The wording of verse 2 also troubled the Rabbis. It begins with Abraham looking up and seeing the three men standing by him, and ends with him running to meet them. This is resolved in the Talmud by the traditional method of filling in the blanks: “At first, they stood beside him. When they saw that he was in pain, they said, ‘It is not polite to stand here.’” They then began to back away, so as not to trouble him. All this did, however, was prompt Abraham to run after them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Rabbis were troubled, as well, by the discrepancy in the number of beings present: three, according to verse 2, and two, according to Genesis 19.1, which is the continuation of the story. This, too, was resolved in the Talmud, which deduced from the text of the two chapters that “angels” are only sent on one mission at a time[[15]](#footnote-15): Gabriel came to destroy Sodom, but stopped off to visit Abraham on the way. Michael came to tell Sarah she would have a baby in a year’s time. That done, he took on a new assignment, going to Sodom to save Lot and his family. Raphael came to Abraham to speed the patriarch’s recovery.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Such textual ambiguity is grist for the mills of the rabbinic commentators, who delight in turning anomalies into homilies. Other problems they encounter include the image of angels eating (they were just acting as if they were, to teach that one should always behave according to local custom). There also is the image of Abraham serving a meal in which dairy and meat are served together. This violates the rabbinic interpretation of the Torah’s thrice-stated warning not to cook a kid in its mother’s milk. They explain it by saying that since it would take a long while before the ordered-up meat and breads were ready, Abraham brought out the dairy products. He did not want his guests to wait too long for something to eat, thus demonstrating how one should treat guests.

For the biblical critics, on the other hand, the only lesson to be learned from such anomalies is that the Torah had more than one author. In the case of Genesis 18, they argue that there are at least two stories here, not one. In an attempt to weave them together, J, the supposed author of Genesis 18 according to many versions of the theory, or the Redactor failed to edit out the inconsistencies.

The biggest inconsistency, as far as the critics are concerned, is language. “The Hebrew sentences are couched alternately in the singular and plural, suggesting the fusion of two literary traditions.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Ironically, this jumble of singular and plural in the text allows for yet a different interpretation.

Abraham, sitting at the opening of his tent as the desert heat continued to rise, is still recovering from his circumcision. Even to a completely healthy man of far younger years, the desert plays visual tricks; anyone who has ever travelled in the desert has “seen” huge lakes on the horizon that turned out to be an illusion caused by heat haze. Abraham looks up and thinks he sees three men coming to him. He rises and rushes to greet them, only to realize that only two men are standing there. At the same time, he senses a third presence; God somehow is with these men.

Seen this way, the singular/plural jumble vanishes. Abraham talks differently to God than he does to the two corporeal visitors. At no time does he address the three together. When he addresses God, it is in the singular. When he addresses the “men,” it is in the plural. When he talks in the plural, it involves corporeal matters, such as eating and washing up. There are no such references when he talks in the singular.

There is also the matter of positioning. The diners were eating by the tree. The guest to whom Abraham always spoke in the singular, however, apparently was elsewhere—behind Sarah’s tent, according to one way of translating Genesis 18.10. As Abraham Ibn Ezra notes, “he was behind it” is as valid a translation of v’hu ah-kha-rav as the more accepted “it [Sarah’s tent] was behind him.”

One potential objection—that Abraham ordered three s’im of flour,[[18]](#footnote-18) which could be seen as one s’ah for each visitor—is not an objection at all, for in no way could Abraham have expected that each “man” would consume an entire s’ah of baked goods. According to most authorities today, a s’ah of flour is 7.3 liters (over 6.6 dry quarts); three s’im measure 22 liters in volume[[19]](#footnote-19). In other words, one s’ah would have been more than enough to take care of three visitors times three, with a lot left over.

That Abraham ordered so much flour to be used suggests he intended inviting his whole household, or at least a significant portion of it, to the feast he was preparing. As we have noted before, Abraham heads an encampment of at least 1,000 people, about a third of whom are men at arms, as Genesis puts it. This would be a very large gathering, something akin to a state visit.

The fact that an entire calf was prepared—a discussion in BT Baba Metzia 86b claims three calves were actually prepared—also suggests that many more than three people were to be fed. Such a feast would be consistent with whom Abraham believed his two guests to be: messengers of God. Thus, the fact that Abraham asked for three s’im of flour cannot be related to the number of visitors awaiting food, but rather to the large number of people he intended to feed.

What I am about to do is recreate the visit, using the text in Genesis 18, but adding words to clarify the text. Those words appear in brackets. The Torah all too often leaves out words and phrases. Thus, an agonized Rebekah declares, “if so, why do I,”[[20]](#footnote-20) leaving the reader to finish the thought for her. In dialogues, it often uses “he said,” requiring the reader to fill in who it was who spoke by examining the context. Consider Genesis 27.24-25: “He asked, ‘are you really my son Esau?’ And when he said, ‘I am,” he said, ‘Serve me and let me eat’….So he served him.” From the context, we know this is Isaac talking to Jacob, and we know who said what. Little more than that is being done here. In other words, while this is a recreation based on my reading of the text, it is possible that this is how the text should be read.

The Lord appeared to him by the oak trees of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him; when he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them [but found only two men, accompanied by the spirit of the Lord], and [so] bowed down to the ground.

He said [to God], “My Lord, if I find favor with You, do not pass by Your servant.”

[Turning to the two men, he said:] “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”

So they [the two men] said, “Do as you have said.”

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three s’im of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.”

Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.

Then he took curds and milk, and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They [the two men] said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?”

And he said, “There, in the tent.”

And He [God] said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance, and He [God] was behind it. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

And the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, `Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Then the [two] men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

[As they took their leave of Abraham and God,] the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

Then the Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

So the [two] men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord....

And the Lord went His way, when He had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Read this way, it would appear that only one story exists here, not two. Is this the way the text should be read? It matters not as far as the question of authorship is concerned. What is important is that the text *can* be read this way and doing so resolves the problem posed by grammar. It is a theory, nevertheless, just as the documentary hypothesists theorize two texts that were merged into one precisely because of the grammatical anomaly. Theories cannot be used to prove theories.

This text, therefore, cannot be used to prove the existence of more than one author, or even the existence of two stories woven into one.

# The violence of Vayera

## Judith Plaskow

This extraordinarily rich parashah is filled with violence—not just the ob­vious and dramatic violence of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the incipient violence of the binding of Isaac, but also various, more ordinary, forms of violence—against women.

Half-buried in the vivid description of the people of Sodom gathering around Lot’s house and demanding the strangers staying with him is Lot’s reply, “Look, I have two daughters who have never been intimate with a man; let me bring them out for you, and do to them as you please. But do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof” (19.8). While a later midrash (Tanchuma Vayera 12) will see Lot’s offer as evidence that he was infected by the wickedness of Sodom and picture him as having been punished, the biblical text offers no explicit judgment on his behavior. The violence of the people of Sodom merits the destruction of the city, but the willingness of Lot to see his daughters assaulted and raped is apparently unworthy of comment.

At the beginning of Genesis 20, we have another form of violence. the second of two stories (or two versions of the same story; see 12.10-20) in which Abraham seeks to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister in order to protect himself. In this passage, Abimelech, king of Gerar, seizes Sarah, but her potential rape is averted when God keeps Abimelech from touching her. The similar tale will be repeated once again in re­lation to Isaac and Rebekah in Chapter 26.

The three-fold reiteration of the narrative suggests that it might serve as a paradigm of the situation of Jewish women. The first two male ancestors of the Jews, perceiving them­selves as “other” and therefore endangered in foreign lands, use their wives as buffers between themselves and the larger culture. The women become the “others’ other,” the ones whose safety and well-being can be sacrificed in order to save the patriarchs’ skins. The story names a pattern that becomes a recurring part of Jewish history: male Jews, subordinated by the dominant culture, in turn subordinate women within their own cultures, doubling the otherness that partly mir­rors their own. As in the case of Lot’s offering his daughters to the people of Sodom, the biblical text of­fers no comment on or protest against this situation. Unlike when God appears to Abimelech in a dream and threatens him with death unless he releases Sarah, God does not explicitly chastise Abra­ham or Lot.

Then, in Genesis 21, we meet still another form of violence—this time Sarah’s violence against Hagar.

After Sarah bears Isaac in her old age, she tells Abra­ham to throw the slave girl Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the house, so that Ishmael will not share in his father’s inheritance along with Isaac. The violence that is practiced by Abraham against Sarah, she now recapitulates in relation to the most vulnerable person in her own household. Thus, the cycle of abuse goes on. In this context, not only does the text not judge Sarah, but God is explicitly on her side, telling Abra­ham to listen to Sarah because her son Isaac will be the bearer of the covenantal line.

This Torah portion makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society. It provides us with opportunities to look honestly at ourselves and the world we have created, to reflect on destructive pat­terns of human relating, and to ask how we might address and change them.

In Lot’s treatment of his daughters—and in the Torah’s lack of comment on that treatment—can we see the casual acceptance, indeed the invisibility, of violence against women that is so ubiquitous in many cultures, including our own?

In Abraham’s seeming lack of concern about the fate of Sarah, can we see the ways in which marginalized peoples are all too liable to duplicate patterns of sub­ordination from which they themselves have suffered?

In Sarah’s banishment of Hagar, can we see the hori­zontal violence that oppressed people visit on each other as they jockey for what seems to them limited resources, rather than making common cause against the forces that suppress them?

And what do we do when we see ourselves enacting these patterns in our own personal and political lives? How do we respond to and interrupt them?

It is striking that throughout the portion, God is implicated in the violence in the text. Except in the case of Lot’s willingness to sacrifice his daughters, God carries out or commands the violence (Sodom and Gomorrah; Isaac) or supports it (Abraham and Sarah; Sarah and Hagar). The representations of violence that the text holds up to us are ones on which the human and divine Leviticusels mirror each other. There is no cosmic relief, so to speak, from the reality of vioIence.

Abraham’s challenge to God over the destruc­tion of Sodom and Gomorrah can thus be seen as a question to both God and ourselves. “Must not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” Abraham asks God. “Will You indeed sweep away the innocent along with the wicked?” (18.23).

The implication of these ques­tions is that it is the judge of all the earth who creates the ethical norms that Abraham reflects back to God and to which he holds God answerable. But the moral voice in this passage is Abraham’s voice. What happens to that moral vision two chapters later when Abraham betrays his wife Sarah? Can we read these narratives in ways that strengthen our resolve to hold both ourselves and God accountable to standards of justice that we recognize and value—and yet continually violate?

# God and Strangers

## Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Parashat Vayera opens with one of the most famous scenes in the Bible: Abraham’s meeting with the three enigmatic strangers. The text calls them men. We later discover they were, in fact, angels, each with a specific mission.

The opening chapter of the parashah, Chapter 18, at first glance seems simple, almost fable-like. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham meets the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

The relationship between these sections is far from clear. Do they represent one scene, two or three?

The most obvious possibility is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, “to visit the sick” after Abraham’s circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news that Sarah will have a child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice and the imminent punishment of the people of Sodom.

Maimonides (Moreh Nevuchim, the Guide for the Perplexed, 11.42) suggests that there are only two scenes: The visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God. The first verse does not describe an event at all; it is, rather, a chapter heading. It tells us that the events that follow are all part of a prophetic revelation, a divine-human encounter.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed—in verse 17—does he turn to God, and the conversation begins.

The interpretation of the chapter affects—and hinges upon—the way we translate the word Adonai [it is written as אדני, not YHWH] in Abraham’s appeal: “Please Adonai, if now I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by, I pray you, from your servant” (18.3). Adonai can be a reference to one of the names of God. It can also be read as “my lords” or “sirs.” In the first case, Abraham would be addressing God. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

The same linguistic ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19.2), when two of Abraham’s visitors—now described as *malachim*—visit Lot in Sodom:

And the two *malachim* came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot sat by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low, he said, “I pray you now, adonai, turn aside to your servant’s house and tarry all night and bathe your feet and you shall rise up early and go on your way.”

As there is no contextual element to suggest that Lot might be speaking to God, it seems clear, in this case, that adonai refers to the visitors.

The simplest reading then of both texts—the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot—would be to read the word consistently as “sirs.” Several English translations indeed take this approach. Here, for example, is the New English Bible’s:

The Lord appeared to Abraham… He looked up, and saw three men standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. “Sirs,” he said, “if I have deserved your favor, do not pass by my humble self without a visit.”

Jewish tradition, however, does not.

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halachic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case of Abraham’s addressee is unusual, however, because if we translate Adonai as “God,” it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If, by contrast, we translate it as “my lords” or “sirs,” it has no special sanctity. Jewish law rules that in the scene with Lot, adonai is read as “sirs,” but in the case of Abraham it is read as “God.”

This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham actually interrupted God as He was about to speak, asking Him to wait while he attended to the visitors. According to tradition, the passage should be read thus:

The Lord appeared to Abraham…He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to God] he said: “My God, if I have found favor in Your eyes, do not leave Your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men].” [He then turned to the men and said:] “Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree…”

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: “Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence.” Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to what seemed to be human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? It seems disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God.

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham’s time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As Psalms 115 puts it:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell….They that make them become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them.

One cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person; compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say “You,” we honor human dignity as sacrosanct.

Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham’s greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

In one of the most beautiful comments on this episode, Rabbi Shalom of Belz notes that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham (*nitzavim alav*), while in verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them (*omed aleihem*). At first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels.

By choosing the most radical of the three possible interpretations of Genesis 18, the sages allowed us to hear one of the most fundamental principles of the life of faith: We honor God by honoring His image, humankind.

# The proper treatment of guests

## Pinchas H. Peli

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How happy was Abraham when he saw the three men approaching. He did not wait for them to come to him, but rushed from the entrance of the tent to greet them. Bowing to the ground, he begged for them to visit him.

Abraham did not have the faintest idea at that moment that the strangers he hailed were important personages, angels sent from heaven. According to the Midrash, quoted in Rashi’s commentary, Abraham had good reason to believe that his guests were nomadic Arabs. Neverthe­less he did not receive them with cautious suspicion, but treated them with full respect and sympathy.

A chasidic story tells about a great rabbi, then poor and unknown, who often travelled to a certain city where the only person who would offer him lodging was a poor Jew who lived in the poor section of town. As years went by and the rabbi acquired fame and for­tune, he came again to visit the same city. This time the wealthy head of the community sent to welcome the rabbi, inviting him to stay in his palatial home. The rabbi gratefully accepted the invitation, but sent his horses to the house of the wealthy man, while he himself went directly to the poor home of his old host.

When the rich man came running to express his aston­ishment, the rabbi explained: When I used to come to this town previously, making my way by foot, you did not think of inviting me to your home. You did so now, when I arrived in town in style, in a splendid carriage pulled by four horses. Obviously it is not me, but the horses that you pay homage to; they should therefore go to your home and be received as the “guests of honor.”

Abraham had no idea that he was about to receive “im­portant” guests. For him every person was important enough to leave whatever he was doing and run to wel­come the strangers.

And what was he actually doing at that moment?

Again, a good question. The answer is in the first verse of the story: “And the Lord appeared to him.” Abraham was then in the midst of a meeting with God himself, who came to pay him a sick-call. Yet, as soon as he noticed the three strangers, who in his estimation were wandering Arabs, he left God waiting and ran towards them.

Hence, the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud tractate Shabbat 127a) derives a daring les­son: “Being hospitable to a guest ranks higher than re­ceiving the Sh’china (God’s presence).” God himself apparently would not mind being “put on hold” on ac­count of a wayfaring stranger. The latter, however, may not be able to wait, because of hunger or thirst.

Two features stand out in Abraham’s manner of enter­taining his guests. First, he himself did everything that had to be done, not delegating it to his staff or aides. Sec­ondly, all Abraham did for his guests was not done slug­gishly, but in a hurry, as by one who is earnestly eager, and not merely acting in the line of duty: “And Abraham hastened into the tent ... and said make ready quickly...; and Abraham ran to the herd ... and he hurried to pre­pare it” (Genesis 18:6-7).

Abraham remains to this day the great example of *Hachnasat Orchim* (hospitality to strangers). A festive meal in a good Jewish home is not complete if there is no guest joining in the meal.

The Talmud (BT Taanit 20b) tells us that it was the custom of Rabbi Hamnuna (a third-century sage) not only on Pe­sach eve [when it is a requirement] but every day of the year, whenever he would break bread, he would open widely the door of the house and declare: “Whoever is in need, let him come and join.”

From Abraham we learn that even when we do the right thing, it matters very much how we are doing it. A smile, the right gesture, the tempo in which our action is carried out, are just as important in the treatment of the stranger as is the action itself.

# Paradoxical People

Excerpted from Common Ground: The Weekly Torah Portion Through the Eyes of a Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform Rabbi, by Shammai Engelmayer, Joseph S. Ozarowski, David Sofian, and edited by Steve Lipman; published by Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997.

Question: Noah, the ark builder and Lot, Abraham’s nephew, are two of the most morally ambiguous figures in the Torah. Noah is described as “righteous...in his generations,” which many commenta­tors call relative praise. Lot heroically opened his home to strangers, but cowardly offered his virgin daughters to appease the hostile Sodomites.

Noah and Lot lived amidst corruption. Neither tried to rebuke the doers of evil. But both play key roles as genealogical links. Noah, after the flood, becomes the father of mankind. Lot, through the son Moab born to his daughter, becomes a forebear of King David and ultimately the Messiah. Why do these men, not entirely righteous, earn such vital roles? Is God settling for second best? Abraham would seem a better choice in King David’s direct lineage. What is the contemporary lesson for us?

### Answer # 1: Shammai Engelmayer (Conservative)

Noach and Lot are “morally ambiguous figures,” according to the question, which then wonders whether God is settling for “second best” in choosing “the father of mankind” and David’s ancestor.

Well, Noach was not second best. Whatever the Torah meant by “righteous…in his generations,” the fact is, *he was the best there was at the time*. Noach was a product of his age and his environment. If he had faults and foibles that would qualify his righteousness in a later time, in his own time they were neither faults nor foibles. Should we say that Avraham was less righteous because he brought to his mysterious visitors dishes made of meat *and* of milk? Of course not; in his time, that was not an issue.

Noach, for his part, showed his innate sense of righteousness by rising above his environment. One can only assume, therefore, that he would have done so in any environment. The way he lived his life in the period before the Great Flood, therefore, cannot be used as proof that he would have been less righteous, say, during Avraham’s time, or David’s. The assumption must be made that he would have lived a righteous life as is defined in any period in which he might have found himself.

As for Lot (by far the best there was in Sodom), the question assumes that he remained silent amid the corruption around him, but the text suggests he did not. Two strangers appear out of nowhere and Lot is right at the gate, waiting to greet them and spirit them to safety. This suggests a man who, by his actions, is saying a great deal to the residents of Sodom. He did not just arrive at the gate haphazardly; the text makes clear he was there, in full view of the city’s elders, waiting for any strangers who might show up (thereby emulating his Uncle Avraham, which shows that the young man who earlier had selfishly chosen greener pastures had grown up). This took a lot more courage than someone who talks about morality, but does nothing about it.

As for his daughters, what we think is morally repugnant does not count.

What does count is the environment in which Lot existed. Women in general had the status of dishrags in those days. Whatever the father or husband wanted to do with them could be done. Lot was not doing anything more than saying, “Here, I have some property of value; take that instead.”

But why his daughters? For one thing, he may already have considered them lost. After all, they were engaged to be married to men of Sodom. That says something about their character and moral station, not Lot’s (just as their seduction of Lot later says something about them). That he was willing to give them in marriage the Sodomites would suggest that he considered them little more than Sodomites themselves.

For another, maybe Lot was taking a calculated risk. These men at the door did not want women, they wanted men—and the men they wanted were the two strangers. Perhaps Lot was banking on impressing the Sodomites with how serious he took his obligation to protect the guests in his home, but not having his offer accepted. Clearly, Lot is not a strong figure, but he has morals and is willing to stand up and be counted.

As far as his being David’s ancestor, however, rather than Avraham, here we have a problem with the question. Lot is the ancestor of Moab—all of it, not any specific line beyond the immediate eponymous one. Nations do not flow from people’s loins; only national founders do. Not even infant Israel is pure: Caleb is a Kenite; a “mixed multitude” joined the Exodus (and there is no record that they ever separated from Israel); Moshe’s children are as much Midianites as they are Israelites (or more so, since they were raised as Midianites). So, while Lot may have been ancestor to Moab, it’s a stretch to absolutely claim that he was the ancestor of Ruth.

Avraham, on the other hand, is the direct ancestor of David. Avraham is Yehudah’s great-grandfather, after all. That makes David as much “of the line of Avraham” as it does “of the line of Yehudah.” And, in a patriarchal age, patrilineal descent is all that matters. If it were otherwise, we would know him as David of the line of Tamar, not David of the line of Yehudah.

Now, if you want to discuss morally ambiguous people whom God chooses, suggesting that Hew settles for “second best,” how about discussing a man who would sacrifice his wife’s honor to save his neck at the drop of a stranger’s leer? How about a man who will argue with God to save Sodomites, but utters not even a whisper when God tells him it is okay to toss one son into the desert and slit the throat of the other?

Now, there is a character worthy of the title “morally ambiguous.” Yet Avraham is a man much esteemed by us precisely because of his character. We ignore the ambiguities and magnify the traits we hold dear.

Why are we not equally willing to give Noach similar latitude? Could it stem from the fact that he was a non-Jew, and that non-Jews, no matter when they lived (including the age before there were Jews), are somehow incapable of being completely moral?

I wonder what Iyuv (Job), who himself was a non-Jew, would say to that?

### Answer # 2: Joseph Ozarowski (Orthodox)

Noah and Lot are both paragons of imperfection. Both maintain some strands of monotheistic morals amidst a corrupt society. Yet, both some­how give up important moral characteristics in their lives. Noah’s relative righteousness could be seen as credit or criticism. As Rashi so succinctly puts it, “There are those of our Rabbis who explain this to his praise, and there are those who explain it to his disgrace.” The late Rabbi Menachem Sacks of Chicago, in his delightful homiletical work *Menachem Tzion* (Jerusalem: Machon Harav Frank, 1978), tries to see the redeeming qualities by emphasizing Rashi’s wording as follows: If you want to count yourself among the followers of the rabbis, judge Noah favorably, in spite of the fact that there are others who may be quick to criticize.

Lot, while seemingly hospitable, was ready to offer his daughters to the crowd for abuse. Further, his acts of incest with his daughters resulted in the genealogy, which eventually leads to the nation of Moab, Ruth, King David, and the Messiah. Again, the rabbis differ on the purity of the family’s motives. But, it is possible to argue for the need to do what they did. The daughters getting their father drunk and raping him can be considered an act of desperation in a world that they thought had come to an end.

Thus, they realized that only by having sex with Lot would they be able to preserve the species and pave the way for eventual redemption via the promised Messiah (see Midrash B’reishit Rabba 51.8). A further argument can be based on Psalm 89.3, which states, “The world is built on chesed,” usually translated as kindness. But in Leviticusiticus 20.17, the Torah bans incest and refers to it as chesed! Thus, there are moments when the world is indeed built on incest, at times when everything and everyone else is destroyed! (See BT Sanhedrin 58b, where it is suggested that Cain married his sister based on this very verse.) After all, if any of us survived a nuclear holocaust, in a situation such as the well-known movie On the Beach, how would we behave?

By the way, the Messiah’s other *yichus* are not so pristine. The ancestors of David’s Jewish side were Judah and Tamar (see B’reishit 38), protagonists of another steamy, sexy, not-so-pure story. It is so interesting to compare the Christian understanding of a Messiah born through “Immaculate Conception,” with that of the Jewish Messiah born through a rather *schmutzedik* ancestry. But our notion of the world’s redemption suggests that it will come through dealing with real life, which is often packed with dirt. The Torah’s stories of real people teach us that we can affirm sanctity, holiness, and a way to live amidst the schmutz, eventually leading to the world’s redemption.

### Answer # 3: David Sofian

The kind of moral ambiguity brought up here is the norm rather than the exception in biblical materials. The question refers to Noah and Lot, but could equally refer to Aaron’s involvement with the golden calf, Miriam’s and Aaron’s rebellion against Moses, David’s behavior regarding Bathsheba, or Solomon’s wives and his idolatry. We can even point to Moses’ killing of the Egyptian, breaking the tablets, and striking the rock.

Surely, all of these people play key roles in the development of future generations, and they are only some of the possible examples. Tanach does not give us idealized heroes who are perfect people. Instead, it depicts our ancestors as real, multi-faceted people who possess admirable and deplorable traits.

The goal of this narrative is not to show how the Jewish people are descended from entirely righteous antecedents. Our task, as the inheritors of the tradition, is to begin with the story as told and try to learn from it.

Lot’s importance is in his contrast to Abraham. Lot is certainly a secondary character, but his presence helps us appreciate Abraham better. The contrast begins in Lech L’cha, when we learn of the quarreling between Abram’s herdsmen and Lot’s. Abram’s great desire for peace, his magnani­mous, generous character is brought out in contrast to Lot’s selfishness. Lot chooses the lush plain where Sodom is located.

Still, within that parshah, another aspect of Abram’s character is evi­denced when we see his reaction to his kinsman, Lot, being taken captive. He spares no effort to defeat the abductors. Lot helps us see Abram’s generosity, family commitment, and courage.

In Vayera, the comparison continues. The parashah opens by showing us Abraham’s version of hospitality. Upon looking up and seeing the three strangers, Abraham disparages his efforts, saying he will only bring a morsel of bread and a little water. Yet, both he and Sarah spare no effort, bringing curds, milk, and meat, and waiting on them as they rest. We see as before a clear contrast of Abraham’s generosity and Lot’s selfishness.

In this case, Abraham’s luster is brought into focus by Lot trying to be like Abraham but failing. Lot also insists on the angels accepting his hospitality. Yet, his earlier choice returns to haunt him. Whereas Abraham is in control of his environment and, consequently, the hospitality he shows his guests, Lot is in Sodom and must contend with the Sodomites. The Sodomites interfere in Lot’s attempt to welcome the strangers. Only the blinding light produced by the angels keeps a disaster from happening. As the story proceeds, Lot continues to be ineffectual. We see Abraham’s strength in Lot’s weakness.

The midrashic tradition, however, does not want us to see Lot in a totally unsympathetic light. The midrash is aware that Lot is pivotal for future developments, so it asks why God saw to it that Lot was saved? Midrash B’reishit Rabba 516 answers this question by referring us back to Lech L’cha and the episode of Abram and Sarai in Egypt.

This particular section of the story shows us that Abram also was not wholly righteous. Every biblical personality has flaws. Fearing for his own life, Abram passes Sarai off as his sister. The midrash points out that Abram would not have been able to do that without Lot’s silence. In other words, Lot’s family loyalty, his connection to Abram, is demonstrated in that instance. For this, he is saved.

The answer to the question then is that God is not settling for second best. God is dealing with real human beings, made of flesh and blood, all of whom are, to a greater or lesser extent, paradoxical people.

# The Akedah

## Nahum Sarna

This is a parashah filled with momentous events in the life of Abraham, climaxing in the ultimate trial of faith. God asks the aged patriarch to offer up his son as a sacrifice. Abraham binds the child on the altar and poises the knife for the fatal thrust. But the deadly act is stayed by a heavenly voice.

The Akedah, as the story is popularly called, is organically connected with the preceding chapter. Abraham has lost one son and now seems about to lose the other. In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment—the only two biblical instances of an angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases, there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.

Beyond its connection with the chapter that precedes it, in which Ishmael and his birth mother are banished from the clan, the Akedah brings to a close Abraham’s spiritual odyssey that began with God’s call to him. The curtain rises and falls on the patriarch as he receives a divine word that demands agonizing decisions. The first time, God bids him to take leave of his father and to cut himself off from his past; now, in this last theophany he is to receive, God asks that he sacrifice his beloved, longed-for son by Sarah and thereby abandon all hope of posterity. On both occasions, Abraham responds with unquestioning obedience and steadfast loyalty.

This correspondence between his native land and Moriah encases the biography of Abraham within a framework of unwavering faith. For added emphasis, the two crucial events are cast in a common literary mold so that chapters 12 and 22 share many connecting links. God’s first call to Abraham is introduced by the declaration, “Go forth…to the land that I will show you”; and His last employs almost identical language, “Go forth…to the land of Moriah…, on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

The Hebrew phrase lech l’cha, “go forth,” does not occur again in the Tanach, a fact that underscores the deliberate and meaningful nature of its use in these two passages. In both instances, the precise ultimate destination of the trek is withheld, and in both the tension of the drama is heightened by the cumulative effect of several Hebrew epithets, the last of which is the most potent: “your land, your homeland, your father’s house”; “your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love.” Both episodes culminate in promises of glorious posterity, the second one containing striking verbal echoes of the first. One blessing was received at the terebinth of Moreh as the parashah opens, the other at the similar sounding Moriah at the parashah’s end; and at both sites, it is stated, Abraham “built an altar there.”

Finally, just as the account of the initial call is preceded by a genealogy that introduces the main character of the next episode, so the story of the final call from God is followed by a genealogical note having the same function.

It has often been claimed that the story of the Akedah is a polemic against human sacrifice and thus constitutes a turning point in the history of religion, marking the transition from the ritual killing of human beings to animal substitution. Such an understanding of the narrative cannot be supported either by history or by biblical tradition. Animal sacrifice was the accepted norm throughout the ancient world. It had to be, in fact, if only because ancient pagans believed that the gods, for their own survival, needed the flesh of animals provided by man.

It is strange that Abraham does not protest the inhumanity of the divine request that he sacrifice his son on the altar. And the story contains no explicit condemnation or repudiation by God of such a practice, [even though the Torah vehemently opposes it in the Mosaic code—Shammai]. A contemporary might have reasonably inferred that only in this instance was the human victim reprieved but that on another occasion the sacrifice might well be consummated. For all these reasons, the claim that the Akedah is a protest against human sacrifice cannot be sustained.

As a matter of fact, no such protest is needed. The Akedah has nothing in common with pagan human sacrifice, which was practiced in order to appease an angry or inattentive deity. In such cases, it is the worshipper who takes the initiative. In the case of Abraham, there is no emergency, no impending disaster to be warded off. It is God Himself who makes the request, and it is God who interrupts the sacrifice.

In its present form, the narrative is the product of a religious attitude that is already long conditioned to the notion that Israelite monotheism is incompatible with human sacrifice. An undeniable atmosphere of the singular and the unique pervades the episode. God’s request is treated as something utterly extraordinary, something a person would never think of doing on his own initiative. More than this, it so tries the man of faith that his response is by no means predictable. It is taken for granted that one would normally recoil from such an act as child sacrifice. God’s request is so clearly shocking and unrepeatable that the reader is informed in advance that God is only testing Abraham and does not want the sacrifice for His own needs.

Why is Abraham tested? Since the time of God’s first call to him, no experience of his proved that his devotion to God was unconditional and boundless, not influenced by the many glorious promises he received or the wealth he achieved. In this respect, Abraham and Job share a common circumstance, and the adversary’s questioning of the disinterested nature of Job’s piety (Job 1.9) applies equally to the patriarch. Abraham is designated to father a new nation, a nation that is to be endowed with a unique destiny among the family of nations. He must therefore unequivocally prove his worthiness to be God’s elect. The totally disinterested nature of his devotion to God must be established beyond any doubt.

It is this that dictates the abnormality of the test, and it is this very abnormality that explains why God, not His angel, must present it, in contrast to the order to desist. It would not be adequate for Abraham to be asked to sacrifice himself, because he would surely do this in order to preserve his son, and he would still know that the divine promises would be honored. The sacrifice of his son is thus the decisive ultimate test that can be devised.

The Akedah must be seen in this light, and in this light alone. The focus is exclusively upon Abraham. All the rest, from the Narrator’s point of view, is irreLeviticusant and intrusive. That is why we are told nothing about Sarah or about the feelings of Isaac.

### The Akedah in Jewish Tradition

The story of Isaac’s near sacrifice on the altar, although not mentioned again in biblical literature, captured the popular imagination and deeply penetrated the religious consciousness of the Jewish people. As the occasion prompted, one or another aspect of the episode acquired special reLeviticusance. Thus, from early times the liturgy of fast days, called because of impending disaster, included the following prayer: “May He who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah answer you and hearken this day to the sound of your cry.” Here, it is God’s last-minute intervention that seemed to be singularly appropriate to the day. On Rosh Hashanah, when the fate of Israel hangs precariously in the balance because of its sins, the following passage is included in the Musaf service: “Be Mindful of Abraham’s binding of Isaac his son on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Your will wholeheartedly. In the same way, may Your compassion overcome Your anger toward us….In behalf of his posterity may You this day recall with compassion the binding of Isaac.”

So powerful and enduring is the impact of the Akedah that God is asked, as it were, to emulate Abraham’s superhuman behavior in controlling His emotions. This daring notion has its source in a midrash (Genesis Rabba 56.15), according to which Abraham is said finally to pour out his soul, reminding God of his uncomplaining, unquestioning obedience despite the obvious contradiction between the Akedah and the previous promises. The old man pleads with God that just as he had suppressed his compassion to perform the divine request, so should God be mindful of the Akedah and be filled with compassion for Israel when it finds itself in adversity or mired in sin.

The reinterpretation of the Akedah in terms of expiation of sin contributed toward its selection as the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The increasing emphasis on this motif, especially in the liturgy, was in all probability the rabbinic response to the teachings of the mystery cults. In opposition to the pagan idea that atonement for the sins of the faithful may be effected through the sacrifice of the god or of his son, the sages stressed the doctrine of patriarchal merit. The willingness of the founding father to sacrifice his son as a proof of his devotion to God created an inexhaustible store of spiritual credit upon which future generations may draw.

More than anything else, however, it was the recurring experience of persecution— from the Hellenistic age down through the Roman oppression, the Christian massacres on an unprecedented scale, and Muslim fanaticism—that secured the prominence of the Akedah as a theme in the Jewish liturgy. Abraham and Isaac became the supreme exemplars of wholehearted loyalty to God and to His Torah, even to the extent of self-sacrifice. Jewish martyrdom derived unfailing inspiration from the Akedah narrative, and medieval poets produced a whole genre of penitential poetry in which the central theme was the Akedah as a metaphor of martyrdom *al kiddush ha-shem*, “in sanctification of the Name of God.” The blowing of the ram’s horn on Rosh Hashanah was interpreted in terms of the Akedah. Said R. Abbahu, “Why does one blow a shofar taken from a ram? The Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He said: Blow a ram’s horn before Me so that I remember in your behalf the binding of Isaac son of Abraham and count it to you as though you had bound yourselves (as a sacrifice) before Me” (Babylonian Talmud tractate Rosh Hashanah 16a).

# The Akedah

## Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

 “Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic. The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to “test” Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed 3.24) answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.

On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book about it, Fear and Trembling, and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in an essay titled “Majesty and Humility,” explained the episode in terms of his own well-known characterization of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant. There are times when “God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.” We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus, the binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire—eating, drinking, physical relationship—there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes *chukkim*, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason [as opposed to *mishpatim*, laws that do make sense to us].

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are “seventy faces to the Torah,” I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanach and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

We know from Tanach and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanach mentions that Mesha king of Moab did so. So did Jepthah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanach’s most wicked kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence—the bones of thousands of young children—that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.

Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanach. Micah asks rhetorically, “Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” and replies, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a father. God says of him, “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: “If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child.”

As Jews—indeed as humans—we must reject Kierkegaard’s principle of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” This is an idea that gives *carte blanche* to a religious fanatic to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood. God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God’s perspective, but we believe that “He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just” (Deuteronomy 32.4).

To understand the binding of Isaac we have to realize that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges in The Ancient City (1864) and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism.

Before the emergence of the first cities and civilizations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges puts it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes in Leviticusiticus as Literature, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors. Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Leviticusi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that a child is the property of the father. First, Isaac’s birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah, who like Sarah also was unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when he is born, Hannah says of Samuel, “I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.  So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son.” The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son, but whether he would give him over to God.

The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses’ survival is semi-miraculous, since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague, when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to Me, whether human or animal.” The firstborn were originally designated to serve God as priests, but lost this role after the sin of the golden calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, redemption of a firstborn son.

What God was doing when he asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice, but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that children are not the property of their parents.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God.

A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as his spokesperson Moses who was “not a man of words.” He was a stammerer. Moses became God’s spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own, but those placed in his mouth by God.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: “With the help of the Lord I have acquired [*kaniti*] a man.” That child, whose name comes from the verb “to acquire,” was Cain who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Colanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born. The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children—all children—belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, 12 for girls, 13 for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus’ tragedy. (Freud argued, in Totem and Taboo, that the Oedipus complex was central to religion also.) By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension. If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: “Offer him up as a burnt offering”? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah’s revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualized. But the birth of the individual—the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right—was one of the great moral revolutions in history.

# Searching for the missing matriarch

## Wendy Zierler

This is an essay about presence of absence. More specifically, it is about how feminist readers of the Tanach can discern or conjure up the voices or values of women in the Tanach in spite of or in light of their absence from the written page. The specific biblical episode in question is that of the Akedah (Gen. 22: 1-19), the binding of Isaac, which, notwithstanding its status, in the words of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, as “the central text in the formation of our spiritual consciousness,” continues to horrify and bewilder. God asks Abraham to sacri­fice his son; Abraham offers no emotional or ethical response to the command, but simply sets out with his son to do God’s bidding. God, reconsidering, sends an angel to call off the test and then a ram as a replacement sacrifice. Can that possibly be the complete story? The Tanach offers a text shot through with trou­bling holes. My feminist reading of this episode begins, then, with a response not to what is readily visible in the story, but to what is missing.

Based on the chapters that precede Genesis 22, one would expect the major female character in this narrative to be the matriarch, Sarah. But if Chapter 21 begins with God’s “remembering of Sarah” -her promised pregnancy and the subsequent birth of Isaac-the opening of Chapter 22 constitutes a forgetting. Abraham, Isaac, the servants, the angel of God, and the ram all appear in the ensuing verses, but Sarah, who loomed so large in the preceding chapter, in person, laughter, and speech, has now gone missing from the narrative.I believe that Sarah’s absence from the Akedah narrative allows her to endure in the story as an alternative to the Abrahamic theology of detachment asserted by the feminist theologian Phyllis Trible: “Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham.” However, the glorification of Abraham that occurs in the wake of the Akedah experience is at best partial. Both Abraham and Isaac pay a steep price for their visit to Mount Moriah. Ultimately, Isaac’s adulthood and marriage bear the imprint of this traumatic event, leading him to seek solace not in detachment, but rather in love and connection. The model for it, of course, is not his father, Abraham, but his mother, Sarah.

In the context of a course on the subject of “Love in the Tanach,” I have repeatedly asked students where they think the Hebrew verb for love (a.h.v) first appears in the Tanach. Mostly, they expect to find it in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or in that of Abraham’s marriage to Sarah. It is stunning and disquieting to find love’s first mention in Genesis 22:2:

Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, and go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you.

If Abraham is the first individual recorded as loving in the Tanach, and God asks him to sacrifice his beloved child, then this test appears to be about Abraham’s need to declare the priority of his love for God over his love for his son. The notion of such a conflict is evident in a famous comment by Rashi on the word vayahavosh (“and he saddled [his donkey]”) in v. 3, immediately after the command to sacrifice Isaac:

He [saddled it] himself and did not order one of his servants to do it, because love upsets the rule [of regular/dignified conduct]. (emphasis added- W.Z.)

Love prompts Abraham to depart from his regular practice. But love for whom? Is it Abraham’s great love for his son, whom he is about to sacrifice, that compels him to take this private moment to attend to his donkey? Or is it his great love for God? Rashi’s comment is clipped and ambiguous, implying that Abraham struggled, in the earlier morning hours, with competing emotions.

By the end of Chapter 22, God wins out, but at great cost The Tanach depicts this cost starkly and honestly. Abraham and Isaac had walked to Mount Moriah in a spirit of togetherness (vv. 6 and 8)-vayelekhu sheneihem yahdav-but when Abraham makes the decision to bind Isaac and place him on an altar, that solidarity is forever shattered. An angel intercedes and commands Abraham not to “reach out his hand” against his son, but by then, the damage to Abra­ham’s relationship with Isaac (and vice versa) has already been done. The word yahdav (together) is repeated one more time in this chapter, but with a crucial difference. At the end of the chapter, Abraham returns to his servants (ne ‘arav, as opposed to Isaac, hana’ari and walks with them together (yahdav) toward Beersheba (Gen. 22: 19). Note the ingenious rhyme of the words yahdav and ne’arav, a detail that highlights Abraham’s solidarity with his servants rather than his son. Never again does Abraham walk together with Isaac. This dra­matic change in their relationship is signaled by another important textual repetition-with-a-difference. At the beginning of the chapter, we recall, Isaac is designated as Abraham’s son, his only one, the one that he loves. But in vv. 12 and 16, when the angel of God twice assures Abraham that he has passed his spiritual test and notes with approval his willingness to give up his son Isaac, the text lops off a vital element from the previous designation.

You have not held back your son, your only one, from me.

The outcome of the Akedah is that Isaac no longer appears in the story as Abraham’s loved one. Perhaps even more startling, by the end of the story God isn’t Abraham’s loved one either. If this began as a story about compet­ing love claims, from which we might have concluded that Abraham’s love for God eclipsed his love for Isaac, love as a term has now disappeared from the narrative. Instead, Abraham is lauded by God’s angel for being a yir’e elohim, a fearer rather than a lover of God (Gen. 22: 12). It is the God of Awe that Abraham discovers on Mount Moriah, not the God of Love.

The end of the Akedah story thus situates Abraham in a condition of precari­ous detachment He now stands in awe and terror before God, to whom he has devoted his life. He has become estranged from his son, as evidenced by Isaac’s complete absence from this part of the story. He has become distanced from his wife Sarah as well, as indicated by his decision to dwell in Beersheba, while Sarah lives out her last days in KiryatArba, that is, Hebron (see Chapter 23 ). The Akedah has traditionally been applauded as a great spiritual moment, in which Abraham was willing to sacrifice his most precious attachment for the sake of demonstrating his faithfulness to God, and God promised Abra­ham great reward and familial continuity in return for his act of faith. Yet this sacrificial act appears to threaten that very continuity and connection. While the Akedah remains a powerful text about religious dedication and awe, about the role of “fear and trembling” (to recall Søren Kierkegaard’s famous words) in religious life and the sometimes violent nature of religious energies, it seems to fail as a recipe for passing on religious convictions to living children whom we love. Many Jews throughout history viewed the persecution they had to endure through the lens of the Akedah, and some, as Israel Yu val demonstrated in his work on Jewish responses to the Crusades, 19 even acted on its model and martyred their children. For those of us who want to live and love God with our children, however, another theological model needs to be uncovered.

That is why Sarah’s absence from the Akedah narrative is so important Contrary to Trible, I do not want Sarah to be the protagonist of the Akedah, because I need her to endure as an alternative to the Abrahamic model of God­-encounter through interpersonal detachment I need her to serve as a model of love rather than of awe/fear. It is no accident, I would argue, that the next time the verb a.h. v appears in the Tanach, it is with reference to Sarah, for even after her death, Sarah is the one who keeps the notion of love alive in the text. In Gen. 24, Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to Aram Naharayim to bring home a wife for his son. At this point in his life story, Abraham does every­thing from a detached remove, through servants rather than through personal involvement. At the beginning of the Akedah story, love disrupted Abraham’s regular routine, as the wealthy master saddled his donkey by himself. Now detached routine rules, even as this father initiates a search for a (love)mate for his son.

At the end of this very long chapter, when Eliezer returns to Canaan with Isaac’s fiancee, Rebecca, we read the following:

And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah as wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was consoled after his mother’s death. (Gen. 24:77’151

At this very important juncture, when Isaac sets out to create a family of his own, the text invokes not father Abraham but mother Sarah, and her legacy of love.21

The Akedah and Deuteronomy 6

I return now to my observation at the beginning of this essay about the herme­neutical necessity of providing countertexts to central but disturbing biblical narratives. The Akedah story pits love of family against love of God. It does so in a transcendent context, on a mountain, a high place, removed from everyday life. Abraham has a peak spiritual experience on Mount Moriah, replete with angelic intercession and divine revelation. Isaac, the would-be inheritor of Abraham’s spiritual legacy, is the casualty of this peak experience, as is Sarah, and even God! The concluding verse of Genesis 24, with its reference to love and its mention of Sarah’s tent, is a crucial countertext insofar as it provides a domestic, mundane, everyday framework of love, in both a f arnilial and a theological sense.

But what about the Akedah text itself? How can this text remain reLeviticusant?

How can it serve as a spiritual model for any of us, especially the parents among us? Is there a way to inject the lesson of Sarah back into our under­standing of this narrative? Is there a way to recast the story so as to imagine a loving God Who stands not in competition with our love for our children, but rather enlists our parental love to God’s cause and allows us, within our mundane parental context, to discover little instances of transcendence?

Against all textual evidence to the contrary, a number of the classical exe­getes, in their responses to the stark presence of the expression yir ‘e elohim in Gen. 22: 12, insist upon Abraham’s great love for God. In several cases, they do so in language resonant with that of Deut. 6:5-9. According to R. David Kimhi (Radak, 1160-1235), “the truth is that this whole test is meant to show the people of the world Abraham’s complete love for God ... so that they will all learn from him how to love God with all their hearts and all their souls” (commentary on Gen. 22:1). Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) echoes this point, adjuring: “we are obligated to learn from him [Abraham], and emulate him, and worship God with all of our hearts and all of our souls, like Abraham did (Commentary on Genesis, p. 277).

I, too, believe that Deuteronomy 6:5-9 is a crucial intertext, but for different reasons. Rather than viewing Abraham as the primal exponent of the Deutero­nomic commandment to love God, I suggest that we read Deut. 6:5-9 as a text that recapitulates the Akedah, but in “Saraitic,” home-based terms:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you on this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

A number of elements in the above passage, both stylistic and thematic, recall the Akedah. Both passages begin with references to love. Like God’s four-part instruction to Abraham to “Take, pray, your son (1), your only one (2), whom you love (3), Isaac (4),” the Deuteronomic commandment to love God has a four-part structure: “And you shall love God (1) ... with all your heart (2) and all your soul (3) and all your might (3).” However, in contrast to the Akedah narrative, where love for one’s children competes with love of God, the Deuteronomy passage renders parental interaction and teaching of one’s children a necessary component of love and devotion to the Eternal. The story of the binding of Isaac is replete with images of sight and of hands: “On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw” (vv. 4, 8, 13); “God will see to the sheep” (v. 8); “And Abraham raised his eyes” (v. 13); “On the Mount of the Lord there is sight” (v. 14); “He took in his hand the wood and the cleaver” (v. 6); “And Abraham reached out his hand” (v. 10); “Do not reach out your hand” (v. 12). The Deuteronomy passage also includes sight and hand imag­ery, within the context of tying or binding: “Bind them as sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes.” Here, however, the verb is the common, prosaic ukeshartem (and you shall bind/ tie), as opposed to the much more uncommon verb used in the Akedah (from which derives the name of the story), vaya ‘akod. In Deuteronomy, professions of love for God are mandated within everyday, domestic space, where one goes to sleep and rises in the morning. While the commandment to love God also applies when one is away from home, the greatest stress is laid on the ways in which one builds a home-a Saraitic tent, if you will-of love. Deut. 6:5-9 can thus be seen as a revision of the message of the Akedah, a ritual domestication of its spiritual aspirations, providing a model for how a feminist reader and believer might engage and carry on its spiritual project.

In proposing this intertextual connection between Deut. 6:5-9 and Genesis 22, I do not mean to deny the patriarchal basis of the Tanach or to ignore the sound critique of Genesis 22 presented by Ostriker and Trible. I also do not mean to suggest that this reading of the Akedah corrects Genesis 22, offering the “true,” unsexist reading of this episode. On the contrary: To borrow the words of Ilana Pardes, this reading is based on a consideration of the “hetero­geneity of the Hebrew canon, [on] an appreciation of the variety of the socio­ideological horizons evident in this composite text.’?’ If the Tanach is a com­posite, that means that as a whole, it is the sum of its parts, and that these parts necessarily differ from but also relate and speak to one another. In drawing on two very different elements of the composite, then, I have endeavored to bring the shadowy presence of Sarah in Genesis 22 into the light, to dig her out of her textual burial plot and show how, despite her absence on Mount Moriah and in the specific verses of Genesis 22, she lives and loves on.

# The Response of Jewish and Islamic exegesis

## Prof. Reuven Firestone

### The Problem

In two instances, Abraham attempts to protect himself from harm in a foreign land by conceal­ing his true marital status and claiming that his wife Sarah is his sister. The motif actually occurs three times in Genesis—the third involving Isaac and Rebecca. This study is limited to Abraham’s curious remark in Genesis 20.12 claiming that his wife Sarah is his half-sister.

Presumably, the patriarch lied when telling others that Sarah was his sister. The problem of Abraham’s lie is resolved in Genesis 20 by the explanation that Sarah was indeed his sister, or rather half-sister. But the very solution provided in Genesis 20 became a problem in later generations, when it became clear that brother-sister marriage or even brother-half-sister marriage is strictly forbidden. In fact, the prohibition was eventually spelled out precisely in the text of the Torah itself. Leviticus 18:9 prohibits sexual relations with one’s sister, and Leviticus 18.11 explicitly prohibits sexual relations with one’s paternal half-sister, the very consanguinity claimed by Abraham in Genesis 20.12.13 This is explained by some modem scholars by the notion that marriage patterns were freer in the patriarchal period than in later times, as reflected by the priestly and deuteronomic codes. But this was no solution for traditional Jewish exegesis of the Bible, which tended to view the Torah as a unified work and which saw the righteous patriarchs as moral heroes who observed Jewish ethical and ritual laws even before they were promulgated.

With this in mind, therefore, Abraham seems to have been caught in a moral double bind. Quite simply, the patriarch appears either as a liar or involved in an incestuous relationship, neither of which was acceptable to rabbinic Judaism, which tended to view Abraham as the wholly righteous patriarchal exemplar of Jewish morality.

### Rabbinic Exegesis

It is possible to respond that since Abraham lived before the giving of the Torah, he was not obligated to observe the commandments. He was therefore not bound by the Jewish laws of consanguinity spelled out in Leviticus and Deuter­onomy. He remained a righteous man because he was indeed telling the truth about Sarah, but was exempt from the sin of brother-sister marriage because the ruling outlawing it had not yet been enacted. This is indeed the first response of Rashi.

Rabbinic sensitivity to the role of Abraham and the assumption of his punctilious observance of laws to be given centuries later at Mount Sinai, however, did not permit this explanation to stand alone. Rashi therefore goes on to cite the tradition that Sarah was not actually his genetic half-sister; rather, she was Abraham’s niece, the daughter of his brother. This early view is expressed already in the Palestinian Targum to Genesis 11.29, in which Yiskah, the daughter of Abraham’s brother Haran, is iden­tified with Sarah. Rashi notes this view in his commentary on Genesis 11.29 and provides further support based on a word-play connecting Sarah to Yiskah found in the Babylonian Talmud.

If Sarah was Yiskah, Abraham’s niece, then their marriageable con­sanguinity would be perfectly acceptable in Jewish law. But this would again raise the problem of Abraham as a liar, for if Sarah was actually his niece, why did he refer to her as his sister, and his paternal half-sister at that? Rashi provides the answer in his com­mentary on Genesis 20.12 by quoting directly a talmudic definition of kinship: “The children’s children are also referred to as children.” According to this view, because Sarah’s father Haran was the son of Abraham’s father Terach, Haran’s child Yiskah/Sarah could also be referred to as Terach’s child. Terach’s granddaughter Sarah, therefore, could be referred to as a sister to Terach’s son Abraham. True to Abraham’s comment in Genesis 20.12, then, Sarah is the “daughter” of Abraham’s father Terah.

This understanding of Abraham’s and Sarah’s biological rela­tionship was accepted by most rabbinic sources. It explained Abra­ham’s claim of Sarah being his sister, eliminated the possibility of the patriarch lying, and provided a marriageable relationship fully in keeping with Jewish law. One potential weakness in this ap­proach, however, was noted in the Babylonian Talmud as well as in Genesis Rabbah. The rabbis came to the conclusion that if Abraham married his niece Sarah, she would have been born to her father Haran when he was at the tender age of eight. Their reasoning is based on the straightforward chronology provided by the Bible itself, which noted the ten year age difference between Abraham and Sarah” and listed Abraham as the first and there­fore logically eldest son of Terach. If Abraham was the eldest, his younger brother Nachor would have been at least one year younger, and his youngest brother Haran at least two years younger. The mathematical logic is quite simple. If Haran was two years younger than Abraham and Sarah 10 years younger, Sarah would have been born when Haran was no more than eight years of age.

The Palestinian Tar­gum on Genesis 20.12 places Sarah as Abraham’s first cousin. The Targum has Abraham say to Abimelech, “But she is truly my sister: my father’s brother’s daughter, though not of my mother’s family; and she has become my wife.” The advantage of this exegesis lies in its elimination of the problem of Haran’s young age at the birth of his daughter Sarah, but it again raises the problem of Abraham’s possible lie.

Both solutions demonstrate the at­tempt of later Jewish authorities to see the person of Abraham in a light which is more consonant with the evolution of the religious tradition. Abraham as a moral role model had to be disassociated from the strain of dishonesty or incest.

### Islamic Exegesis

Although the Koran contains many references to legends about personages found in the Bible, and in some cases relates the legends themselves, the sequence describing Abraham and Sarah’s predica­ment in a foreign land is nowhere found in it. The legend is quite popular in later Islamic tradition, however, and occurs in virtually all genres of tradition literature that contain narrative material referring to biblical episodes. These sources refer to his three lies, two of which involve non-biblical legends involving young Abraham destroying his father’s idols, and the lie involving his relationship to Sarah.

Muslims, like Jews, were concerned about Abraham’s possible association with dishonesty or forbidden sexual relations. Unlike Judaism, however, which regards Abraham more as a patriarch than a prophet, Islam came to view Abraham as a paradigm of prophecy and one of a long line of prophets whose moral fabric and divine office protected them from sin. Islam thus was faced with the identical set of problems that disturbed the Jews. If Sarah was not Abraham’s sister, the prophet must have lied outright in order to save his life and gain material wealth. But if she was his sister, he must have been engaged in an illicit marriage, for Islam prohibits marriage between siblings.

Some responses to the problem simply echoed the Genesis 12 impli­cation that the simple danger of the situation warranted Abra­ham’s ruse. Those who espoused this view were satisfied with the biblical justification.

Notwithstanding the existence of this view in the Muslim sources, most traditions take pains to demonstrate that Abraham was not actually lying when he referred to Sarah as his sister. The many renditions are unanimous in their view that Abraham and Sarah were not biological siblings.

Most note that Abraham’s reference to Sarah as his sister was one of a spiritual or religious nature. A group of traditions makes this clear through Abraham’s own words to Sarah when he asks her not to contradict his claim. His plea to Sarah is coupled with the statement that after all, they are the only true believers on earth. This is made more explicit in the traditions which explain Abraham’s comment by the claim that she was indeed his “sister in religion.” Support for this notion may be found in the Koran itself, which refers to Muslim coreligionists as “brothers in religion.”

This understanding solves both problems at once. Abraham neither lied to his adversary nor was he involved in a forbidden marriage. He told the truth when he referred to Sarah as his sister, for she was indeed his sister *in religion*. She was not his biological sister, however, and was there­fore a perfectly acceptable marriage partner.

The one item of concern in Jewish exegesis of the biblical legend that is entirely missing in the Islamic traditions is the determina­tion of Abraham and Sarah’s true consanguinity. This can be explained by the fact that Sarah’s identity is established prior to the appearance of this sequence in the cycle of legends about Abraham in Islamic literature. Sarah is identified in the Islamic Abraham cycle when she is first mentioned as Abraham’s wife, slightly earlier in the story of Abraham’s emigration (*hijra*) from Babylon.”

The Islamic rendering of Abraham’s and Sarah’s biological relationship is generally different from the Jewish view, however, and this is due to a minor difference between the two religions in their kinship restrictions of marriage. Whereas Judaism allows marriage between uncle and niece, such a union is strictly for­bidden in Islam. The Islamic understanding of their relationship, therefore, centers around two alternate possibilities. One view suggests that Abraham and Sarah were first cousins, a view identical to the minority Jewish view expressed in the Palestinian Targum mentioned above.

The alter­native suggests that Sarah was the daughter of the king of Charan and biologically unrelated to Abraham. This suggestion does not appear in extant Jewish sources, which prefer to find a close but acceptable biological relationship between Sarah and Abraham. This suggestion could not have been derived from anything but a Hebrew linguistic environment because Sarah’s position as a princess represents a play on the Hebrew meaning of the name Sarah—“ruler” or “princess”—a definition with no Arabic cognate or equivalent to support a wordplay. It is likely, there­fore, that the popular report equating Sarah with Charanian royalty represents the retention in Islamic sources of an old Hebrew tradi­tion that was subsequently lost or removed from Jewish sources. It dropped out of Jewish tradition because, although it successfully supplied an etymology for Sarah’s name, it contradicted the bio­logical veracity of Abraham’s claim in Genesis 20.12 that he and Sarah were truly blood relatives, therefore suggesting that the great patriarchal role model was less than truthful.

Because of its regard for the integrity of every word of the biblical text, Jewish exegesis always had to remain within the (interpretive) boundaries of the biblical text. Islamic exegesis, however, is freer in its reading of the Bible because of its view that the Bible is neither a literal nor an entirely accurate revelation. The suggestion that Sarah was a princess of Charan, therefore, was perfectly acceptable in the Islamic world, whereas it raised too many problems to be retained in Jewish tradition.

# The greatest test—and how ancient interpreters dealt with it

## James L. Kugel

Surely the greatest test to Abraham’s faith was God’s demand that Isaac be offered up as a human sacrifice. Not only was Abraham prepared to carry out this most painful command, but the text even stressed Abraham’s promptness in doing so: after receiving God’s command, Abraham “rose early the next morning and saddled his donkey” (Genesis 22.3).

To some ancient interpreters, however, this very aspect of the story was troubling. The narrative gives not the slightest indication that Abraham felt sorrow (or anything else) at the prospect of having to slay his own son. He moves through the story like someone in a trance. Isaac seems to be a young man—old enough to carry the wood for the fire (Genesis 22.6), but young enough, or trusting enough, not to have the faintest idea of what is afoot.

So, when Isaac says to his father, “The fire and the wood are both here, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” one might expect Abraham to take the occasion to inform his son of God’s tragic commandment—but no.

Apparently bent on keeping Isaac in the dark, Abraham hedges: “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” (What he says actually turns out to be true—but Abraham presumably had no way of knowing this at the time.) In fact, after the altar is built, Abraham has to tie Isaac up in preparation for sac­rificing him. There could scarcely have been any clearer indication in the text that Isaac was an altogether unwilling victim until the very end.

Certainly this picture of an apparently coldhearted father and his simple, trusting son was repellent; it was difficult for ancient interpreters to make their peace with it. It would be nice if, somehow, the text could have indicated that Abraham was pained at what was about to take place—indeed, that at some point he had actually confided in Isaac and explained his dilemma, thereby also telling his son what was being asked of him. Then, if they nev­ertheless went forward, it would mean that both parties had accepted God’s decree. Far from a naive victim, Isaac would be a willing martyr.

Apart from matters of sentiment, there was a more concrete reason for wishing that the story had unfolded in this way. Toward the middle of the sec­ond century B.C.E. (that is, right at the time of the ancient interpreters), the Jews were seeking to rebel against their Syrian rulers, and not a few found them­selves called upon to be martyrs and willingly give up their lives in the name of their religion. (This is recounted in 1 and 2 Maccabees, among the biblical apocrypha.) The line between martyrdom and suicide is not always clear, and some Jews must have wondered if the Tanach even sanctions a person willingly giving up his own life. But there were no clear examples of martyrdom within the Tanach—unless, of course, it could be argued that Isaac somehow knew that he was going to be sacrificed and nevertheless went along with it. Then he would indeed be a kind of martyr.

Ancient interpreters did hit upon one anomalous detail in the biblical account:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and he put it on his son Isaac, and he took the fire and the knife, *and they walked the two of them together*. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father?” and he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will pro­vide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” *And they walked the two of them together*.

An assumption of the ancient interpreters—that the Bible contains no internal contradictions but is perfect in all its details and perfectly harmonious—even­tually included within it the notion that every word of the Tanach is significant. The Tanach thus never repeats itself or says anything for emphasis, and when it seems to, there must be some additional, hidden meaning. Read with that in mind, the words italicized above seemed to be saying two different things. If the first *and they walked the two of them together* meant that Abraham and Isaac physically proceeded together along the same path, then the second use of this phrase must have been intended to communicate something else. Since the preceding sentence has Abraham saying, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son,” it did not seem too much of a stretch to conclude that this second appearance of the phrase meant that, in the intervening time, Abraham had somehow indicated to Isaac—through a gesture or otherwise—that he was to be the sacrifice, and despite this dis­comfiting bit of news, *“they walked the two of them together.”*

Such a possibility seemed all the more likely in view of the ages of the two people involved. As mentioned, Isaac may still have been a boy, but he was old enough to carry the wood for the sacrifice—surely he was at least 10 or 12, perhaps even older. As for Abraham, he was 100 years old when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5), so by the time of the sacrifice he would have to be, by the same logic, 110 or older. Even given the longevity of early biblical figures, it seemed unlikely that a man more than 100 years old would be able to outrun a boy of 10 or 12, should the boy have chosen to flee. Still less likely did it seem that Abraham would have actually been able to tie his son up (Genesis 22.9) without the boy’s assent.

On top of all this was the fact that in Hebrew the text of the Tanach contains a great potential for ambiguity. Not only are the vowels in a word usually left to be figured out by the reader, but the begin­nings and ends of sentences are not marked: Biblical Hebrew had neither cap­ital letters nor periods at the ends of sentences. As a result, interpreters constantly had to decide between different ways of dividing up a sentence and construing the relationship of the various words within it.

In this case, Abra­ham says to his son, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” But that sentence could, if forced a little, be read as two sentences: “God will provide for Himself. The lamb for the burnt offering [is] my son.” (Note that Hebrew normally has no word for “is,” so this second sentence is altogether grammatical.)

Thus developed the idea that Isaac was actually a willing victim, nay, a martyr to God:

Going at the same pace—no less with regard to their thinking than with their bodies—down the straight path whose end is holiness, they came to the designated place. (Philo, Abraham 172)

[Abraham said to Isaac:) The Lord will provide a lamb for Himself for the burnt offering, my son—and if not, you will be the lamb for the burnt offer­ing. And the two of them walked together with firm intention. (Targum Neophyti and Fragment Targum, Genesis 22.8)

Even without the specific connection to the phrase “and they walked the two of them together,” the motif of Isaac the willing victim is widely attested:

Remember what He [God] did with Abraham, and how He tested Isaac….For He has not tested us with fire, as He did them, to search their hearts. (Judith 8.26-27)

Remember...the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion. (4 Maccabees 7.12-14)

Given the basic clues of the text, some sources lovingly elaborated the full conversation that must have taken place between Abraham and Isaac on their way to the sacrifice:

And as he was setting out, he said to his son, “Behold now, my son, I am offering you as a burnt offering and I am returning you into the hands of Him who gave you to me.” But the son said to the father, “Hear me, father. If [ordinarily] a lamb of the flocks is accepted as a sacrifice to the Lord with a sweet savor, and if such flocks have been set aside for slaugh­ter [in order to atone] for human iniquity, while man, on the contrary, has been designated to inherit this world—why should you be saying to me now, ‘Come and inherit eternal life and time without measure’? Why if not that I was indeed born in this world in order to be offered as a sacrifice to Him who made me? Indeed, this [sacrifice) will be [the mark of] my blessedness over other men—for no such thing will ever be [again]—and in me the generations will be proclaimed and through me nations will under­stand how God made a human soul worthy for sacrifice.” (Pseudo-Philo, Biblical Antiquities 32.2-3)

### The Foreshadowing of the Crucifixion

The typological approach to Scripture (see chapter 1) had some Jewish antecedents, but it was essentially a very Christian way of reading. According to this approach, early things foreshadow later ones; more specifically, Chris­tians came to believe that things contained in “the Old Testament” are actually there as hints or allusions to events in the life of Jesus or to elements of Chris­tian belief and practice (the Trinity, the Eucharist, baptism, and so forth). To put it another way: the Tanach may not seem like a Christian book, but its stories and laws and prophecies all *correspond* to something in the “New Testament ,”or even in post-New Testament Christianity.

The roots of this idea are not hard to find: as we shall see, certain verses in the Psalms and the book of Isaiah were, from a very early stage of Christian­ity, taken as prophecies of the events of the Gospels. But after a while, the typologies began to suggest themselves at every turn: Adam, Abel, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and other figures were all read as foreshadowings or prefigurations (*figurae* they were called in Latin, “figures”) of Jesus. So was Isaac. After all, his father offered him up to be killed as a sacrifice—certainly anyone who thought of Jesus as the son of God could see the parallel.

If God is for us, then who is against us? He who did not spare His own son but gave him up for us all [an allusion to Genesis 22.12 and 17, both of which say that Abraham did not “spare” his only son], will He not also give us all things along with him? (Romans 8.31-32)

[Jesus was the fulfillment of] that which was foreshadowed in Isaac, who was offered upon the altar. (Letter of Barnabas 7.3)

Eventually, other elements were found to suggest further correspondences between the story of Isaac and the crucifixion:

And on this account Isaac carried the wood on which he was to be offered up to the place of sacrifice, just as the Lord himself carried his own cross. Finally, since Isaac himself was not killed—for his father had been forbid­den to kill him—who was that ram which was offered instead, and by whose foreshadowing blood the sacrifice was accomplished? For when Abraham had caught sight of him, he was caught by the horns in a thicket. Who then did he represent but Jesus, who, before he was offered up, had been crowned with thorns? (Augustine, City of God 16.32)

Such, in short, is the portrait of Abraham that first emerged toward the end of the biblical period. Having been tested by God on multiple occasions, Abraham never lost his faith; even when God demanded he give up his beloved son, the biblical patriarch did not flinch. As for Isaac, he was a will­ing victim, a would-be martyr to his own trust in God. For Christians, the story of that great near-sacrifice was confirmation of the Old Testament’s foreshadowing of the New—and hence, further proof that God had arranged all in advance and according to His own plan. These interpretations, created by the Bible’s ancient interpreters, were then lovingly passed down from late antiquity through the Middle Ages and on to the present day. But modern scholars see a different picture.

### Modern views

To begin with, a modern scholar would hardly see the series of biblical nar­ratives about Abraham as a unit. Different episodes in his life are attributed to different authors with different purposes, and while most of the stories are allocated to the source (or complex of sources) designated J, a number are connected with P and E. Thus, the idea that these separate passages and inci­dents were all designed to transmit a single theme—“Abraham the tested” or “Abraham the man of faith”—would hardly seem self-evident to most mod­ern scholars. Indeed, no such theme is actually evoked in some of the incidents mentioned. Take, for example, the episode of Sarah’s being taken by Pharaoh against Abraham’s wishes. On closer inspection, it hardly seems to be pre­sented in Genesis as a test of Abraham’s faith—or even as a hardship.

If there is any victim here, it seems to be Pharaoh, not Abraham. Moreover, this episode hardly presents Abraham in heroic posture. He tells Sarah to say she is his sister in order to save his own life; then, as a consequence, he ends up surrendering her to Pharaoh—without a word of protest. This could hardly be considered a test of faith.

But then why, a modern biblical scholar might ask, was such a story ever told? There is still no scholarly consensus on this issue, but one thing is clear: the narrative highlights the fact that, as a result of Pharaoh’s taking up with Sarah, Abraham became a rich man. All those sheep and oxen, donkeys, camels, and servants that Abraham ends up with—the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of a hefty investment portfolio—were apparently one of the perks of being the Egyptian king’s brother-in-law. Surely this was not an insignif­icant detail.

Nor does the Tanach say a word about any emotional hardship suf­fered by either Sarah or Abraham—for all we know, Abraham chuckled all the way to the bank. So, why was this story told? To some scholars it seems more a way of accounting for Abraham’s great wealth than a divine test. After all, Abraham appears later on to be a wealthy man—at one point he is said to have had 318 retainers in his employ (Genesis 14.14), a detail no doubt reflecting his proverbial wealth. Indeed, mention of his wealth served to introduce the very next episode in Abraham’s life, his separation from his nephew Lot. As the Tanach remarks in introducing that episode,

“Now Abram was very wealthy in livestock, in silver, and in gold ... so that the land could not support both of them living together” (Genesis 13.2, 6).

Some schol­ars say that accounting for Abraham’s great riches may have been one reason for which the incident with Sarah and Pharaoh was told.

# Abraham commits attempted murder—and is praised

## Alan Dershowitz

No biblical narrative is more dramatic, more poignant, and more confusing than God’s command to Abraham that he sacrifice his son Isaac.

What kind of a God would ask such a thing of a father?

What kind of a father would accede to such a request, even from a God?

Why did Abraham, the man who argued so effectively with God over the fate of strangers, suddenly become silent in the face of so great an injustice toward his own beloved son?

Why did God praise Abraham for his willingness to engage in an act of ritual murder?

And what are we to learn from a patriarch who follows, without question, immoral superior orders to murder an innocent child?

These and other questions have been debated by Jews, Christians, and Muslims for generations. There are trivial answers, designed to justify everything God and Abraham did. Some of the “defense lawyer” commentators [rabbis and others who resort to doing verbal gymnastics to turn an uncomfortable text on its head—Shammai] argue that Abraham knew God was merely testing him and would never let him actually kill his son.

The problem with this “defense” is that if Abraham knew the outcome, then it wasn’t really a test—or at least a fair test. One who knows the answer to a test in advance is a cheat. Moreover, based on God’s past behavior, why would Abraham trust that his son would survive? After all, this is the same God who destroyed the world in the flood, and was prepared to sweep away the innocent along with the guilty in Sodom. Why would such a God not also expect one of His followers to kill a single child?

There is, of course, the possibility that Abraham went along with God’s command for entirely self-serving reasons: He believed that if he disobeyed God’s direct order, God would kill him as he killed Lot’s wife. By killing his own son, Abraham would be saving himself. Remember that this is the same Abraham who twice sacrificed Sarah’s virtue to save his own neck. Remember. too, that God invited Abraham to argue with Him over the condemned of Sodom, but he commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Failure to comply with a direct command from God carried a divine punishment.

Maimonides refuses to attribute Abraham’s compliance to simple fear of consequences: “For Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God would slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is man’s duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment.”

But why then is Judaism (as well as other religions) so premised on reward and punishment, both in this world and in the world to come? I believe true morality can best be judged in the absence of threats or promises. The atheist who throws himself in front of a car to save a child is performing a truly moral act because he expects no divine reward. The religious person who strongly believes that he will be rewarded for his moral acts and punished for his immoral ones in the hereafter may simply be making a long-term cost-benefit analysis.

Blaise Pascal, a 17th-century French philosopher and mathematician, argued that faith is a worthwhile gamble, since we lose nothing if we believe and God does not exist, but we risk spending eternity in hell if we do not believe and God turns out to be real. The fallacy is that God may despise those who engage in such self-serving wagers, and prefer those who honestly doubt or even disbelieve. Maimonides argued strongly against the midrashic variation of “Pascal’s wager”:

Let not a man say, “I will observe the precepts of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom in order that I may obtain all the blessings written in the Torah, or to attain life in the world to come; I will abstain from transgressions against which the Torah warns, that I may be saved from the curses written in the Torah, or that I may not be cut off from life in the world to come.” It is not right to serve God after this fashion, for whoever does so, serves Him out of fear. This is not the standard set by the prophets and sages.

Even the noble motive attributed to Abraham by Maimonides and other commentators is somewhat self-serving. Abraham placed his allegiance to the all-powerful God above his obligation as a parent and a husband. He never even consulted with his wife about his decision to sacrifice their son.

Of course, Sarah was not entirely blameless, either. After all, she was prepared to sacrifice Abraham’s other son, Ishmael, to her own ambitions for Isaac—a deed for which she was called a “sinner” by Maimonides. It was only God’s intervention that saved Ishmael from certain death.

What then is the nature of God’s test of Abraham? The best evidence of that comes from God’s own mouth when He declares that Abraham passed the test: “…now I know that you are in awe of God.” The actual Hebrew word is y’rei , which literally means “afraid” or “in fear of” God. But what kind of a moral test is that? Acceding to an immoral command out of fear does not show much courage or virtue. What if a powerful human king had presented Abraham with a similar, terrible choice: “Either kill your child or I will kill you”? Would we praise a father for being “afraid” of the king, or being “in awe” of the king and killing the child? Of course not. At most, we might understand why the father, like those parents during the Holocaust who abandoned or even sacrificed their crying children, might have made such a decision. We might even feel uncomfortable condemning them. But praise them? Never.

Why then do we praise Abraham? He may have passed God’s test of justice, but he failed his own test of justice, as he articulated it during his argument over the condemned of Sodom—namely that it is always wrong to kill the innocent, even if God commands it.

In addition to failing his own test of justice, Abraham also fails every contemporary test of justice. No one today would justify killing a child because God commanded it. A contemporary Abraham would be convicted of attempted murder, and his defense—“I was just following superior orders”—would be rightly rejected.

Of course, today we believe that people who hear commands from God are insane, but even if we were to entertain such a claim, we would condemn anyone who acted on it by killing a child. Indeed, there are religious cults that cite the Bible in support of abusing disrespectful children, but we correctly reject their claim that the Bible supersedes their legal obligation, especially when it comes to children.

My Harvard colleague Prof. Jon Leviticusenson of the Divinity School makes a powerful argument against viewing Abraham’s actions through the prism of contemporary abhorrence to the murder of children. In the days of the patriarch, child murder was distinguished from child sacrifice. The former was almost universally condemned, the latter widely accepted as a show of gratitude toward the gods. (As recently as 500 years ago, Incas in South America were still sacrificing children to their gods, as preserved mummies prove.) God did not order Abraham to “murder” his son; such a command would have violated the Noachide laws against shedding innocent blood. God ordered Abraham to “sacrifice” his son, and sacrifice is different from murder, as evidenced by the inclusion of “whom you love” in the description of the sacrificed object.

You murder those you hate; you sacrifice what you love most.

Professor Leviticusenson makes an interesting argument against judging historical figures by the moral standards of a later age. Søren Kierkegaard anticipated and answered Leviticusenson’s argument:

Perhaps in the context of his times, what [Abraham] did was something quite different. Then let’s forget him, for why bother remembering a past that cannot be made into a present?

Abraham is not seen as a mere historical figure whose actions are simply described; he is a *biblical* patriarch whose actions are supposed to be eternal, not timebound. Abraham is supposed to be more than a man for all seasons. He is seen as a man to be emulated forever. Leviticusenson acknowledges that Abraham, by being willing to sacrifice his son, violated the Torah’s explicit prohibition against child sacrifice, but, like other traditional commentators, he argues that Abraham’s actions took place before the Torah was given at Sinai and that “any attempt to derive practical norms for ourselves immediately and directly from Abraham’s experience…is thus a denial of the Torah, rather than an implementation of it.”

This argument, cLeviticuser as it is, proves too much. If accepted, it would make all of Abraham’s actions—from his rejection of idol worship to his argument on behalf of the sinners of Sodom—irreLeviticusant to current life. Yet we do derive “practical norms” from Abraham’s pre-Sinaitic actions. Indeed, Leviticusenson himself derives a very important norm from the akedah, praising Abraham as “a man who scrupulously observes God’s commandments” and who “fears” the Lord.

How are we to decide which norms are universal and which time-bound? At an even more fundamental Leviticusel, why should sacrifice be so highly valued at the expense of other—even other biblical—norms? Abraham may have been entitled to sacrifice “what is most precious” to him—as long as it was his to sacrifice. His life, his fortune, his health—yes. But his son? No! His wife’s son? Certainly not! Where did Abraham get the right to sacrifice Sarah’s only and last child, especially since he could, as a man, have more children with other wives? Indeed, he had six more children with his next wife.

Leviticusenson might argue that judged by the standards of his day, Abraham owned his son—just as he owned his wife. Isaac was his, to do with as he wanted. By sacrificing Isaac, Abraham was giving up something that was his—not Sarah’s. But this argument takes moral relativism beyond all meaning. By any moral, as distinguished from descriptive, standard that Leviticusenson or others could articulate, it would have been wrong for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It is significant that Leviticusenson proposes no standard—other than the immoral practices of the time—by which Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac could be justified.

Abraham’s critics may be wrong for failing to consider the historical conditions that allowed for human sacrifices. But the fact that some of Abraham’s contemporaries may have been willing to sacrifice their children does not make Abraham’s actions praiseworthy. Surely there were some, even in those days, who refused to sacrifice their children. Perhaps they lost their own lives for their refusal. Why should we judge Abraham by the common—or lowest—standard of his era; should we not expect more of a man who is presented as a paragon of virtue for all times and places? The closest Leviticusenson comes to his own standard of judgment is to praise Abraham for his “radical obedience to the divine commandments” and for his “complete trust” in God.

“Trust” in this context can have multiple meanings. It can mean that Abraham trusted that God was right in ordering him to sacrifice his son, and was prepared to do the terrible deed. This is moral trust. It could also mean that he trusted that God would never actually permit the slaughter of an innocent child. This is empirical trust. Trust, in the latter sense, can be illustrated by the experiment in which you ask a loved one to fall backward into your arms. If they trust you to catch them, they will willingly fall. That is empirical trust. Moral trust would be a willingness to fall backward even if they knew you would not catch them, because they trusted your judgment that a broken back is not such a bad thing! It is not clear in which sense trust is used in the context of the akedah.

Kierkegaard, in his famous essay on the akedah—“Fear and Trembling”—focuses on Abraham’s “faith” and argues that he suspended his own ethical principles in demonstrating his faith. Kierkegaard, too, is unclear whether he means faith that God would not require Abraham actually to sacrifice Isaac (empirical faith) or faith that if He did, it would be the right thing (moral faith). If the latter, then Kierkegaard fails to provide a persuasive argument for why we should praise faith over parental responsibility.

How then do the traditional commentators explain God’s command, Abraham’s actions, and the praise we are supposed to heap on both of them? What lessons about justice are we supposed to derive from this extraordinary tale of injustice?

First, there is God’s command. How are we to assess it? The “defense lawyer” commentators have a simple-minded, reductionist justification of God’s command. One writes, “The nature of this trial calls for an explanation, since there is no doubt that the Almighty does not try a person in order to prove to Himself whether he is capable of withstanding the trial, since God is all-knowing and has no doubt about anything.” But the text itself is richer than this tautological answer, since the angel of God says, “For now I know that you are in awe of God” (or that you “fear” God).

This suggests that the trial was not fixed, as some commentators argue—that neither God nor the angels knew what its outcome would be. Just as God believed and hoped that Job would pass the diabolical test concocted by Satan, God probably also believed and hoped that Abraham would pass the test that God contrived for him. (Some commentators argue that Satan provoked God into testing Abraham just as he did with regard to Job.) But God could not be certain, because since the day Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge and learned right from wrong, man had the capacity to choose freely.

Perhaps if the test had been a simple one—between good and evil—God could be confident that Abraham would choose good over bad. But which is “good” and which “bad” in the context of a divine command to kill one’s own son? Even God and His angels could not be certain of Abraham’s answer. They had to wait for Abraham to act, and only then could the angel declare, “For now I know….” This idea of God’s uncertainty is supported by some contemporary commentators, who argue that Abraham’s “decision could not be known—even by God—until he actually made it by bringing down the knife on his son’s body.”

Other commentators try to have it both ways. Of course God knew what Abraham would do, even though Abraham had complete free will. The purpose of the test, therefore, was “to translate into action the potentialities of [Abraham’s] character and give him the reward of a good deed, in addition to the reward of a good heart.”

In other words, God rewards good actions more than good intentions. But this begs the important question: Would it have been good if Abraham had actually carried out God’s command and sacrificed his son? Would the killing of Isaac have given Abraham “the reward of a good deed”? As it was, Abraham got to have his cake and eat it, too. He got brownie points for following God’s command, and he got his son back. But for purposes of evaluating the morality of Abraham’s actions, we should judge him as if he actually plunged the knife into Isaac’s throat. Would that story have appeared in the Bible? If not, why *does* this story appear—since Abraham’s *mens rea* (state of mind) and *actus reas* (actions) are essentially the same as they would have been had he actually killed his son?

Some midrashic commentators go so far as to suggest that Abraham did actually kill Isaac and that God then brought him back to life. Isaac then “stood on his feet and spoke the benediction ‘Blessed are Thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead.’” These commentators do not take this suggestion to its logical conclusion by asking whether Abraham deserves praise for actually killing Isaac—if that’s what he did.

One modern commentator offers a radical interpretation of the Abraham story. Lippman Bodoff, a Jew working within the Orthodox tradition, proposes that in testing Abraham, God hoped that Abraham would refuse His command to murder Isaac. The object lesson of the story, according to Bodoff, is to send a message “that God does not want even his God-fearing adherents to go so far as to murder in God’s name or even at God’s command.” God was “testing Abraham to see if he would remain loyal to God’s revealed moral law”—namely the prohibition against murder—“even if ordered to abandon it.”

According to Bodoff, Abraham would pass the test only if he stood up to God and said: “‘I can’t do it; it is contrary to Your moral law.’” How might he have managed such an act of defiance? Abraham could have reminded God of His covenant with Noah, which made explicit what had been implicit at least since Cain and applying it. The legend tells of a rabbinic dispute between Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (a brilliant but somewhat arrogant rabbi who lived at the beginning of the second century C.E.) and the other members of the yeshivah over a rather arcane issue concerning an oven:

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: “If the halachah [oral law] agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it.” Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of place.…”No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,” they retorted. Again he said to them: “If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!” Whereupon the stream of water flowed backward. “No proof can be brought from a stream of water,” they rejoined. [Finally] he said to them: “If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!” But Rabbi Joshua arose and explained: “It is not in heaven!” What did he mean by this? Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The Talmud then relates how a rabbi asked the prophet Elijah what God did next. According to the story, God laughed with joy and said, “My sons have defeated me [in argument].” If God’s voice is not enough to change the law regarding an issue of ritual, why should it be enough to overrule the most fundamental law of humanity: You shall not murder? At the very least, Abraham could have pointed to God’s covenant with Noah, and asked God to resolve the conflict between His written and oral command before agreeing to slaughter his son. It shows no disrespect to point to conflicting authority and seek guidance. When Abraham argued with God over the sinners of Sodom, he had no contrary authority—other than his own sense of justice—to which to refer.

There is a wonderful midrash that elaborates on the conflict between God’s general prohibition against murder and His specific command to murder in this case. As Isaac questioned his father about the absence of a lamb for the burnt offering, a wicked angel named Samael upbraided Abraham, saying:

“What means this, old man! Have you lost your wits? You go to slay a son granted to you at age of 100!” Abraham was resolute: “Even this I do.” Then the angel prophesied that after Abraham sacrificed Isaac, God would condemn him: “Tomorrow He will say to you, ‘You are a murderer, and are guilty.’” Still, Abraham responded, “I am content.”

Abraham, according to this interpretation, was willing not only to sacrifice his son, but also to break God’s law against murder and be rebuked as a murderer, as long as God personally ordered him to do so. Immanuel Kant would have had Abraham respond more directly to God’s command with a reference to the categorical imperative against murder:

“That I ought not to kill my son is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt; that you, as you appear to be, are God, I am not convinced. …”

Or, as Bob Dylan put it:

God said to Abraham, go kill me a son. Abe said, man, you must be puttin’ me on.

But Kant and Dylan beg the critical question: What if Abraham believed it really was God and that He was not putting him on? Bodoff goes so far as to say that if Abraham had actually killed Isaac and received praise for that act, we would have had “a religion to which few and perhaps none of us could subscribe.…” But this raises the disturbing question of why so many can subscribe to a religion in which Abraham is praised for his willingness to obey God’s immoral command. Here is where Bodoff’s interpretation is truly radical. He claims that Abraham never intended to carry out God’s unjust command. He expected God to countermand it at the last minute—he had empirical, not moral trust. He was willing to fall backward, confident that God would catch him before he hit the ground. He was not willing to accept God’s moral assurance that killing Isaac was the right thing to do.

Bodoff argues that Abraham was resolved to violate God’s command if, at the last minute, God did not countermand it. In other words, as much as God was testing Abraham, “Abraham was testing the Almighty.” And the reason for the test is understandable: This is a God who swept many innocent along with the guilty in the flood, but who acceded to Abraham’s moral argument over the innocents of Sodom. Which God was He, really? Had He learned the lesson of not condemning the innocent? This test would answer that question for Abraham. Had God failed the test—had he not stayed Abraham’s hand—Abraham would have broken the covenant and said, “If the God I have found demands the same kind of immorality that I saw in my father’s pagan society, I must be mistaken [in accepting Him and] I must look further.”

Bodoff tells us that God passed the test by sending an angel to stay Abraham’s hand, and in doing so told Abraham and the rest of the world that He does not demand blind obedience to immoral superior orders. His is a code of justice that eventually develops a process for deciding what is right and wrong. That process includes codification, as in the Noachide code, and argumentation, as in the Sodom narrative. But it does not include uncritical acceptance of the immoral commands of heavenly voices.

This is a brilliant and positive interpretation that makes both God and Abraham appear just, but it is difficult to reconcile with the text. After all, God’s angel—purporting to speak for God—praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. If God had really wanted Abraham to refuse His command, why does He have His messenger praise him for his willingness to comply? Here Bodoff is at his weakest, claiming that the angel—being only a messenger of God and not himself omniscient—was unaware of the true intention of God’s test, as well as Abraham’s true intention to refuse God’s order.

The following midrash is more faithful to the text: When God commanded the father to desist from sacrificing Isaac, Abraham said:

“One man tempts another, because he knows not what is in the heart of his neighbor. But You surely did know that I was ready to sacrifice my son!”

God: “It was manifest to Me, and I foreknew it, that you would withhold not even thy soul from Me.”

Abraham: “And why, then, did You afflict me thus?”

God: “It was My wish that the world should become acquainted with you, and should know that it is not without good reason that I have chosen you from all the nations. Now it has been witnessed unto men that you fear God.”

As this midrash points out, there is an even more fundamental problem with Bodoff’s fascinating interpretation. How does He know that Abraham intended to stay his own hand if God had not sent the angel? Abraham surely behaves as if he is ready to slay Isaac. Why should we not assume that he intended the natural consequences of his actions, which ended with him stretching out his hand and taking the knife to kill his son?

Here an analogy to the law of attempted murder may be helpful. The law of attempts deals directly with the problem of ascertaining a person’s true intentions when he has not completed the crime but appears to have intended it. A vast literature has developed around this issue.

I recently argued a case that was similar, in certain respects, to the Abraham story. My client was accused of attempted murder after the police found him on top of another man, holding a knife over the other man’s body. The police drew their guns and ordered my client to drop the knife, which he did. My client claimed that he did not intend to kill the other man, merely to frighten him into submission. Even if the police had not intervened, he said, he would never have plunged the knife into the other man’s body.

According to Bodoff, this was roughly the mindset of Abraham at the moment the angel intervened. How should the law go about assessing a claim of this kind? We can never know for certain what my client would or would not have done had the police not intervened. The facts of the case were consistent with either possibility. The man my client was accused of attacking had been dating my client’s sister. Their relationship had been a troubled one, and someone burned down the sister’s house, injuring her severely.

The prosecution argued that my client believed that his sister’s boyfriend had caused the fire and was trying to kill him in revenge. My client maintained that he had gone to see the other man to complain that he had not even bothered to visit the sister. A fight broke out, and my client was either holding the man at bay until the police arrived or trying to kill him.

The jury believed the prosecution and convicted my client. Although we eventually won the appeal on an unrelated ground, it appears—from the external evidence—that he had made the decision to proceed. We can never know for sure, since we are incapable of entering into his mind, but the degree of likelihood is deemed sufficient to overcome the general presumption of innocence and the requirement of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

(My daughter, a 10-year-old at the time, said she believed that Abraham was conflicted and that the angel represents his “better instinct” [*yetzer ha-tov*], which eventually prevailed. If so, the “angel” was an internal, rather than an external, source.)

Applying these principles to the Abraham narrative, one finds it difficult to accept Bodoff’s interpretation. Both the text and general principles of law make it more likely that Abraham intended to kill his son. That is certainly the apparent message of the test, as even Bodoff concedes. Indeed, he characterizes his interpretation as “a coded countermessage.” And he has the right to his interpretation, since one of the glories of the Bible is its Rorschach test quality: its 70 faces and its amenability to multiple midrashim—interpretations.

Bodoff’s analysis also suggests a somewhat darker interpretation—namely that Abraham failed God’s test. He would have killed his son had God not sent the angel, and God was upset at Abraham for his willingness to kill on command.

There is textual support for this interpretation, as well. After all, it is God who commands Abraham directly at the beginning of the story. If Abraham had passed God’s test with flying colors, we might expect God Himself to come down and praise Abraham. Instead, God sends a mere messenger. In addition, when God first commands Abraham to offer up his son, He refers to Isaac as Abraham’s “only son, whom you love.” But after Abraham fails the test, the angel refers to Isaac twice as “your only son,” eliminating the description “whom you love.” This suggests that the angel does not believe that a father who was willing to sacrifice his son can be said to love him.

Moreover, God Himself never speaks to Abraham again. Isaac emerges from the experience a shattered person, who rarely speaks until his deathbed (where he is tricked by his son). One can only imagine the trauma a son would go through upon learning that his father was prepared to kill him. I would have loved to overhear the conversation between Isaac and his father on the way down from the sacrificial mountain: “You were preparing to do what?”

To be sure, Abraham is rewarded with long life, wealth, a new wife, more children, and patriarchy, but in some respects all this seems like a consolation prize for doing his best, but not quite enough in God’s eyes. His personal relationship with God ended, because he disappointed his covenantal Partner. According to this interpretation, God used Abraham as an object lesson for future generations. People in those days sacrificed their children when the gods commanded it. Abraham was willing to do the same. But God’s angel stopped him, thus signaling that this God was different.

The message of this story is not in what Abraham did in setting out to sacrifice his son. It is in what God did in refusing Abraham’s sacrifice. Abraham passed the test of obedience, but failed the test of moral self-determination. Like a good student who messes up one exam, Abraham learned a great deal from the experience and was able to teach future generations from his own mistake.

An even more disturbing conclusion is offered by the writer and Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel, who argues that not only did Abraham fail the test, but so did God. No God should ever ask a father to kill his child, and no father should ever agree to do so. God may have eventually saved Isaac physically, but He crippled him emotionally.

Even Bodoff concedes that many wrong lessons have been gleaned from this story. Perhaps the most disastrous is the concept of “*daat torah*,” prevalent among some chasidim, whereby the individual sacrifices his intellect on the altar of blind obedience to the words of the sages or a charismatic rabbi. The murder of Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish fundamentalist who believed he was following God’s command may be the best known consequence of this know-nothing interpretation of the Abraham narrative.

A more uplifting metaphoric interpretation, similar to my daughter’s, is offered by a contemporary Conservative rabbi named Harold Schulweis, who suggests that Abraham passed the test by refusing to kill Isaac. He sees “the angel who stays Abraham’s hand [as] a symbol of Abraham’s moral conscience”—an aspect of Abraham, rather than of God. “Abraham’s acceptance of the voice of the Lord’s angel over God’s commanding voice expresses his faith in a moral God who could not will the death of an innocent.”

My own favorite interpretation is that by commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God was telling Abraham that in accepting the covenant, he was not receiving any assurances that life would be perfect. Far from it. Through that terrible test, God was demonstrating—in a manner more powerful than words could ever convey—that being a Jew often requires sacrificing that which is most precious to you—even children. The history of the Jewish people has certainly borne that out. During the Crusades, the Inquisition, and especially the Holocaust, many “Abrahams” made the decision to kill their own “Isaacs,” sometimes to prevent their forced conversion, other times to prevent their torture, rape, and eventual murder.

The traditional view of the akedah influenced the willingness of Jews “to turn the biblical prohibition against murder into an act that became recognized as a legitimate form of *kiddush ha-shem* [honoring of God], when fathers killed their children and wives and then committed suicide rather than face forced Baptism during the crusades.”

Perhaps this took religious zealotry too far, but during the Holocaust even baptism could not save “genetic” Jews. Parents had to kill or abandon crying babies in order to prevent Nazis from finding Jews in hiding. In one poignant episode during the Holocaust, 93 teenage girls—students of a Jewish seminary in Cracow—reportedly took their own lives after learning that they were going to be forced to serve as prostitutes for German soldiers. Before taking poison, they collaborated on a poem, which included the following lines: “Death does not terrify us; we go out to meet him. We served our God while we were alive; We shall know how to sanctify Him by our death….We stood the test, the test of the binding of Isaac.”

These have been the tragic realities of Jewish life, and God was warning Abraham that the covenant offered no assurances that such sacrifices would not be required. Sometimes God would intervene. Sometimes He would not. That is the nature of a covenant. So if a Jew witnesses tragedy—even the worst of tragedies, as did Job and those who saw their children die in the Crusades and Holocaust—do not think that God has broken the covenant. Religion is not a panacea for all of life’s tragedies. An Israeli rabbi made a similar point in the context of his nation’s daily struggle: “Every parent in Israel who sees his son off to the army hears the divine command: ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love….’”

I also have a favorite interpretation of why Abraham argued with God about the Sodomites but not about his own son. Good people are sometimes reluctant to argue for self-serving ends. They demand justice for others, but are silent in the face of injustice to themselves. I have seen fellow Jews march energetically for the civil rights of others, but sit passively when their own rights are violated. Many Jews who marched for the rights of blacks in the 1960s did nothing during the Holocaust. There is something more noble in advocacy for others than in self-serving advocacy.

To be sure, some Jews speak up only for Jewish causes, not for others, but a great many are active in the struggle for universal human rights. The Bible instructs us not to “stand idly by the blood of your neighbors”; Hillel interpreted this to mean “If I am not for myself, who will be for me, [but] if am for myself alone, what am I?” The two apparently conflicting Abraham stories teach us to seek an appropriate balance between advocating for strangers and advocating for our own families.

Even if one concludes that the two Abrahams are irreconcilable, this too makes an important point: Genesis speaks with multiple voices; it does not seek to convey a singular message. The Abraham who argues with God represents one voice, while the Abraham who places his complete faith in God represents another. The Christian scriptures explicitly speak in multiple voices—the Gospel according to Mark, Matthew, and so on—while the different voices of the of the Tanach are implicit. Genesis is not written in the voice of God; the stories are not presented from His point of view; indeed, God is described as simply one of the actors.

Multiple points of view assure multiple interpretations. Whatever interpretation the reader ultimately finds meaningful, one conclusion is clear: No one can read the story of the akedah literally and accept it as a clear guide for human action. It cries out for explication, for disagreement, for reflection, and for concern. It provides no answers, only eternally unanswerable questions, and in that respect it is the perfect tool for teaching the realities, limitations, and imperfections of both divine and human justice.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is real life writ large, with all of its tragic choices, ambiguities, and uncertainties.

1. Actually, the two who arrive in Sodom do nothing extraordinary, with the exception of the momentary blinding-by-bright-light of the crowd outside Lot’s door. Perhaps that was a supernatural act, but it could have been caused in a natural way. The text states it was God who destroyed the two towns, not the *malachim*. Clearly, the men/angels act on God’s behalf, but we see here an effort by the author to avoid investing them with any supernatural powers. Are *malachim* angels or messengers, however. The word translated as angel, *malach*, derives from the word *m’lachah*, meaning work. Messenger, or more correctly agent, makes more sense. Consider, for example, that the burning bush and the pillars of cloud and fire also are referred to as *malachim*. A *malach* thus would be someone or something through which God acts at times. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. That only two left for Sodom is inferred from Genesis 19.1, an obvious continuation of the previous chapter, in which the two arrive in Sodom, and from the fact that Abraham is still talking to someone after his guests leave. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Obviously, God is everywhere at once and so was at Mamre regardless. What is referred to here is God making His presence known in a tangible, direct way. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is mentioned twice in the Talmud, both times citing Rav Judah in the name of Rav. In the first instance, BT Shabbat 127a, the issue under discussion is hospitality to wayfarers. In the second, BT Shevu’ot 35b, the matter under discussion is whether the “Adonai” in Genesis 18.3 is God’s name or merely the word for “my lord.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BT Shabbat 127a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The possible exception is God’s seeking out the First Man in Genesis 3. That “visit,” however, was a contrivance meant to expose the sin of eating from the forbidden fruit. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Exodus 23.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, the commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (the 11th century commentator known by the acronym Rashbam) to this verse, as it appears in the *Mikra’ot Gedolot* editions of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. BT Kiddushin 41b; this rule, שלוחו של אדם כמותו (*shelucho shel adam k’moto*), does not apply when a sinful act is involved, as the Talmud states further on its discussion (42b). Since the “men” are acting on God’s behalf, and because no sinful act is possible in this instance, the three are as God during the term of their commission. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is how Abraham Ibn Ezra sees it, quoting anonymous commentators. See his commentary on the verse, as it appears in the *Mikra’ot Gedolot* editions of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, ed. and trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), II-42, 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. No. 1, Genesis, commentary to Genesis 18.1, comp. and ed. Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel (1971), 226–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nachmanides, op. cit., 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. BT Baba Metzia 86b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. BT Baba Metzia 86b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This he must have done in an instant, because the “ill” Abraham is suddenly running from place to place to prepare a meal for his guests. The Rabbis involved in this discussion in BT Baba Metzia do not seem to be bothered by Gabriel’s presence at Abraham’s tent, yet they should have been since their solution to the three-equals-two problem suggests that it is okay for someone to tarry when setting out to fulfill a mission from God, which clearly cannot be so. At the very least, it should have led them to rule that visiting the ill takes precedence over fulfilling a commission, even if the commission is from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Genesis 18.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Speiser, in his commentary on the verse, says a s’ah is 13 liters, meaning that Abraham ordered that approximately 35 dry quarts of flour be used to prepare bread and cake for three people. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Genesis 25.22. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)