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by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf

FROM THE RABBI'S DESK:

On Accepting the Akedah

Some people don't understand the answers to the Akedah-problem. I don't understand the question. Did you think the Torah was a Boy Scout Manual? A goody-goody book? A politically and theologically correct celebration of human life? Where have you been during all these Shabbat readings about incest, murder, plagues, violence and punishment from God and men?

We all risk our lives and our sons' lives and our community's lives, all the time. I sent my son to Israel the very week the Six-Day War ended. He learned, just in time, the Hebrew word for "land-mine." He lived with a family that had survived and, fortunately, he survived. But I had no hesitation in sending him into danger, as I had no hesitation in volunteering myself for chaplaincy in the Korean theater of war. Would I always do what God commanded just as I had done what my country asked? I hope so.

Life is precious, but it is not the most precious thing of all or we would not dare to remain Jews. Judaism is risky business. Circumcision is only the first trauma we bequeath to our sons. In Israel they prepare them to die like Trumpeldor for their country, and many have and many will, until peace comes, and some even after that.

God is much more important than life. Judaism is very good for us some of the time. It must be good for God all the time. The Akedah is only the most up-front demand among many: God is entitled to our death. Life is temporary; only God is permanent. Life is good; God is The Good. Life is worth living, but mostly because it gives us the opportunity to serve God with all our heart and soul and life.

For us Americans, it is hard to put God at the center. We all feel that *we* belong at the center of everything, but we do not. All of us will die. All of our children will die. Only God will never die. Only the sacred is immortal. Abraham was right: to obey is much better than merely to live. To obey God is best of all. *T'shuvah* requires renunciation, humility, confession. Yom Kippur is a charade of dying. We do not eat or love or create or laugh (except perhaps, at poor old Jonah), but in dying into God is our hope. Our rabbis agree with Kierkegaard: there is a teleological suspension of the ethical. The good is not the best. Divinity trumps morality. God's ways are not our ways nor God's thoughts our thoughts. God makes us offers we cannot refuse. God gives us gifts that we receive on deferred payment, but God's bill will finally come in. Death pays off all our many reckless loans.

The Akedah illustrates, I believe, what Abraham Joshua Heschel z"l meant when he wrote: "for the pious man, it is a privilege to die." As with Rabbi Akiba, we owe God our death, and the death of our children.

May the New Year bring us all closer to the consciousness that while our life is but a moment of eternity, it has meaning in the mind and heart of God, if in the end, only there. Let us climb Mount Moriah courageously, whatever will befall us on its summit. "Any day is a good day to be born and any day is a good day to die," said John XXIII, to which I try to add: "Amen."

From HUCalum internet discussion group, reprinted with permission.

In reading the Akedah I think it is important to remember that Avraham is not an Everyman, and therefore I don't read the story as though you or I or anyone might be in his place. What do we know about Avraham? God's first words to him are "Lekh l'kha...;" Avram is singled out with no prior explanation and summoned to cut himself off from his past, literally and figuratively, in order to become, eventually, Avraham. He (and Sarah) take a tremendous leap off a precipice. The promise of offspring made at that time is eventually fulfilled in Yitzhak. Then comes the second "Lekh l'kha..." and Avraham is summoned to a paradoxical task: to risk cutting himself off from his future in order to have that future. It is the ultimate trust exercise: he trusts God and God's promises enough to obey, even in a deed which is counter to all his ordinary human feelings as well as ordinary human logic. The heart of the story in the Torah is not about rejection of human sacrifice or Avraham's ethical sensitivity; it is about the unique character of Avraham. The greatness of Avraham is his ability to trust God beyond the point where an ordinary person would give up and instead pursue his or her private needs and wants in line with what seems right in the immediate present. God never speaks to Avraham after the Akedah because Avraham has now completed his task of being the first link in the chain which will create the nation of Israel. From now on God speaks to the next generation -- next time, specifically, to Rivka.

Rabbi Joan Friedman
Colgate University

"Is something wrong with Isaac? When God tells Abraham to take Isaac to Moriah, Isaac shows no sign of resistance, even though, according to one interpretation, he must have been thirty-seven years old at the time. Is this son of a menopausal woman in some way damaged? There is a whole strand of the rabbinic tradition that sees Isaac as a willing sacrifice. Isaac is powerless at the Akedah. He is either unable or unwilling to resist. In several legends, Isaac actually dies on Mount Moriah and then comes back to life. The rabbis told those tales in the wake of the destruction of Judean independence, after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 c.e. For Jews living in exile and in subjugation, Isaac symbolized their plight, and served as a model for their faith. He accepted what befell him with perfect faith. He became, therefore, the classical Jewish man – passive. His blindness in old age is even part of his passivity. One midrash says that angels wept when they saw Isaac on the alter. Their tears fell into his eyes, and, he was blinded forever. Centuries later, Isaac would become the most popular name for Jewish boys in medieval Europe, for each parent imagined that their child might, in fact, become a ghastly sacrifice, slaughtered on the pyres of marauding enemies."

From ***Searching For My Brothers:***
Jewish Men in a Gentile World
by Rabbi Jeffery K. Salkin

Sacrifice by H. Leivick

Bound hand and foot he lies
on the hard altar stone
and waits.

Eyes half shut, he looks
on his father standing there
and waits.

His father sees his eyes
and strokes his son's brow
and waits.

With old and trembling hands
the father picks up the knife
and waits.

A Voice from above cries, "Stop!"
The hand freezes in air
and waits.

The veined throat suddenly throbs
with the miracle of the test
and waits.

The father gathers up the son.
The altar is bare
and waits.

Ensnared in thorns a lamb
looks at the hand with a knife
and waits.

Translated from the Yiddish by Robert Friend

JACOB GLATSTEIN □

My Father Isaac

As Isaac in his old age was led to the sacrifice,
he lifted his clouded eyes to heaven
and said in a tired voice:
"I know I'll be your choice."
No good angel came flying;
the flames burned more brightly and higher.
"The blade has been sharpened for my throat."
Isaac, old, was not deceived
as when he'd been that lad from Genesis;
he knew that there would be no lamb.

And as they bound him to the altar,
and as he smelled the searing fumes,
he spoke his mind thus:
"God will not interrupt this slaughter!"
He called out in a tired voice:
"Here I am—prepared to be your ram."

Translated from the Yiddish
by Etta Blum

H. Leivick (pen name of **Leivick Halpern**, December 1888–December 23, 1962) was a Yiddish language writer, known for his 1921 "dramatic poem in eight scenes" *The Golem*. He also wrote many highly political, realistic plays. He adopted the pen name of Leivick to avoid being confused with Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, another prominent Yiddish poet. He was born in Belorussia, spent several years imprisoned for political activities and immigrated to the United States in 1913.

Story of Isaac

by Leonard Cohen

The door it opened slowly
My father he came in
I was nine years old
And he stood so tall above me
Blue eyes they were shining
And his voice was very cold
Said, "I've had a vision
And you know I'm strong and holy
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain
I was running he was walking
And his ax was made of gold.

The trees they got much smaller
The lake a lady's mirror
We stopped to drink some wine
Then he threw the bottle over
Broke a minute later
And he put his hand on mine.
Thought I saw an eagle
But it might have been a vulture,
I never could decide.
Then my father built an altar
He looked once behind his shoulder
He knew I would not hide.

You who build the altars now
To sacrifice these children
You must not do it any more.
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
You were not there before.
When I lay upon a mountain
And my father's hand was trembling
With the beauty of the word.

And if you call me brother now
Forgive me if I inquire
Just according to whose plan?
When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must
I will help you if I can.
When it all comes down to dust
I will help if I must
I will kill you if I can.
And mercy on our uniform
Man of peace or man of war -
The peacock spreads his fan.

by Yehuda Amichai from Open Closed Open:

Every year our father Abraham would take his sons to Mount Moriah
the way I take my children to the Negev hills where I once had a war.
Abraham hiked around with his sons. "This is where I left
the servants behind, that's where I tied the donkey to a tree
at the foot of the mountain, and here, right here, Isaac my son, you asked:
Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?
Then, up a little further, you asked for the second time."
When they reached the mountaintop, they rested a bit, ate and drank,
and he showed them the thicket where the ram was caught by its horns.

After Abraham died, Isaac started taking his sons to the same place.
"Here I lifted the wood, this is where I got out of breath,
here I asked, and my father answered: God will see to the lamb
for the offering. Over there, I already knew it was me."
And when Isaac's eyes were dim with age, his children
led him to that same spot on Mount Moriah, and recounted for him
all that had come to pass, all that he might have forgotten.

Three sons had Abraham, not just two.
Three sons had Abraham : Yishma-El, Yitzhak and Yivkeh.
First came Yishma-El, "God will hear,"
Next came Yitzhak, "he will laugh,"
and the last was Yivkeh, "he will cry."
No one has ever heard of Yivkeh, for he was the youngest,
the son that father loved best,
the son who was offered up on Mount Moriah.
Yishma-El was saved by his mother, Hagar,
Yitzhak was saved by the angel,
but Yivkeh, nobody saved.
When he was just a little boy, his father
would call him tenderly, Yivkeh,
Yivkeleh, my sweet little Yivkie –
but he sacrificed him all the same.
The Torah says the ram, but it was Yivkeh.
Yishma-El never heard from God again,
Yitzhak never laughed again,
Sarah laughed only once, then laughed no more.
Three sons had Abraham,
Yishma, "will hear", Yitzhak, "will laugh", Yivkeh, "
will cry."
Yishma-El, Yitzhak-El, Yivkeh-El,
God will hear, God will laugh, God will cry.

AMIR GILBOA □

Isaac

Early in the morning the sun took a walk in the woods
with me and my father
my right hand in his left.

A knife flashed between the trees like lightning.
And I'm so scared of the fear in my eyes facing blood
on the leaves.

Father father come quick and save Isaac
so no one will be missing at lunchtime.

It's I who am butchered, my son,
my blood's already on the leaves.
And father's voice was choked.
And his face pale.

I wanted to cry out, struggling not to believe,
I tore my eyes open
and woke.

And my right hand was drained of blood

Translated from the Hebrew
by Shirley Kaufman

ALIZA SHENHAR □

The Akedah

The loudspeaker screamed
"Take your only one
the one you love."
And the altar is destroyed.
Wood of the burnt offering is scattered.
The youths roll balls of love
on the grass of their youth.
Their tongues are hot.
The knife is shining in the wadi
in the light of the moon
of mid-border.
The white angel, the one
who always cries
"Please don't lay a hand"
is on leave.

Translated from the Hebrew
by Linda Zisquit

CHANA BLOCH □

The Sacrifice

1
The patriarch in black takes
candle and knife
like cutlery,
rehearsing under his breath
the Benediction
on the Death of an Only Son.

Isaac stoops under the raw wood,
carries his father on his back,
candle, velvet and all.

2
On the woodpile
Isaac's body waits
as women wait,
fever trilling under his skin.

He will remember the blade's
white silence,
the waiting
under his father's eyes.

The Passion of Sarah

Alicia Ostriker

As always when he leaves I am gripped by anxiety, and now they both go, father and son. Their figures grow small along the stony road, into the white-wine colored haze of the rising morning. Birds shoot from the rocks, the sun clears the amber cliffs, it will be a hot dry one. I sniff the stirred-up dust. I crack my knuckles, I imagine robbers, bandits, strangers, hooded beings who appear from nowhere. A mountain lion asleep on a ridge. From a shadowless thistle at noon a snake suddenly striking. The old man uselessly beating his breast. The child would be defenseless. I picture my son's slender thigh swollen from snakebite, thin body in seizures, glazed rosy with fever. The man says to expect him home in a week, approximately. Expect him, *him?* Whoever lays a hand on my child, I think, I'll kill him. I am still thinking such thoughts when the sun drops toward the town of Beersheba and again as it rises from the rocks, coating the mountaintops in a bloody paint. I imagine the congregation of vultures flapping down from some broad limb, walking confidently across the path. Ugly, black as burnt wood, they would begin to circle around their little find like merchants at the butcher's.

Of course I pray to the man's God to protect my husband and son. Imagine my thoughts when I discover the truth.

From FIVE CITIES OF REFUGE

Lawrence Kushner:

According to the Midrash, this was the last of ten trials by which God tested Abraham. The first began with the same conspicuous Hebrew phrase, "Lekh-lekha, Go forth [for yourself]," when God told Abraham to leave his own father's house. The story thus ends the way it began: "Lekh-lekha, Go forth [for yourself]." The boy is father to the man. It's so primal, it's the touchstone for all religious learning. Why else would the rabbis have us read, of all things, such an awe-full story on Rosh Hashanah? The parents whisper to their progeny, "You know, I almost killed you once." "Happy New Year, Daddy." "Sit up straight."

On two separate occasions, the text says of Abraham and Isaac, "And they went, both of them together." But after whatever it was that happened up there on that peak, we read only, "And Abraham returned to his servants." Isaac, we must assume, went down the other side, alone.

The name of the mountain, Moriah, means "awe-full." Tradition claims it will become the site of the Temple, the center of the world. Sinai, where the Torah was given, is ownerless and unknown. The holiest place known to Jews is the scene of a near sacrifice. The Temple is built where the older generation almost kills the younger but forbears at the last possible moment. Only a three-day's journey from home. If you raise your eyes, you can see it off in the distance.

David Mamet:

And God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham," and Abraham answered, "Here I am."

Having acknowledged the voice of God, Abraham commits himself to do God's will.

The true act of acceptance, however, the inception of the Jewish religion, is not Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, but his willingness to accept the command not to do so.

Judaism repudiates what would, it seems, be the most ancient and prevalent form of propitiation of the gods: infant sacrifice. Donation to the gods of that which, beyond question, was the most precious possession of the donor, must have been the ultimate primordial attempt at eradication of anxiety: "How can the gods not accept this greatest of gifts—they must."

We see the survival memory of child-sacrifice inverted in the Santa Claus myth, where a representative of the sun god sneaks into the house at the winter solstice. Again, inverting cause and effect, the messenger takes away a child in his sack; it is the gods who are propitiated, not the child. Recall the rhetoric of the Vietnam War, in which sixty thousand young men were sacrificed to defend "our position in the world"—they were the unfortunate infants, sent as an offering to the unfathomable Powers.

We hear the rhetoric in the speech of parents who, doubting the true educational abilities of their school, send the children in any case to be "socialized."

Abraham was acting as part of a known, and accepted, primeval and still extant tradition.

As he stands ready to sacrifice his son, a messenger of God speaks. The messenger calls, "Abraham, Abraham," repeating his name twice, as the command to cease is harder to accept even than the original command to kill. And Abraham obeys; he accepts the word of God's Messenger and stays his hand, even though such restraint visits upon him, and upon the Jewish race, the various burdens of uncertainty.

Without Feathers

Woody Allen

. . . And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, "I have had an dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on." And Isaac trembled and said, "So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole thing up?"

"What am I going to say?" Abraham said. "I'm standing there at two A.M. in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?"

"Well, did he say why he wants me sacrificed?" Isaac asked his father.

But Abraham said, "The faithful do not question. Now let's go because I have a heavy day tomorrow."

And Sarah who heard Abraham's plan grew vexed and said, "How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes, for the Lord hateth practical jokes and whosoever shall pull one shall be delivered into the hands of his enemies whether they can pay the delivery charge or not." And Abraham answered, "Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that."

And Sarah said, "And thou art willing to carry out this senseless act?" But Abraham told her, "Frankly yes, for to question the Lord's word is one of the worst things a person can do, particularly with the economy in the state it's in."

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and said, "How could thou doest such a thing?"

And Abraham said, "But thou said—"

"Never mind what I said," the Lord spake. "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?" And Abraham grew ashamed. "Er—not really . . . no."

"I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees, "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it."

"But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?"

And the Lord said, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice."

And with that, the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with him tomorrow.