Abraham, the Father, at Mount Moriah

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Any discussion of the human rights of children within a religious context must take account of the fact that one of the most significant stories in the Old Testament is that of the sacrifice (or the binding) of Isaac (in the Koran, the son involved was Ishmael). In one of the most extensive discussions of this episode, Soren Kierkegaard sees this test of Abraham as indicative of the depth of his belief and the quality of his character.[1] Indeed, he points out that, for those lacking Abraham's special qualities, a demand to sacrifice a son could actually be seen not just as a test, but as a temptation. There is a deep truth ensconced in this insight by the great Danish philosopher, namely some of the ambivalence which fathers (indeed, both parents) may well feel for their offspring.

However, Kierkegaard's thesis poses afresh the problematics of a favorite biblical story in which a test of this cruel nature is imposed by God. Furthermore, it raises serious questions as to the message that is transmitted by the story. In this article I suggest that the story itself is in need of reinterpretation, and that the standard interpretations of the monotheistic religions are not necessarily accurate. A closer look at the text of the Old Testament story is required, especially in the light of social science theories dealing with generational relations.

The story of the *Akedah* begins with God calling out to Abraham by name, and Abraham responding with one word (in Hebrew): *Hineni*—Here I am. This is an archaic form no longer in use in the modern language, but it is understood to contain an inner message, beyond the mere declaration of one's presence—namely a prior readiness, in the course of the ensuing dialogue, to fulfill God's wish. Abraham is requested to take his son to a place, Moriah, a three-day journey from Beersheba where Abraham lived, and on arriving there, to sacrifice his son, his only son, his beloved son. The Bible elucidates that God's purpose was to test Abraham.[2]

Shalom Spiegel, in a fascinating book, describes this test as the last test, the ultimate test, in a series of contacts between God and Abraham.[3] The Bible tells us directly only that God tests Abraham. What the test related to is not spelled out specifically. It is presumed in Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible, that the test was of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, but this is at no stage made clear. Other possibilities suggest themselves and will be examined.

Traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation has seen Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as the ultimate proof of his absolute and unswerving belief in God and of his determination to obey all of his commands without reservation. However, from what is known of Abraham's behavior till then, the accounts of several earlier events in his life suggest that this is a simplistic approach to the momentous story of the *Akedah*.

On the one hand, we know that Abraham does not always implicitly accept God's plans. On being informed of the impending destruction of the cities of Sodom and

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Gomorrah because of the wickedness of their citizens, Abraham spares no effort in his attempt to convince God to avert the harsh decree. In an inspiring and fascinating dialogue, Abraham bargains with God, desperately seeking arguments to placate God's anger, focusing on the possibility of saving all the wicked because of the virtuous behavior of a minute number of righteous people. In the end, even the final smallest number of such people that is agreed upon, is apparently not to be found, and God's original plan is executed.[4]

Yet, when Abraham is told to sacrifice his son, there is no similar desperate insistence on his part to seek a different outcome. On the contrary, Abraham meekly submits to God's command, immediately setting out to consummate God's request. For this obedience he has been widely and warmly commended as a model of true faith, to be emulated by others eager to fulfill God's will. Religious thought does not even try to compare the contradiction between Abraham's response to the imminent fate of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the fate awaiting his own son, except perhaps to stress even more Abraham's implicit faith.

On the other hand, Abraham had, only a short while before, already proved his willingness to sacrifice a son—in terms of Biblical chronology, a few paragraphs preceding the story of the *Akedah*. On this occasion, it was not God's original idea, but certainly carried out with his specific sanction. Because of family tensions between his wife, Sarah, and the handmaiden, Hagar, the former had requested Abraham to have the latter sent away with her son. Abraham was reluctant to do so, since he had genuine love for this firstborn child of his, Ishmael, the son with whom he had entered into a covenant with God, by their simultaneously undergoing circumcision. On seeing Abraham's reluctance, God intervenes to tell Abraham to hearken unto the voice of his wife, Sarah. Only then, after the divine intervention, does Abraham accede to Sarah's demands. He then sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert with only minimal preparations, provisions and equipment, with every likelihood of their succumbing, in the heat of the desert, to their lack of sufficient food and water. As to how disturbed Abraham was at this time we may learn from a series of stories (*midrashim*) related in later Jewish legends, of Abraham making several attempts to re-establish contact with Ishmael in the desert, but to no avail.[5]

Thus, even before Abraham received the direct order to sacrifice Isaac, he had already heard God say, in a slightly different context, that he was to commit an act which was to directly endanger his son's life. The background to these two instances is certainly very different—but, Abraham's earlier removal of a son tends to undermine the significance which religious leaders attach to his later obedience to perform what is, in essence, a similar act, certainly in its potential outcome.

Despite the fact that the Bible allows the reader to know that Ishmael does not die, and even provides a basic description of his subsequent marriage in Egypt and the birth of twelve children, thereby confirming part of God's promise to Abraham of the nation that would emerge from his progeny, Abraham himself, from the biblical account, had no knowledge of these fortunate developments. For all practical purposes, at the personal level, he was left to grieve alone over the loss of this son.

Ishmael returns to Canaan in order to participate, with his half-brother, Isaac, at the burial of Abraham, next to his wife Sarah, at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

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No explanation is provided, no hint is even offered, as to how Ishmael even knew of his father's death in order to participate at the funeral—but the mere fact of its happening is an indication of the strength of the family bond, and particularly of Ishmael's filial fidelity.[6]

A number of writers have noted this juxtaposition of the two incidents—of the actual expulsion of Ishmael and the intended sacrifice of Isaac. For them, the demand being made on Abraham is a divine punishment for the earlier action—in a sense, if you will, an inverted (or perhaps a perverted?) application of the *lex talionis*: a son for a son. A leading American Jewish theologian, David Polish, poses this possibility. He writes that, "Abraham cannot get Ishmael out of his mind. He is answering with Isaac because of Ishmael: Take (Isaac) as you once took Ishmael whom you still love."[7]

But this explanation founders somewhat on the empirical fact that Ishmael's expulsion had been carried out only after God had exhorted Abraham to acquiesce in Sarah's demand. That is, Abraham was acting against his better judgment only because of God's directive. On this basis, there is a distinct possibility that, having chosen Abraham as his messenger, God now has doubts as to his capacity to fulfill this mission. For the meekness in surrendering to Sarah, after God's intervention, suggests an underlying weakness. Where, one may surmise, is the courage and the humanity once displayed in pleading the cause of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Perhaps, then, the last test imposed by God is not one of faith and belief, but of Abraham's spirit of humanity, his independence of mind, his courage at heart. The Bible does no more than tell us that God tested Abraham—but what specifically was at stake is left open to interpretation. Was the test to see if Abraham would immediately and implicitly obey (as he had done with the casual divine comment to listen to Sarah's voice, seeking to be rid of her rival and her rival's son), or was it to see if Abraham had the inner resources (as he had displayed in the Sodom and Gomorrah incident) to challenge God's words? Was God looking for a pliant, blind believer, or for an independent, courageous personality?

For religious thinkers, it is the former. In a secular age, within a respect for religious traditions, and in acknowledgment of the Bible's persistent and perpetual power, the possibility exists of the latter. Having endangered the life of his elder son, would Abraham now, in more direct fashion, be prepared to eliminate his younger son? Would filicide be the pattern of his behavior?

The Hebrew Bible describes mainly direct action—even to the extent of placing God in a human setting, where His precise words are quoted. At this stage, it is not spiritual enlightenment that is being described, but a God who takes on the attributes of humans, by engaging them directly in dialogue. It is left to interpretation to make deeper and larger sense out of the drama being played out. In a religious age, it is perhaps understandable that the test to which Abraham was submitted would be considered to be one of faith; in a secular age, one in which generational tensions have been the focus of research, treatment and theory, alternative explanations emerge.

This is the approach that I shall adopt. In doing so, I add a caveat—that the suppositions to be presented reflect a bias toward Abraham, for possessing special qualities that enabled him to perceive human reality in a manner that is no less worthy of admiration than his ability, from a religious perspective, to understand and accept the

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novel idea of monotheism. Furthermore, I believe that his battle on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah is a truer reflection of his qualities, and that these qualities—unique and special—are present also during the *Akedah* incident.

Given modern understanding and relying on the accumulated findings of social science, a key factor of social life is the well-nigh inevitable clash of generations, expressed in modern times, on the one hand, through the prism of psychoanalysis, in the form of the Oedipus complex,[8] and on the other hand, of child abuse, in the home and elsewhere, expressed through violence and sexual exploitation.[9]

Abraham is by no means, by biblical account, a person without blemish, but his positive attributes are undoubted. Whatever the depth of his belief in one God, one may presume that there was no less a depth of love for his children, for both of his sons; one may presume also that the spirituality that enabled him to perceive of the idea of monotheism was matched by his humanistic capacity to appreciate the complexities of family life—of the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar, of the impact this had on his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, of his own feelings towards them, and of his interaction with them.

If this is correct, then having, in a moment of weakness, acceded to Sarah's demand, without displaying any opposition to divine intervention in favor of Sarah, he was bluntly and abruptly confronted with the full complexities of family life, with the invariable ambivalence that accompanies it. Having expelled Ishmael (and religious interpretation agrees with his reluctance to do so and his subsequent regrets[10]), he now had, on his own, without the kind of psychological support that might be available in modern times, to confront this ugly reality, to contemplate the nature of human nature.

And then comes the command—take your son, your other son, your remaining son, and sacrifice him to your God. To the modern age, and even earlier, this is an outrageous demand, and has caused much embarrassment to religious thinkers—but, to a certain extent (but not completely as we shall see) it is mitigated by the fact that the story has a happy ending. Isaac is saved. However, it must be remembered that at the time that the demand for sacrifice was made, there was nothing unusual about such a practice. According to the Bible itself, and to archaeological and historical evidence, filicidal practices were prevalent at that time throughout the region. Those who believed in idols, those who worshipped Baal and Maloch, were ever eager to sacrifice their sons.[11] Even some modern apologetics for such actions, such as the notion that child sacrifice was an attempt to limit over-population, which placed strains on the common resources, fails to convince, as normally it was the eldest child (generally the eldest son) who was the victim of these practices, and not the younger ones, who might perhaps constitute a population problem.[12]

Filicide (or infanticide), then, is part of the overall human experience; it appears to be, in universal terms, only one aspect, if admittedly an extreme one, of patterns of hostility practiced not by everyone, but by a sufficiently significant number of people to make it a social phenomenon worthy of note.[13] The killing of a son is filicide, even if carried out in biblical times—and in biblical terms.

For Abraham, the divine command to sacrifice his son must clearly have been an ambiguous statement. On the one hand, it appears to be a total denial of the earlier promise of the great nation that was to emerge from Isaac; one the other hand, the demand itself presented no special monotheistic pattern, since child sacrifice was part of

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the normative practices of that time and in that area amongst the heathens. To do as his neighbors were in any case doing was to diminish the very uniqueness of the monotheistic concept that Abraham was struggling to conceptualize and appreciate.

From this perspective, we may begin to understand why the sacrifice was to be carried out at Moriah—not on a nearby hillock or mountain, but in an area with which Abraham had, till then, had little contact—a full three days journey away. These three days are crucial. They indicate no rush to act, but a prolonged expectation, allowing time for reflection, allowing time for regret, allowing time for introspection, allowing time for insight.

On this score, the bible provides us with little assistance. We only know of the length of time it took to walk from Beersheba to Moriah; we also know that the father and son were accompanied by two young people, but nothing is known of what transpired during this journey—what they spoke about, what emotions were sensed, how father and son interacted with each other. The Bible sometimes provides extensive descriptions (such as the meeting between Jacob and Esau at the River Jabbok, or that between Joseph and his brothers in Egypt).[14] On other occasions it provides only a bare outline. In this case, it is possible, given the gravity of the occasion, that little was said, but even so, the concerned and curious would want to know what transpired between father and son: whether there was physical contact between them, the former aware of the impending tragedy awaiting them at their destination, the latter perhaps sensitive enough to be aware of the tension emanating from his father—from the manner of his walk, from the tenderness of their physical touching, in their eye contact.

Rabbinical exegesis has shown no lack of creativity in attempting to fill in the gaps.[15] However, many of these additions serve only to further complicate the problematics of the story. Intent on proving Abraham's utter faith, the sages postulate evil attempts by hostile forces to dissuade Abraham from his intended action. Satan, according to some of these *midrashim*, accosts Abraham and suggests to him that he should disobey God's will, that he should forego the sacrifice. But, according to these stories, Abraham is steadfast in his intention, steadfast in his faith. And so, rabbinical explanation unabashedly allows for a God who wishes to sacrifice a human being, and a Satan who wishes to forestall this act! More than this, and worse than this, other *midrashim*, as Spiegel describes in detail, actually change the climax of the story—referring to the consummation of the sacrifice, with a subsequent resurrection (which allows for the later emergence of the Jewish people).[16]

For those who adopt this approach, there is apparently a desperate need to prove Abraham's faith, beyond any doubt. The doubt apparently arises from the fact that, in the end, the sacrifice is not performed. This, it seems, leads to the gnawing perception that perhaps Abraham, from the beginning, did not intend to sacrifice Isaac, that his three-day journey to the site was only a charade, an attempt to outwit God.

This possibility poses problems not only for the story *per se,* but for the very destiny of the Jewish people, as, through years of persecution and suffering, much succor has been gained from this story etched deeply in the collective memory.[17] God will, by this thesis, remember Abraham's utter faith, as well as God's later intervention to save Isaac, and will, in a similar fashion, allow for the redemption of God's people, the descendants of Abraham. Given this close connection between Abraham, the father of the

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Jewish people, and their ongoing fate, in every generation, it becomes of supreme importance to allay any suspicions as to the sincerity and purity of Abraham's intentions. While grateful for the deliverance of Isaac from his fate, there must nevertheless be a firm conviction that Abraham had no reservations as to the outcome, not even, one presumes, a sneaking hope that somehow, at the end of the three-day journey, his son would yet be saved. Any such hope would detract from the fullness of his faith and would simultaneously perhaps deny his people, in later generations, salvation at crucial time, because of his diminished faith. Their fate is intimately bound up with his faith.

The possible alternative explanation of the three days which constitute the *Akedah* story, is of a deep soul-searching undertaken by Abraham, desperately trying, on his own perhaps, or in communion with his God, to understand one of the basic facts of social life, the ambivalence, so often expressed within the family setting—of love and concern and pride, mingled on occasion with hostility, indifference and anger. Abraham, uniquely capable of interaction through belief, with a divine being, was surely no less capable of sensitive perception of his immediate surroundings within his family. The trauma of Ishmael's expulsion with Hagar was a catalyst for understanding the complexities of his relations with his remaining son. In order to come to terms with this disturbing situation, he embarked, through interaction with God, on a three-day trek that allowed him to reflect on his relationship with his son, his capacity as a father, to harm him (even unto death), but also his desire to protect and guide him.[18]

In modern terms Abraham was undergoing a *mimesis*, a concept that describes acting out behavior in order to fully appreciate its meaning. One performs certain actions in certain roles in order to vividly experience the total sensation.[19] The negative aspect of generational contacts was the binding of Isaac prior to his imminent demise through sacrifice. The closer the actor (Abraham) came to actually performing the deed, the more precisely would the problem confronting him (of the relationship between fathers and sons) be clarified. This is what happened on Mount Moriah—or, to be more exact and fair—this is *possibly* what happened on Mount Moriah. Abraham was creatively setting up a situation that would enable him to better comprehend and cope with his own confused feelings, exposing them to symbolic reality.

A further conundrum remains. The voice that called out to Abraham to desist was not that of God, but an angel, acting for God. Indeed, never again was God to engage in a dialogue with Abraham, as he had so often done until then. In fact, Abraham himself responds with a second *Hineni,* on hearing his name being called, and willingly foregoes the sacrifice of his son, supplanting him with a ram. Again religious interpretation ignores this key transformation. It is now not the voice of God calling out, but only an angel as an emissary. Why? Is God now angry with Abraham for going so far, almost to the point of no return (on the assumption that the test was to see if Abraham would understand the enormity of what was being asked of him)? Does He refuse any further conversation because Abraham was so close to failure?

Or, alternatively, does God understand what thoughts and emotions are churning within Abraham's very being? Does he then send only an emissary to prevent the action, in a continuation of the test, in order to allow Abraham this final degree of flexibility, of independence? For, perhaps, from Abraham's perspective, this is not God's emissary. Perhaps, drawing on rabbinical exegesis, it may be asked if this is one last attempt by

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Satan to undermine Abraham's faith.[20] Why should Abraham, responding initially to God's voice directly, now allow an emissary to cancel the project?

But, as the Bible explains, Abraham is quite willing to trust this new voice, one he has never encountered before; by now it seems, his mimesis has been acted out until the end. Isaac has been bound, the fatal instrument is at hand, and then Abraham immediately responds to this new, strange voice calling out to him, and once again he says *Hineni*—Here I am, perhaps anticipating the countermanding order to stay his hand. Having proved himself in this final test, in this ultimate test, of pulling back from the brink, he may now be relied upon to act with sensitivity, with wisdom. Having understood the depths of possible depravity, he may now soar to greater spirituality on his own.

And so Abraham is, at the end of the biblical account, rewarded by God with a renewed promise of the future power and plenty of his progeny, for listening to the voice, for obeying what presumably was God's command. But which one? The initial directive to take the son for sacrifice, or the last-minute intervention to desist? For the text puts in the mouth of the emissary the words of obeying "My" word. Is the reference to the actual words of God at the beginning of the story, or the words of the emissary at its conclusion? Let me suggest the latter. At this moment, according to Erich Wellisch, a critical juncture in world history was reached.[21] There is no room for human sacrifice on the altar of a monotheistic God. Human life is precious, filicide is an abomination. Religious rituals, important for social life, may instead focus on animals (*vide* the nearby ram) as a core for sacrifice. Many generations later, the site of the *Akedah* was to become the presumed site of the Temple, where animals were indeed sacrificed to the honor and glory of God. But to establish a ban on human sacrifice, given generational frictions, given prevalent surrounding norms that sanctioned it, words alone are not sufficient—the drama must be acted out in vivid reality. The only question remaining is whether (given generational tensions) the message will be understood.

An explanation of this type, dealing with Abraham's role in the *Akedah*, also provides an explanation for the contrasting behavior of Abraham in the Sodom-Gomorrah incident. On that occasion, the harm about to be wrought was beyond Abraham's direct control. The fate of the inhabitants was in God's hands, and Abraham could do no more than plead their case, which he did so eloquently, and almost effectively. However, in the case of Isaac, it was he, Abraham, who bore direct responsibility for what would transpire at the site. Abraham was in control of what was happening; he could comply with God's directive, or he could refuse. Passionate debate with God was a distinct possibility, but it would tend only to blunt the issue at stake which, beyond the divine issue of faith and obedience, was a human one of familial relations. Abraham, if he is to be given due credit, based on modern knowledge, was willing to struggle with the full import of generational relations on his own.

The issue was not his capacity to plead on behalf of others, but his capacity to probe within himself the essence of a key problem in social life—generational conflict. The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah was in God's hands; the fate of Isaac was in Abraham's. He, the father, was to kill Isaac, his son. Confronted with this awesome task, he finally understood the full extent of his dilemma, a universal dilemma not confined to any period or place, a dilemma of parental power *vis-à-vis* the vulnerable young—a

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dilemma dealing not with killing alone, but with harm inflicted, even unwittingly, even in error and not necessarily in anger.

Religious thinking holds that by his action, Abraham assured God's compassionate protection of his people. Secular thinking suggests that by his action, Abraham exposed the problematics of parenthood, and provided a message that may well resound through the generations, of a warning of parental power, but also of an example of parental devotion. Not love of God was the test (for Abraham had already proved that in manifold ways), but love of progeny, despite the dilemmas and difficulties of parenthood, which are so much easier to ignore or deny.

The story of the *Akedah* is a superb one, in its wording a literary masterpiece. It grips the reader, it speaks magnificently to people of different times and different climes. But, as with all good literature, it is open to varying understandings and interpretations. For hundreds of years the emphasis was on the religious understanding of faith in God. In recent years other possibilities have been probed, drawing on the findings of social science research. Some of the above descriptions fit in well with much of this modern writing.[22] It behooves us now to examine separately some of these more modern ideas. The story remains constant as a short, succinct episode in a sacred text; the understandings must be adapted to the larger perceptions that we are enabled to have by virtue of increased knowledge, perhaps even more perceptive wisdom. To do so is not to diminish the text or desecrate it. On the contrary, it is to accord it due respect, and to perhaps reinvigorate its overall appeal.

Indeed, it is only with the wisdom of hindsight that the inner message of biblical themes may be ascertained; only with the accumulated knowledge of modern social science that deeper understanding may be achieved, In a series of books and articles, David Bakan suggests that in general, the underlying theme of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is to warn against the dangers of child sacrifice.[23] Most specifically, he states that:

> The essence of Judaism and Christianity is the management of the infanticidal impulse…and a binding of the father against acting out the impulse. One of the main historical functions of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been to counteract the infanticidal impulses which arise as a dialectical antithesis to the assumption of paternal responsibility on the part of men.[24]

Symbolic support for Bakan's approach is that the final book of the second part of the *Tanakh* (containing all the prophets) concludes with a statement of almost messianic proportions, especially since it incorporates a reference to Elijah, the prophet, traditionally considered to be a forerunner of the Messiah. Malachi, the prophet, exclaims:

> Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the land with utter destruction.[25]

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Bakan's use of the word "binding" in the context of preventing the father from acting out any negative impulse is of some interest. For the direct translation of the Hebrew word "*Akedah*" is "binding." But Bakan himself refers elsewhere to an act of binding which is part of religious ritual—namely the practice of religious Jews at morning prayers on an ordinary week-day, of laying *tefillin* (phylacteries). This is in fulfillment of a biblical command. In practice it involves, amongst other actions, the binding of a leather strap seven times around the forearm. Bakan, himself an orthodox Jew, writing from a professional psychological perspective, suggests that in this physical action (a sort of mimesis if you will), the hand, with its potential capacity to harm, is restrained in a constant reminder of the need to be aware of paternal power, to avoid its possible damaging manifestations.[26]

But Bakan himself is fully aware of the limitations of symbolic acts. Plain and simple, they may be easily misinterpreted. This is indeed, according to Bakan, what did happen with the *Akedah*. Its real message, of avoiding doing harm to children, was not understood. Thus, as already noted, the reference to the incident on Mount Moriah is generally made in terms of "sacrifice," even though no sacrifice was consummated. According to Bakan, a more direct action is required—and this is precisely what happened several generations later when Jesus, considered by many as the son of God, was sacrificed—an act considered by Christian theology to be one of redemption. Indeed, for Bakan, the interconnections between the two incidents may be noted in the overlap between the Jewish festival of Passover and the Christian holiday of Easter.[27] The very name of Passover is a reference to the saving of the firstborn of the Israelites in Egypt when, in the final plague, the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed. In this methodical slaughter, the houses of the Israelites, clearly designated by the blood of a lamb smeared on the doorposts, were passed over; in the harsh biblical description: "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall no plague be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."[28]

As Isaac was saved at the last moment, and replaced by a ram, so, several generations later, all the firstborn of the Israelites are spared the fate of their Egyptian neighbors. As Moses explained to the people: "For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side-posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you."[29] This is, then, by Jewish tradition, one of the first examples of redemption granted because of the proven faith, through the *Akedah*, of Abraham.

Of course, the harm inflicted on the Egyptians is also problematical—the firstborn children were after all, not responsible for the unfortunate fate of the Israelites. It was Pharaoh who was displaying obstinacy in refusing to release the Israelites. Yet, this tenth plague is only one more example of the manner in which the fate of children, as noted by Bakan, is a dominant theme in the Bible.

The story of the *Akedah* has evoked many different reactions—of puzzlement, of inspiration, of embarrassment, of rejection, of fear. Puzzlement as to why God should even conceive of a test as extreme and cruel as this; inspiration for those eager to accord Abraham the capacity for expressing utter faith; embarrassment as to how to relate to a story so sinister in its intended consequences; rejection by those who want no part of a religion whose patriarchal figure is capable of committing (or almost committing) such a

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despicable act; fear, as specifically used by Kierkegaard in the title of his book dealing philosophically with the meaning of the sacrifice.[30]

A useful summary of these varying approaches is provided by Louis Berman, extensively presenting many of the myriad of responses to the story of the *Akedah*. As extensive as this presentation is, it can by no means be exhaustive, as for every written exposition, there must surely be several oral analyses—more particularly since many sermons must inevitably focus on the story, given the fact that it is read in the synagogue on the second day of *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish New Year).

Furthermore, almost nothing is known as to the manner in which the story is perceived by young people being exposed to it for the first time. In Israel, where the Bible is taught in all schools, the story is included in the curriculum for the second grade, that is, for seven-year-old children. Little is known of the emotions that grip the child as he follows the unfolding of a father willing to kill his son. What possible fears does it instill in him? Sigmund Freud related that one of his patients—in one of his seminal case studies—explained his loss of religious faith as rejecting a God who was capable of making such a demand, but Freud himself did not attempt to probe the story at greater depth, or the emotions of his patient in this regard.[32] Freud himself, so involved with generational conflict and ever ready to draw on biblical themes (for instance in his book, *Moses and Monotheism*),[33] never related to the *Akedah*, a story that is, in its bare essence, the very opposite of the Oedipus theme.

Possibly the most troublesome explanations given over the years are those that attempt to explain Abraham's action in terms of the normative procedures of that period. A leading American Jewish scholar, Robert Gordis, in a book entitled *Judaic Ethics for a Lawless World,* provides perhaps the most succinct and pertinent example of this approach. He writes:

> …the sacrifice of a child was an all-but-universal practice in ancient Semitic religion and beyond.…Abraham, living…in a world permeated by pagan religion, did not feel himself confronted by a moral crisis when he was commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, and he proceeded to obey.…In the patriarchal age, this horror of child sacrifice, an attitude in which Judaism was unique in the ancient world, still lay in the distant future (p. 108).[34]

In discussing the work of Gordis, Berman comments that, "The error of presentism flaws any attempt to evaluate the event from another era as if it were occurring in our time. When you attempt to put yourself in Abraham's shoes, first ask yourself, 'Did he wear shoes?'"[35] Such an approach seems to me to denigrate whatever contribution Abraham made to Judaism and to universal influence, for it ignores the fact that his greatness lay precisely in his being able to rise above the prevailing tide of custom and opinion, to acknowledge the very idea of monotheism in an environment of idol-worship. Apologetics for Abraham's action diminish his stature.

In any event, modern life provides us with ample evidence of child abuse in various forms. As one of the most extreme expressions, Gilligan describes a murder committed by a father which he explained in court as being his response to a divine

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command, just as Abraham had responded.[36] She uses this incident as the basis for an interesting analysis of Abraham's action, which is nevertheless problematic, as she remains troubled till the end by the violence endemic in the story.

Abraham's action cannot be understood in terms of normative values and customary practices of that time; such an approach is to deny his innovative creativity. Certainly today, it must be understood in universal terms, perhaps more easily because of the twin facts of a secular age (not bound by rabbinical and priestly interpretations) and a scientific one (allowing the use of sociological and psychological knowledge). By these terms, Abraham's last-minute withdrawal from completing the sacrifice of his son is the mark of his positive qualities, of his passing of the test, of the real lesson to be learned by others, of the true message

Footnotes:

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953).
2. *Genesis,* XXII, 1-19.
3. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: 1967); see also Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom, and the Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988). He specifically links Abraham's willingness to martyrdom, which he sees as being "…the ultimate love of man for God."
4. *Genesis,* XVII, 16-33.
5. See Spiegel, *op. cit.* for accounts of these stories.
6. *Genesis,* XXV, 8-9: "And Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of *Machpelah*…".
7. David Polish, ……..

   Elsewhere Polish writes that "The Biblical story is intent on only one objective, to demonstrate what a man of faith Abraham was. But the Rabbis in the *Midrash* had a different objective…they were distressed by the idea that a just God…should subject him to such a ghastly test." See *Abraham's Gamble: Selected Sermons for Our Times* (Evanston, 1988), pp. 162-163.
8. See, for instance, Erich Fromm, "The Oedipus Complex and the Oedipus Myth," in Ruth Nanda Anshen (ed.), *The Family: Its Functions and Destiny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 426; and A.J. Levin, "The Oedipus Myth in History and Psychiatry," *Psychiatry* 2 (1948), p. 287.
9. See, in general, articles in the *History of Childhood Quarterly;* and Lloyd de Mause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975).
10.
11.

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12.

13. See, for instance, the work of an Argentinian psychoanalyst, Arnoldo Rascovsky, founder of a society in South America in the 1970s for the study of this problem. See his Spanish-language book, *El Filicido* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Orion, n.d.).

14. I have discussed these meetings extensively in a recently published Hebrew book, *Asabim Shotim BeGan Eden* (*Weeds in the Garden of Eden: Biblical Narratives and Israeli Chronicles*) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad Publishing House, 2002).

15.

16. See, for instance, Spiegel, *op. cit.,* pp.

17.

18. See, for instance, Burton Caine,

19. As defined in the Random House dictionary: "imitation or reproduction of the supposed words of another, as in order to represent his character."

20. See Spiegel, *op. cit.*

21. Erich Wellisch, *Isaac and Oedipus: A Study in Biblical Psychology of the Sacrifice of Isaac—the Akedah* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

22. See, for instance, the work of Dorothy Bloch, "Fantasy and the Fear of Infanticide," *Psychoanalytic Review* (1974), p. 5; and *So the Witch Won't Eat Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

23. See, for instance, David Bakan, *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966).

24. David Bakan, "Paternity in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *The Human Context* 4 (1972), p. 354.

25. *Malachi,* III, 23-24.

26. See Bakan,

27. Bakan,

28. *Exodus,* XII, 13.

29. *Exodus,* XII, 23.

30. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, op. cit.*

31. Louis Berman, *The Akedah.*

32. Sigmund Freud, *The Rat-Man.*

33. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works,* edited by James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, vol. 4).

34. Robert Gordis, *Judaic Ethics for a Lawless World,* p. 108.

35. Berman, *op. cit.,* p.

36. Gilligan, *Abraham*

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