

PASSION AND VIOLENCE: THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC AS A PHILOSOPHICAL STORY

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Source 1 – Bereshit,
The Binding of Isaac
Genesis 22:1-18 [trans. Adapted sefaria]



וַיְהִי אַחֲרַיִם הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him, “Abraham.” He answered, “Here I am.”

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ אֶת־יְצִחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת־חֲמֹלוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֶת יְצִחָק בְּנֵוֹ וַיִּבְקַע עֵצִי עֹלָה וַיֵּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

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

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק:

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ־לְכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱר נִלְכֶה עַד־לָּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:

Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל־יְצַחָק בָּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלִת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְצַחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לוֹ הַשָּׁה לְעֹלָה בְנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

And Abraham said, “It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
וַיַּעֲרֶךְ אֶת-הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל
לְעֵצִים:

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמָּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת-בְּנוֹ:

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מֵלְאָךְ ה' מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Then a messenger of YKVK called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנְּעָר וְאֶל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי | עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא
אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי: “

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

וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אֲחֹר נֶאֱחָז בַּסֹּבֵב בְּקַרְנָיו וַיִּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל
וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:

When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns.
So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of
his son.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שְׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא ה' וַיֵּרָא אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר ה' יֵרָאָה:

And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh,*whence the present saying, “On the
mount of YKVK there is [a] vision.”*

וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ ה' אֶל-אַבְרָהָם שְׁנִית מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם:

The messenger of YKVK called to Abraham a second time from heaven,

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־ה' כִּי יַעַן אֲנִי עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנִיךָ
אֶת־יְחִידְךָ:

and said, “By Myself I swear, YKVK declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one,

כִּי־בָרַךְ אֲבָרְכְךָ וְהִרְבֵּה אֲרַבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחֹל אֲנִי עַל־שְׂפַת הַיָּם וַיִּרַשׁ
זַרְעֲךָ אֶת יַמֵּי אֲבֹתָיו:

I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.

וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעֲךָ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ לְעֹבֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי:

All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.” ===

Source 2 :

Classic Modern Continental
Philosophy “Existentialism”:

**Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855,
Danish, Christian)**



Søren Kierkegaard:

“There was one who relied upon himself and gained everything; there was one who in the security of his own strength sacrificed everything; *but the one who believed God was the greatest of all.* There was one who was great by virtue of his power, and one who was great by virtue of his wisdom, and one who was great by virtue of his hope, and one who was great by virtue of his love, but *Abraham was the greatest of all, great by that power whose strength is powerlessness*”, 16

Source 3:

“Dialogical Thought”

Franz Rosenzweig
(1886-1929)



“Here is the I, the individual human I, as yet wholly receptive, as yet only unlocked, only empty, without content come out without nature, pure readiness, pure obedience, or is. The commandment is the first content to drop into this attentive hearing. The summons to hear, the address by the given name, the seal of the discoursing divine mouth - all these are but preface to every commandment.”

Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 176

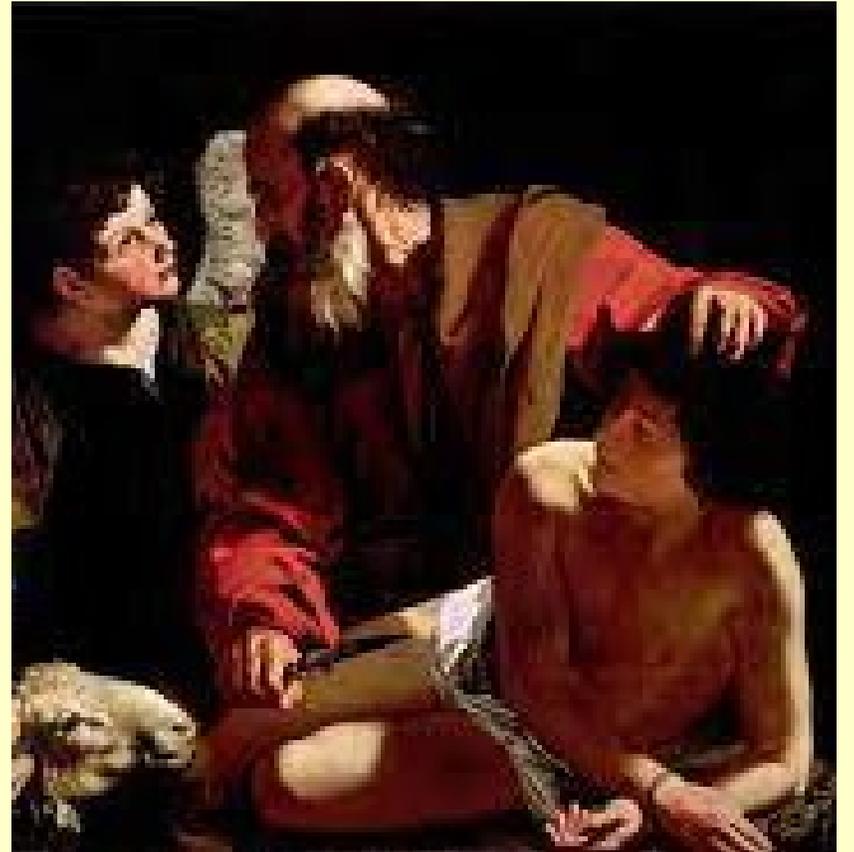


*Alte und neue
Welt*

Source 4:

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)

“Ethics as First Philosophy”



“Perhaps Abraham’s ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order was the highest moment in this drama.

“... Kierkegaard never speaks of the situation in which Abraham enters into dialogue with God to intercede in favor of Sodom and Gomorrah in the name of the just who may be present there.

Source 5:

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)



Yes, it is a matter, once again, of responding. And yes, of responding “yes.” Without even naming Abraham, prior to daring to issue a summons toward the immense figure of the patriarch presumed to respond to the calling of his name, “yes, here I am,” “I am here,” “I am ready,” one must know (and this is the first Abrahamic teaching, prior to any other) that if everything begins for us with the response, if everything begins with the “yes” implied in all responses (“yes, I respond,” “yes, here I am,” even if the response is “no”), then any response, even the most modest, the most mundane, of responses, remains an acquiescence given to some self-presentation

Jacques Derrida, Abraham, the Other, in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* Book Eds Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, (New York: Fordham University Press), 3.

Derrida:

Abraham as an individual possesses “a secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion”.

Contemporary Philosophical View:

- ❖ **The idealised Abrahamic character is not the individual at the centre,**
- ❖ **The ideal Abraham is the one who *is called to leave the centre—to de-centre.***
- ❖ **This is the model of Abraham who leaves, as one who is commanded to know oneself.**
- ❖ **Move to dialogue, and relationality.**
- ❖ **Importance of the Dialogical turn, which re-situates ethics as primary.**

What now? Questions for Jewish thought today:

- **Must we all be Abraham?**
- **Must we, at the end of the day, reject rationalism in preference for passion?**
- **What if we are not spontaneous? Does ethical action not often require great deliberation and dilemma.**
- **How must we respond to religious violence? Is passion not the same, ultimately, as violence?**
- **How do we place the ethical more at the centre of our religion?**
- **What is the meaning of dialogue in our faith? And who is it with?**

