



The Sacrifices of Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac: The Torah Readings for Rosh haShanah

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GENESIS 22:6, 8, 19

<p>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 of them walked together.</p> <p>...</p> <p>And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked together.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Abraham then returned to his servants, and they walked together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.</p>	<p>וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת הַמֶּאֱכָלֶת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו. ...</p> <p>וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה לּוֹ הִשָּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו. ...</p> <p>וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל נַעֲרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע:</p>
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GENESIS 23:1-2

<p>Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.</p> <p>Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.</p>	<p>וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:</p> <p>וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:</p>
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Wilfred Owen, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1918)

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Leonard Cohen, "The Story of Isaac" (1969)

You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.
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.

Haim Gouri, ירושה (1960)

<p>Isaac, as was told, was not offered as a sacrifice. He lived many days, Saw the good, until the light of his eyes dimmed. But this hour he bequeathed to his descendants. They are born and a knife (<i>ma'akhelet</i>) in their hearts.</p>	<p>הָאֵיל בָּא אַחֲרָיו. וְלֹא יָדַע אֲבִרָהִם כִּי הוּא מְשִׁיב לְשֵׁאלֹת הַיֶּלֶד, רֹאשִׁית-אוֹנוֹ בְּעֵת יוֹמוֹ עָרֵב. נָשָׂא רֹאשׁוֹ הַשָּׂב. בְּרֹאוֹתָיו כִּי לֹא חָלֵם חֲלוֹם וְהַמְלָאךְ נֹצֵב – נִשְׁרָה הַמֶּאֱכֵלֶת מִיָּדוֹ. הַיֶּלֶד שֶׁהִתֵּר מֵאֲסוּרָיו רָאָה אֶת גֵּב אָבִיו. יִצְחָק, כְּמִסְפָּר, לֹא הֶעֱלָה קֶרֶבָן. הוּא חַי יָמִים רַבִּים, רָאָה בְּטוֹב, עַד אוֹר עֵינָיו כָּהָה. אָבֵל אֶת הַשְּׁעָה הַהִיא הוֹרִישׁ לְצִאֲצָאִיו. הֵם נוֹלָדִים וּמֵאֲכֵלֶת בְּלֶבָם.</p>
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Hanoch Levin (1943-1999), העקידה, from the collection *Queen of a Bathtub* (1969)

Isaac: I don't understand you, Dad – you see that from my side it's fine. If you're ready to murder in cold blood *me*, the child of your old age, your precious child who was given to you as a gift at age 90, the only consolation you have ever had in life, if you are ready – then am I the person who would say “no” to you? ... It is really such a big deal to slaughter a small weak child? What is it, in the scheme of things, to slaughter a child? What is a child, after all? Especially if the slaughterer is his father, who is a reliable slaughterer and anyway just a messenger!

Get up and drive the blade of the knife into my young flesh, Daddy, and slice open my throat until the blood erupts and sprays out on the ground like the blood of a cow. Make me a cow, Daddy, and when my eyes open wide and nearly pop out of their sockets, and my tongue is like sick, and hangs out with my final mangled scream – then, Daddy, turn the knife in my throat while I, blood of your blood and bone of your bones, limp legs floundering on the altar as death approaches. Nu, Daddy, they told you to slaughter – so slaughter!

**Aramaic poem from the Byzantine era
(published in Sokoloff and Yahalom, שירת בני מערבא, #14)**

<p>This is the day that they will say, A father had no pity, and a son did not delay. How will you go and tell my mother Sarah, How will you leave me and go home? Isaac kissed his father Abraham, Commanding him, saying to him: Sprinkle my blood on the altar, Gather my ashes and bring them to Mother. My life and my death – all is in his hand, And I thank him for thus choosing me.</p> <p>Fortunate are you, Father, that they will say, That I am the lamb for the offering to the Living God. Let your anger triumph over your love, Father</p>	<p>דין הוא יומא / די יהון אמרין אב לא חס / בריה לא עכיב היך תויל ותימר / לשרה אמי 10 היך תפרוש מיני / ותיזיל לביתא ונשיק יצחק / לאברהם אבוהי ופקיד יתיה / וכן אמ' ליה זריק דמי / על גבי מדבחא וכנוש קטמי / ואוביליה לאימי 15 חיי ומותא / כולה בדיה ומודה אנא ליה / דהכדין בחר בי טובך אבא / די יהוון אמרין אנא אימר עלתא / דאלהא חייא יתקוף רוגזך / על רחמך אבא 20 ותיהוי כגבר / דלא חייס על בריה כגבר אכורי / סב סכינך ותכוס יתי / דלא תסאיבני לא תהוי בכי / דלא נעכבך ולית אנא מן ירך / נסב גרמי 25 מה תבכי / אמר יצחק לאברהם אבוה טובי די בחר / קיריס מן כל קוזמוס</p>
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<p>Be like a man who has no mercy on his son! Like a cruel man, take your knife And slaughter me, do not defile me. Do not cry, that I should not delay you, And I will not take myself away from you. Why should you cry? said Isaac to his father Abraham. Fortune that the Lord of the world chose!</p>	
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The critical view: A Shavuot piyyut by R. Elazar b. Rabbi Qilliri

The introduction of Avraham

<p>Turning to the end of twenty he saw / Indeed to circumcise him I rejoiced and exulted /</p> <p>He burnt idols, and I gazed upon him / He abandoned his family to enter my fold.</p> <p>From the burning furnace I saved him / Exalted through ten, with which I purified him.</p>	<p>סב לסוף עשרים צץ איש עצתי סלה למולו ששתי ועלצתי שורף פסילים ועליו הצצתי 195 סובליו עזב להקנס במחיצתי שריפת כבשן מנה אותו הצלתי סוגב בעשורה אשר אותו צרפתי</p>
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God's suggestion to give the Torah to Avraham

<p>Marked with the covenant which I contracted and was pleased / I delighted in him, and rejoiced and cheered / I found a book of the Torah.</p> <p><i>He sat and was calculating / To settle wisdom and knowledge / To create the creatures and civilize the land.</i></p>	<p>סויים בבית אשר איתו כרתי ונרציתי שמחתי בו וששתי ודצתי 200 ספר תורה מצאתי</p> <p>יושב ה'יה ומחשב חקמה ודעה לישוב יצורים לבראות ועולם ישב</p>
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The Torah's criticism of Avraham

<p>The faithful one answered to the Lord, to praise him and exalt him / The young man with whom you graced him when his strength was spent / he bound on the wood of the altar /</p> <p>Arrested for three days, he offered his chick / It was pleasant, and his offering was accepted /</p> <p>He became great, and his reputation spread throughout the land. <i>But he forgot how a father is supposed to have mercy on a son / a prayer or plea he should have offered!</i></p> <p>“Now I know,” you said to him, to praise him, the One who made the land with his strength.</p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="text-align: right;"> <p>עֲנֵתָהּ אֱמוּנָה לְאֵדוֹן לְעֹלָסוֹ וּלְנִצְחוֹ עַל־מֵ אֲשֶׁר־ חֲנִנְתָּהּ בְּכָלוֹת כָּחוֹ עָקְדוֹ עַל עֲצֵי מִזְבְּחוֹ עֶצֶר שְׁלוֹשָׁה יָמִים עַשׂ אֶפְרוֹחוֹ עָרַב וְנִרְצָה נִיחוּחוֹ עֶצֶם וּבְכָל אֶרֶץ הַפִּיחַ רִיחוֹ עֲנִיין כְּרַחֵם אָב עַל בְּנִים בְּשִׁכְחוֹ עֲטִיפַת תַּחֲנוּנָה הִיָּה לוֹ לְעֶרֶךְ בְּשִׁיחוֹ עֲתָה יָדַעְתִּי שִׁמְעָתוֹ לְשִׁבְחוֹ עוֹשֶׂה אֶרֶץ בְּכָחוֹ</p> </div> <div style="text-align: right;"> <p>205</p> <p>210</p> </div> </div>
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Comparison to the Hagar story

God tells Abraham that he needs to get rid of his son – banish in the case of Ishmael, kill in the case of Isaac (21:12-13; 22:1-2).

Abraham “wakes up early in the morning” (וישכם אברהם בבקר) and takes his supplies (21:14; 22:3).

The end draws near: Ishmael, about to die of thirst, is left under a bush by his mother (21:15-16), and Isaac is about to be slaughtered by his father (21:9-10).

At the last minute, an angel appears to offer a reprieve (21:17, 22:11–12).

The appearance of the angel is followed by blessings for the future (21:18; 22:16-17).

The salvation is tied to the parent seeing something new – a well of water in the case of Hagar (21:19) and a ram in the case of Abraham (22:13).

Each end with notices related to the children’s marriages (21:21; 22:20-24).

But there is one major difference:

Hagar “lifts her voice and cries,” and God “hears the voice.”

Abraham – silence.

God tells Abraham that he needs to get rid of his son – banish in the case of Ishmael, kill in the case of Isaac (21:12-13; 22:1-2).	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֲלֵי־רַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנֶּעֱרָר וְעַל־אֲמַתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִי־צָחָק יִקְרָא לָךְ זָרַע:	וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר־אֲהַבְתָּ אֶת־יֶצְחָק וְלֵךְ־ךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לַעֲלֹה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:
Abraham “woke up early in the morning” and takes his supplies (21:14; 22:3).	וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֶמֶת מִיַּם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָגָר שֶׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיְשַׁלְחָהּ וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּתֶנּוּ בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֶר שָׁבַע:	וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת־חֻמְרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־יִשְׁנָיו וְעַרְוֹ אִתּוֹ וְאֶת יֶצְחָק בְּנֵו וַיִּבְקַע עֲצֵי עֵלֶה וַיִּקֶּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:
The end draws near: Ishmael, about to die of thirst, is left under a bush by his mother (21:15-16), and Isaac is about to be slaughtered by his father (21:9-10).	וַיְכַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֲמַת וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים:	וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמֶּאֱכָלֶת לַשַּׁחַט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:
The parent cries out to save their child, and God hears the cries.	וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לֹה מִמִּגַּד הַרְחָק כְּמִטְחָוִי קָשָׁת כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל־אֶרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִמִּגַּד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְדֹּךְ: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר.	וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמֶּאֱכָלֶת לַשַּׁחַט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

“Hagar” – a verbal portrait

And then the voice again. The voice she had heard so many years earlier, that angelic voice who called her “daughter.” But this time, no “daughter.”

“Hagar, why do you give up? The boy is growing. Look at him. He is your future, and his future is bright. Did I not tell you that you would have many descendants? It starts with him, and it starts now.”

“But there is no water!”

“Look over there.”

Hagar looked. Hidden behind a rock, just beyond a thorny bush – a well. Just a small one, it looked like it hadn’t been used in years. But maybe there was some water there still? There was! Hagar filled the skin, and hurried over to the boy-almost-a-man. He drank. His eyes fluttered open, and he whispered. “Thanks, Mom.”

Mom. That was better than daughter.

Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (ed. Nahum H. Glatzer; New York: Schocken, 1982), 41

Both in the first and the last of the revelations, God—the as yet unknown God in the first, and the familiar one in the last—sends Abraham out with the same command: “Get thee...” (22:2). This phrase occurs only on these two occasions in the entire Bible. In the one instance the demand, at the beginning of his trials, is that he *separate* himself from the past, from the world of the Fathers; in the second instance, at the end of his trials, that he *separate* himself, despite the promise given him by that same God, from the world of the sons.

Phyllis Tribble, “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah,” in *“Not in Heaven”: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (ed. Jason Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 170-191.

The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, nonattached, the model of faithfulness. In making Abraham the object of the divine test, the story ... fails to offer Sarah redemption and thereby perpetuates the conflict between her and Hagar. As long as Sarah is attached to Isaac (both child and symbol), so long Sarah afflicts Hagar.

Wendy Zierler, “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah,” *Nashim* 9 (2005), 17

While I, too, am anxious to discover ways and precedents for women to be incorporated into our notions of religious transcendence and our narrative of spiritual seeking, do I want to adopt this particular model of transcendent God-encounter? Do I want “in” on the notion that the “solitary individual, non-attached,” is the ultimate “model of faithfulness”?

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth, however, has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life. This willingness links Gandhi to the biblical Abraham, who prepared to sacrifice the life of his son in order to demonstrate the integrity and supremacy of his faith.

<p><i>I Will Not Offer</i></p> <p>Ra'aya Harnik (transl. Ruth Kartun-Blum)</p> <p><i>Genesis 22:1–19</i></p> <p>I will not offer My first born for sacrifice Not I</p> <p>At night God and I Make reckonings Who can claim what</p> <p>I know and am Grateful But not my son And not for sacrifice</p>	<p>רעיה הרניק / אני לא אקריב אני לא אקריב בכורי לעולה לא אני</p> <p>בְּלִילוֹת אֱלֹהִים וְאֲנִי עוֹרְכִים חֲשׁוֹנוֹת מִה מְגִיעַ לִמִּי</p> <p>אֲנִי יוֹדַעַת וּמַכִּירָה תּוֹדָה. אֲבֵל לֹא אֶת בְּנִי וְלֹא לְעוֹלָה.</p>
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If Abraham did not cry, why did the angel come? Rivkah Lubitch, “Sarah and the Akedah”

From *נשים דרשוני: [Dirshuni: Israeli Women Writing Midrashim]* (ed. Nechama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala; Tel-Aviv: Yedi'ot aḥaronot Sifre ḥemed, ha-Sokhnut ha-Yehudit, and Kōl kōre, 2009), p. 43 – now in English translation, Brandeis University Press, 2022

God tested Sarah. The angel told her: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to yourself (לְךָ *leḵi lak*) to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” And Sarah said: “No. For a mother will not slaughter her son.”

And in the morning she arose, was roused and trembled, for the boy was not there, and neither was his father Abraham. She spread her eyes to God in Heaven and said: “Master of the World! I know that one who slaughters his son in the name of God—in the end has no son and has no god. Forgive Abraham, who sinned in this matter. Recall, please, that the mother would not contemplate sacrificing her son to God, and save the boy from his hand.”

At just that moment Abraham reached out his hand to the knife to slaughter his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him: “Do not reach out your hand against the boy, for now I know that you fear God” (Genesis 22:12), *although* you did not spare your son. And therefore it says, “All that she shall say to you, you should listen to her” (Genesis 21:12), and therefore “for through Isaac you shall have heirs” (there).

Epilogue 1: News from Haran

GENESIS 22:20-24

Some time later, Abraham was told, “Milcah too has borne sons to your brother Nahor...:Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore [four sons]....	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּגַּד לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה יָלְדָה מִלְכָּה גַם־הִוא בָּנִים לְנָחוֹר אָחִיד. ... וּבְתוּאֵל יָלַד אֶת־רֵבְקָה שְׁמִנָּה אֵלֶּה יָלְדָה מִלְכָּה לְנָחוֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם ... וּפִילְגֻשׁוֹ וְשִׁמְהָ רְאוּמָה וַתֵּלֶד גַּם־הִוא אֶת־טֹבֶחַ וְאֶת־גַּחַם וְאֶת־תַּחַשׁ וְאֶת־ מַעֲכָה.
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Epilogue 2: Marriage plans

GENESIS 24:1-4

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.”	וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וְה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת אַבְרָהָם בְּכָל. וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל עַבְדּוֹ זָקֵן בֵּיתוֹ הַמִּשְׁלָל בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ שִׁים נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי. וְאֲשַׁבֵּיעְךָ בָּה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֱלֹהֵי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא תִקַּח אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִבְּנוֹת הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּקָרְבָּן. כִּי אֵל אֶרְצִי וְאֵל מוֹלַדְתִּי תֵלֵךְ וְלִקְחָתָהּ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי לְיִצְחָק.
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