

Sarah Got a New Fur Coat: The Poetics of the Akeda

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Poems of the Akeda
All translations by Ilana Kurshan

Deeds of the Fathers
T. Carmi

And after the Akeda?
Then the most difficult test began.

Abraham took his son to the
camel races
Hiked with him from the
Euphrates to the Nile,
Swam by his side, watching him
like a hawk
In the waters of Eilat. And when
they returned home,
He slaughtered flocks and herds
aplenty,
All tender and good,
Sweet scent of songs and of
muscle and meat
And guests in good graces come
in from afar.
Isaac ate and ate, ate –
And was silent.

Abraham bought his wife
a fur coat
And golden jewelry

Perhaps more than many other biblical story, the Akeda has lent itself to poetic reinterpretation -- from the work of modern Hebrew poets such as T. Carmi, Meir Wieseltier, and Rivka Miriam (translations of whose poems appear here) to the poetry of Wilfred Owen about World War I, to songs by Leonard Cohen and Joan Baez. What is it about the Akeda that has given rise to so much lyricism?

On the most basic level, these poems serve as Midrash, filling the gaps in a difficult and unsettling text. Why did Abraham obey God's charge to lead his son to the sacrificial altar? How did the incident transform Abraham's relationship with Isaac, with Sarah, and with God? T. Carmi explains that after the Akeda, Abraham acted like a guilty father and husband, trying to make up for a past betrayal by taking his son to the camel races and buying his wife a new fur coat. Wieseltier condemns Abraham for his self-righteousness, insisting that the

He installed emergency lighting
in their tent
He brought her boots in style
from a shop on the Nile
Hashish from Tarshish,
Cinnamon from Lebanon.
Sarah, who grew old overnight,
Never took off her mourning
clothes.

Abraham prayed to his God
morning and evening,
He hung tzedakah boxes on all
the tamarisk trees,
Studied his Torah night and day,
Fasted,
And gave room and board to
angels for almost no fee.
The voice from on high
disappeared.

And the voice within him
(The only one left)
Said: Yes, you went
From your land, from your
homeland, from the land of your
father,
And now, in the end, from
yourself.

* * *

Abraham
Meir Wieseltier

The only thing in the world that
Abraham loved was God.
He did not love the gods of other
men,
Which were made of wood or
clay and of polished vermilion,
Which were created by men who
came home each evening to their
wives
to guzzle meat and wine,
Which were sold in the city
market like onions to the highest
bidder:
He invented his own God, and

patriarch was drunk
on God. And Rivka
Miriam suggests
that Isaac did not
want to be unbound
after all. None of
these perspectives is
supplied in the
Torah. If the biblical
account is the set of
natural numbers (i.e.
1,2,3,4,5...), then
these poems, as
Midrash, are
attempts to fill in
some of the real
numbers as well (i.e. 1.1, 1.2, 1.23. 1.233....) The set of
real numbers is infinitely dense: between any two real
numbers, there is another real number. The same is true of
Torah: You can turn it and turn it and always find more in
it.

But these poems do more than just fill in missing
details. The chief characteristic of poetry is metaphor --
the literary device of showing what something is by
describing it as what it is not. "The moon was a ghostly
galleon tossed upon cloudy seas." The moon is not a
galleon -- it's the moon! But by comparing it to a galleon,
we refine our image of the moon, at least as it appeared to
Alfred Noyes's highwayman. Likewise, we have a more
nuanced understanding of the biblical characters after we
have encountered them in these poems. What if Abraham
had felt so remorseful after the Akeda that he spent the
rest of his life making up for it? What if Isaac had become
sullen and obese? To ask these "what if" questions is to

made himself His chosen one.

And of everything that existed in the world, he loved only Him – God.

He did not bow down to other gods; he said to them: If you go right,

I'll go left; If you go left, I'll go right

He said: Lest they say, I made him wealthy.

He refused to take anything from anyone or to give anyone anything,

Except God. Him, all He had to do was ask,

And He would receive.

Everything. Even Isaac, the only one, the tender inheritor.

(But if there is a God, there is also an angel.)

He did not appreciate anything in the world, only God.

He never sinned to Him; there was no difference between them.

Not like Isaac, who loved his coarse-minded son; not like Jacob Who slaved away for women, who limped from the blows that God gave him at night,

Who saw angelic ladders only in dreams.

Not so Abraham, who loved God, and whom God loved,

And together they counted the righteous of the city before they wiped it out.

* * *

So, By the Altar

Rivka Miriam

So, by the altar, Isaac wished to remain

With his father's rough hands working him

substitute other details, to alter the altar. It is to recognize (to paraphrase Wieseltier's crucial parenthetical) that "if there is a Bible, there is also Midrash." And there is also poetry.

Abraham is the hero of the Akeda because he was able to make such a substitution – he acted *as if* he would have been willing to give up his beloved son for God. As Rashi says (22:13), “For every sacrificial act he performed on the ram, Abraham would pray and say, ‘May it be Your will that this be as if it were done on my son -- as if my son were slaughtered, as if his blood were cast, as if he were flayed, as if he were burned to ashes.’” Biblical scholars such as Richard Elliott Friedman and Tzemah Yoreh have posited that in the original biblical story, Abraham carried out the sacrifice of Isaac—but repugnance at the idea of human sacrifice led a later redactor to substitute the ram for Isaac

(see <http://thetorah.com/the-sacrifice-of-isaac-in-context>).

Is the Akeda a story of substitution, or a story that was substituted for an even more terrifying tale? Either way, the Akeda dramatizes the act of substitution that constitutes metaphor, which in turn constitutes poetry.

Historically, the Akeda story underwent another act of substitution over time. If the first metaphorical leap was from Isaac to the ram, then the second leap –hundreds of years later– was from the ram to prayer. The sacrificial animal replaced Isaac and then prayer replaced sacrifice, suggesting that we are supposed to pray as if we are offering to God that which is most precious to us. Perhaps this is why the Akeda appears at the very beginning of the Siddur – as a reminder that prayer must be an expression of our whole-hearted devotion to God. Prayer is not this devotion, but a metaphor for it. The notion that prayer is a

11/06/14

Removing him from the world as
they had brought him into it
With a groaning yearning.

Abraham was binding his son
As if with umbilical cords
To return him to the ancient, frail
loins
That Sarah laughed at.

So, by the altar, Isaac wished to
remain
Growing ever smaller
Turning back again into his
father's hidden seed
Blue as a dream, numerous as the
stars.

Confined by his cloak, sweating,
Abraham's chest rested
On his son's face. His beard in
the light breeze.
The ram nibbled at the grass,
gazing into the distance with
squinting eyes—
The angel never came.

metaphor and not the thing itself has helped me work through some of my discomfort with traditional liturgy, which I continue to recite faithfully even as I allow for my own mental metaphorical substitutions.

And so the Akeda lends itself to poetry because it is the paradigmatic story of metaphorical substitution in the Bible. The Akeda is about the very question, "What if things had been otherwise?" What if Isaac had been on the altar instead of the ram? And what if the ram had been on the altar instead of Isaac? As such, the Akeda story is an inspiring reminder that the world can always be otherwise. If we did not harbor a dream that the world could be better, we would not bother to try to improve it. We human beings have the ability to substitute truth for falsehood, peace for war, and good for evil; and the belief in our ability to make such substitutions is an expression of faith in God.

God tested Abraham, and that test goes on -- both when we try to connect to God through the metaphors of prayer, and when we work to change the world through acts of courageous substitution. Let us hope that we, like Abraham, are up to the challenge.

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11/06/14