

## THE ACTIONS OF ABRAHAM: A LIFE OF ETHICAL CONTRADICTIONS <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Abraham is traditionally seen as a role model by the three major monotheistic religions. Yet many of his acts as described in the biblical text seem to belie this image. This article reviews Abraham 'sale' of his wife, Sarah on two separate occasions to two kings who intend to have intimate relations with her. On two other occasions, Abraham allows Sarah to abuse his second wife Hagar; the first time she is pregnant with his child and in the second he acquiesces to the expulsion of Hagar and his older son Ishmael into the desert, a clear danger. Likewise he is prepared to sacrifice his younger child Isaac believing he has been commanded by God.

The modern reader detects many ethical considerations and dilemmas in these texts. The rabbinic tradition does not view Abraham's actions as problematical. How are we meant to understand the Patriarch and are we modern readers intended to view him as role model? This article focuses on Jewish sources.

Abraham is revered by all three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a role model and as a paradigm of faith. In the words of Soren Kierkegaard, Abraham is the 'Knight of Faith.'<sup>2</sup> The biblical text tells us that Abraham 'shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you' (Gen. 12:2-3). Rabbinic tradition posits that on ten separate occasions Abraham's faith was tested and God was satisfied by his resolve in each case (Midrash Rabbah Ex. 15:27 among many other Midrashim <sup>3</sup>). His piety was defined as so profound that the angel of death was powerless over him (B.T. Baba Batra 17a). He is thought of as an impeccably ethical man.

Yet a close reading of the biblical text reveals Abraham as being abusive to his two wives and to his two sons. As we will detail Abraham's actions are questionable for one of the Patriarchs. Jeremiah defines the LORD as one 'who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness on earth' (Jer. 9:23). Is Abraham's behaviour consistent with this definition?

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<sup>1</sup> I gratefully thank my colleague and friend Rabbi Dr. David J. Zucker for sharing many thoughts and comments on the subject of this article and his review of earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren, *Fear and Trembling*, Translated by W. Lowrie, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1941) pg. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Midrashim is the Hebrew plural of Midrash.

#### **ABRAHAM AND SARAH – PHARAOH AND ABIMELECH:**

In a time of famine Abraham and Sarah travel southward to Egypt in search of food. There Abraham chooses to misrepresent his real relationship to Sarah and pretends that she is his sister. His stated reason for this guise is his fear that the Egyptians would covet her and hence kill him. As a result Sarah is placed into the Pharaoh's harem. In this incident, Sarah can be seen as doubly a victim of abuse; once by her husband, the other by unwanted advances from the Pharaoh.

When Sarah was placed into the harem, *'because of her, it went well with [Abraham]; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels'* (Gen. 12:16). It would appear that this is Pharaoh's purchase price for his new wife or concubine, a normal transaction in ancient days.

The Pharaoh was then punished with plagues by God for his intended – or attempting – intimate relations with a married woman (Gen. 12:17).<sup>4</sup> Pharaoh states that had he known Sarah's true marital status he would never have taken her into his harem.<sup>5</sup> He returns Sarah to Abraham, and then expels both of them from Egypt.

A repetition of this tale unfolds when Abraham moves to Gerar, when presumably unbeknownst to Sarah (Gen. 20:2), Abraham informs the King Abimelech that Sarah is his sister and she is taken into his harem. The king then dreams that Sarah is Abraham's wife and thereby is forbidden to him. Abraham is given sheep, cattle, men and women slaves and a thousand pieces of silver (20:14,16) and heals Abimelech's household. Both Pharaoh and the King of Gerar choose not to lie with a married woman. How should the reader view the behaviour of Abraham when compared with the more honorable intentions of the two ruling pagans?

#### **SARAH AND HAGAR:**

After many years of being barren Sarah engineers a solution to their childless problem: surrogate motherhood with her servant Hagar. Surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman to regulate her status in a world in which children were a woman's status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (Gen. 16:2; 30:1-2; 38). The words Sarah uses to describe her future status - *'I shall have a child through her'* - is in Hebrew *'ib-ba-neh'* – I will be built up – is a word play

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<sup>4</sup> The rabbis suggest that though he tried to approach Sarah, Pharaoh was thwarted in his attempts, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 41.2.

<sup>5</sup> That does not mean he would not have had Abraham killed to achieve the goal of Sarah as an unencumbered woman.

which also could mean I will ‘sonned’ through her (the Hebrew ‘ben’ is son).<sup>6</sup>

The biblical text terms Hagar a (second) ‘wife’ (Gen. 16:3) using the term *isha*, (not a *pilegesh* – a concubine). Hagar presumably was given some undefined rights of a wife, albeit a secondary wife. Yet, paradoxically when Hagar becomes Abraham’s wife she has overlapping roles; she does not cease to be Sarah’s slave. When Abraham surrenders Hagar to Sarah’s authority, ‘he acknowledges that his wife has prior claims that supersede his.’<sup>7</sup>

No dialogue is noted between Abraham and Sarah (never mind Hagar) regarding Hagar’s her new status. Hagar may have conjectured that having sexual relations with her mistress’ master would provide an elevated status and having a child even more so; it would be a plausible and natural reaction. Abraham appears aloof and largely abdicates any responsibility in this very sensitive triad. However as we shall see the dynamics and interpersonal relationships will eventually assume massive importance for the two women involved as well as for Abraham.

Abraham in short order (so far as we can tell) impregnates Hagar. If Sarah had any doubt as to the cause of their infertility Hagar’s pregnancy makes it clear that Abraham is fertile. Whether the relationship between Abraham and Hagar continued beyond the point of Hagar’s conception is not explicitly stated but seems likely given her wifely status. Abraham probably expected to have more than one child with Hagar.

Earlier God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land. No explicit mention was made of a wife; so Abraham assumed that the child born to Hagar would be his promised son.

Once she is pregnant, Hagar may have started to flaunt her status, her ability to become pregnant, in contrast to Sarah’s state of barrenness. ‘*Hagar . . . conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress seemed slight in her eyes*’ (Gen. 16:4). Perhaps Hagar ceased to feel subservient and became more confident; she had achieved the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: Translation and Commentary*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996), pg. 77. Sarah can be compared with Rachel who was preoccupied with her own immortality when as a barren woman she cried to her husband Jacob ‘give me children or I will die’ (Gen. 30:2); meaning to her that without a child her house or lineage would die.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Niditch, ‘Lech L’cha’ commentary to Genesis 16:1, in Tamara Cohn Ezkenazi, Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), pg. 71.

**'impossible mission' assuring Abraham his posterity. Hagar's very swollen belly and smile must have seemed an affront to Sarah.**

**Sarah accuses Abraham of being solely responsible for this state of affairs. She says, 'The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem' (Gen. 16:5). The term Sarah uses, the 'wrong done me is your fault!' is very strong (literally, 'my violence is on you.')** What crime had Abraham committed? A case could be made that he was merely obeying and passively carrying out Sarah's unilateral proposal. Sarah then challenges Abraham with the words, may **'[YHVH] decide between you and me!'**

**In the face of Sarah's anger and accusation, Abraham abdicates his responsibilities to Hagar as his (second) wife. He figuratively turns his back on her. He says to Sarah, 'Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right' (16:6). Abraham surrenders Hagar to Sarah's authority. Sarah abuses her pregnant maidservant who was intended to be a surrogate mother, with the sole intention of producing an heir. The Hebrew for 'treating harshly' is *va-t'anneha*. This word suggests physical as well as mental abuse. It 'generally carries the connotation of physical harm: it can mean . . . to oppress . . . as well as simply to humble or humiliate.'**<sup>8</sup>

**A number of *Midrashim* suggest that Abraham ought to have been more protective of Sarah sensitivity and should have reprimanded Hagar's behavior.**<sup>9</sup> Other sources however are more critical of Sarah. The medieval commentator Nahmanides (1194-1270) writes, **'Our mother sinned by this harsh treatment as did Abraham in permitting her to act this way.'**<sup>10</sup> A modern observer notes, **'Hagar is Sarah's victim and Sarah was wrong to impose a role upon her and then begrudge her for playing it too well.'**<sup>11</sup>

**One might consider Sarah's response (although not excusing it) to Hagar as a delayed reaction to the abuse she suffered in Egypt. Abraham had turned her over to Pharaoh. Sarah was forced into having sexual relations with Pharaoh, or at the least she had to ward off his advances. Hagar, as an Egyptian represented all that was hateful and hurtful in that land. This would especially true if as some commentators believe Hagar was part of the Pharaoh's gifts to Abraham (Gen. 12:16; Midrash Rabbah Gen. 45:1).**<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern" in Peggy L. Day, ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pg. 14. See also *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45:6.

<sup>9</sup> *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.5 (see also 45.6).

<sup>10</sup> Nahmanides, Comment on Genesis 16:6.

<sup>11</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Ishmael and Hagar" in Joseph Edelheit, ed. *The Life of Covenant* (Chicago: Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1986) pg. 238.

<sup>12</sup> In what can be seen as an irony one Midrash tells us that Hagar is Pharaoh's daughter and he stated that being a servant of a righteous man –

When Abraham is eight six years old Hagar gives birth to their son named Ishmael. In the next incident Abraham is ninety nine years old, he is told to circumcise himself and his son Ishmael and that his wife Sarah will give birth. One year later she gives birth to a boy named Isaac.

#### **ISHMAEL'S EXPULSION:**

When the boy Isaac is weaned Sarah unexpectedly and aggressively demands that Abraham expel and banish Ishmael, the son of his wife Hagar. Sarah turns to Abraham and demands, '*The son of this slave woman will not inherit with my son*' (Gen. 21:10). Technically, Sarah is correct, Ishmael is the son of the slave woman but Sarah glaringly fails to acknowledge that Ishmael likewise is Abraham's son. She disregarded her responsibility in having instigated the entire scenario which resulted in Hagar's marrying Abraham and Ishmael's consequent birth.

The inheritance Sarah mentions originated in part from Pharaoh's possessions – including maidservants given to Abraham probably including Hagar as well; other possessions coming from King Abimelech as detailed in Genesis 12 and 20. These possessions are a direct result of Abraham's giving Sarah to these two kings because of his anxiety and fear. Sarah having been abused twice may well feel she is entitled to all of these possessions as she earned them. As an inheritance she may well feel they should go to her son and not Ishmael. Since Abraham had in a sense sold her to Pharaoh and Abimelech, they can be considered a 'dowry price' which under ancient law would belong to the wife.<sup>13</sup> Sarah was rightly concerned that Ishmael being the oldest child would inherit a double share, and being fifteen years older, would control the inheritance.

The two boys are laughing or playing '*metzahek*'. One can even say Ishmael was '*isaac-ing*' his younger brother.<sup>14</sup> A *Midrash* states that the term may bear some connotations of sexuality or a tendency to idolatry (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 53:11). There is nothing in the text to suggest this forced implication as noted by the second century Talmudic Sage Shimon bar Yochai, Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), Abarbanel (1437-1508) and Elie Wiesel.<sup>15</sup> The Tosefta (6.6), an ancient Mishnaic text, reacts to this by stating 'Heaven

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Abraham - was better that the mistress in an another home (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 45:1).

<sup>13</sup> Meek, Theophile J., 'The Code of Hammurabi' in Pritchard, J.B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton University, Princeton, 1969) pgs. 172-174.

<sup>14</sup> Tollington, Janet, Abraham and his Wives, in Gordon, R. P., and Moor, J. C., eds., *The Old Testament in its World*, (Brill, Leiden, 2005) pg. 192.

<sup>15</sup> In Aron Pinker, '*The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael*', *Women In Judaism*, 2009, Vol. 6, pgs. 3-5.

forbid that a son who received training from Abraham would engage in idolatry, adultery or bloodshed.’

The Book of Jubilees suggested that Sarah was jealous of Abraham’s pleasure and satisfaction of the joyous coexistence of his two sons playing with each other (Jub. 17:2-4).<sup>16</sup> Did she see the teenager playing father surrogate to her son? Ibn Ezra suggested similarly a motherly jealousy for her younger son.<sup>17</sup>

God attests the slave status of Hagar (Gen. 21:13). Four of Jacob’s children (Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher) are sons of slaves – Bilah and Zilpah – but are nonetheless valid tribes of Israel. Pinker points out the double irony of the expulsion freeing both Hagar and Ishmael from bondage and at the same time disinherited them.<sup>18</sup>

Abraham saw Sarah’s demand as evil toward his son (Gen. 21:11), in almost the exact language that God referred to David’s sexual liaison with Bathsheba and his actions to her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11; 2 Sam. 12:9).

The Jubilees text states ‘And the thing was grievous in Abraham’s sight, because of his maidservant and because of his son, that he should drive them from him (Jub. 17:5). The book of Jubilees notes the Rabbinic tradition of Abraham having ten trials but only seven or eight are noted; for that author the expulsion may have been another.’<sup>19</sup>

God approved Sarah’s demand for Ishmael’s expulsion and tells Abraham to fear not for the young man - ‘*na’ar*’ - of your slave - ‘*amatekha*’ (Gen. 21:12). In the morning Abraham gave Hagar an insufficient amount of food and water for herself and the child - ‘*yeled*’ - (Gen. 21:14). Why would Abraham who clearly loved his son not supply sufficient food and drink to guarantee his survival? One *Midrash* says Sarah is to blame for the insufficient supplies inasmuch as she refused to allow Abraham to send

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<sup>16</sup> The Book of Jubilees was written in the second century BCE in Hebrew, although only Greek and Latin versions currently exist. It is part of the Pseudepigrapha. It is a re-written version of the Books of Genesis and Exodus. This author treats it as a very early Midrash.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch, Genesis*, (Menorah Press, N.Y., 1988) pg. 218.

<sup>18</sup> Pinker, pg. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Rothstein, David, ‘*Text and Context: Domestic Harmony and the Depiction of Hagar in Jubilees*’, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, June 2008, 17,4, pg. 245. Rothstein notes that H. Albeck, (‘*Six Orders of the Mishnah*, Jerusalem, Bialik Institute, 1959) states within Jubilees the expulsion of Hagar was considered one of Abraham’s trials (IV, pg. 499).

camels and sufficient supplies. <sup>20</sup> Others say that Abraham miscalculated how far she was to go; they are assuming Hagar was not an Egyptian – ‘*mizraim*’ but from a nearby community – ‘*muzrim*’, a northern Arabian tribe near Gerar, where Abraham and his family had lived before and only a few kilometers from their current residence. <sup>21</sup> Medieval commentators (ibn Ezra and David Kimchi, also known as ‘RaDak – 1160-1225) recognized the problem and assumed Abraham gave Hagar silver and gold, despite there being no textual basis. The Maharsal (1510-1573) explained that Abraham expected them to return after Sarah’s rage had dissipated. <sup>22</sup>

Since the ‘*yeled*’ is clearly at least fifteen years of age why is he called a ‘boy’ and why does Abraham put him on Hagar’s shoulders (21:14) as if he were a child? Another *Midrash* explains that Sarah put a curse on Ishmael making him ill (Midrash Midrash Gen. Rabbah 53:13).

When the water supply is exhausted Hagar put the ‘*yeled*’ under some bushes saying ‘I cannot watch the ‘*yeled*’ die . . . [she] raised her voice and wept’ (Gen. 21:15-16). Jewish *Midrashim* consider Hagar as the first woman to pray to God for help (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 53:14).

God however responds to the voice of the ‘*na’ar*’. It is at this critical moment when Hagar and Ishmael’s lives are at stake that an angel of God speaks to Hagar. She is, for the first time addressed as an independent human being, and not as the servant of Sarah or as Abraham’s wife. He states that God has heard the voice of the ‘*na’ar*’ (Gen. 21:17). <sup>23</sup> She then sees a well of water saving their lives (Gen. 21:19).

Abraham and Hagar refer to Ishmael as ‘*yeled*’ – a boy – while God and the angel refer to him as ‘*na’ar*’, young man. His father and mother see him as still a boy, whereas God recognizes he is in fact a young man. God is also noting that Ishmael will be a progenitor of a great nation and God will continue to protect him. ‘*God was with the ‘na’ar’ while he grew up*’ (Gen. 21:20) as God had previously promised Abraham (Gen. 17:20).

#### THE AKEDAH OF ISAAC:

The incident after the expulsion is the binding or near sacrifice of Isaac. This is known in Hebrew as the ‘Akedah.’ Why does the Akedah of Isaac occur immediately after the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael? Was the binding intended as a punishment for the expulsion of Ishmael? The

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Nachmanides on Gen. 21:15.

<sup>21</sup> Pinker, pg. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Pinker, pg. 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> Jubilees states the angel referred to Hagar’s crying.

binding is introduced with the words 'after these things' (Gen. 22:1); these things are according to some commentators the expulsion.<sup>24</sup>

God said 'Abraham', he responded *hinneni*, (Gen. 22:1) usually translated as 'Here I am'; it can be translated as 'I am willing to execute everything I am about to hear.'<sup>25</sup>

Then God said, *kach na*, 'Take, I beg you, your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about (Gen. 22:2).' The very language used here; Abraham's *hinnani* and God's *kach na* suggest both understood the potential situation that was about to occur.

Abraham has already been told by God that Isaac was to be his covenantal son ('I shall maintain My covenant with him [Isaac], a covenant forever, and to his descendants after him' Gen. 17:19). Abraham is faced with a terrible dilemma. If he follows God's demand, Isaac, his covenantal son will die. If he disobeys God he may also lose the covenant for disobeying. It is a lose-lose situation for Abraham. What other thoughts may have rushed through Abraham's mind at this critical juncture? Did he ask himself: 'My God is a God of mercy and justice, can it be that Satan was talking to me?' Or: 'In the past God told me to listen to the voice of Sarah (Gen. 21:12). Should I have consulted her on this?' Or 'Since God promised me that Isaac will be my descendant am I to believe that God will certainly resurrect him after I slaughter him?'

This is noted as one of the tests God inflicted on Abraham to make him a Knight of Faith. It is interesting to note that in the Book of Job Satan is specifically noted as the instigator.<sup>26</sup> With regard to Abraham, Satan tries to convince Abraham that this action is mad (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 56:4). In another version God boasts about Abraham that he would even sacrifice his son and Satan says 'try him', and 'God tried him' (Tanhuma Va-yera, 22). That same Midrash states that when Satan informs Sarah that Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac, her only child (Tanhuma Va-yera 23 and Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 32) she died of shock.

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<sup>24</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma*, translated by S. Buber, (Ktav, Hoboken, 1989) pg. 125-128.

<sup>25</sup> Caspi, Michael and Green, John T., *Unbinding the Binding of Isaac*, (N.Y., Mellen Biblical Press, 1995) pg. VIII.

<sup>26</sup> Many consider the prologue of Job where Satan is mentioned (as well as the epilogue) latter insertions. Both the Book of Jubilees and Levenson (Levenson, Jon, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, pg. 178) discuss the Akedah in conjunction with the Book of Job.

Should this be considered a test for Sarah, Isaac was her only child, born after the ending of her childbearing years. Why was she not the one tested instead of Abraham? To the best of my knowledge not a single Midrash or commentator suggests that Abraham consulted Sarah.

Clearly Abraham understood that sacrificing his son was killing not just another human being but his son. Jewish commentators would consider that obeying God could never be a sin. The vast majority of Jewish commentators do not accept Kierkegaard's 'teleological suspension of the ethical';<sup>27</sup> although in some ways Jewish thought reverses Kierkegaard's theology. During the liturgy on Rosh Hashana we beg God to forgive our sins for the sake of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac; mercy over justice, a 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. This liturgy was developed during the Christian persecution of Jews in the middle ages and thus the Akedah became a central part of the martyriological tradition of Judaism.

God says to Abraham '*lech - lacha 'go to yourself'*'; meaning not merely go in obedience, but accept personal responsibility.

Abraham obeys God and takes Isaac up the mountain, binds him upon the altar, takes out the knife and is ready to sacrifice his son. Then comes an angel and tells him to stop.

At the height of this drama, Abraham must take matters into his own hands and choose for himself between a direct command from God to sacrifice and the urging of an angel to desist.

But what if this angel is Satan telling a lie? Even if not it is only an angel – a mere messenger – not God himself who is telling him this. But what does Abraham do? '*He looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son'* (Gen. 22:13). In choosing to offer up the ram instead of his son, Abraham consciously chooses to abandon a life led simply by his blind faith and unquestioning obedience. This verse is the transforming moment when Abram finally becomes Abraham in choosing to preserve his son's life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bretall, Robert, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973) pg. 124.

<sup>28</sup> Nathan, Emmanuel, '*And the Two of Them Walked on Together*' (Gen. 22:6,8): Abraham and Isaac Between Obedience and Responsibility', published in Dutch: 'Zo gingen zij samen verder' (Gen 22,6-8). Abraham en Isaak tussen gehoorzaamheid en verantwoordelijkheid," *Worstelen met het Woord. Tegendraadse bijbellezingen*, ed. Christophe Brabant & Marianne Moyaert (Kapellen: Pelckmans; Kampen: Klement, 2009) pgs. 129-140,

In an extraordinary Midrash (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 56:8) quoted by Rashi (1040-1105) the author suggested that perhaps Abraham misunderstood God. Rashi points to the ambiguity of *ha'alehu l'olah* [bring him up as an offering] addressed to Abraham, may be a subtle hint of the LORD's true intention. 'God did not say to him *shachtehu* [slaughter him], because the Holy One did not intent to slaughter him (Isaac), but only to bring him up to the mountain in order to dedicate him to God.'

Abraham receives an explicit blessing of descendants as numerous as '*the stars in the heavens and sand on the shore of the sea*' for his act of faith (Gen. 22:17).

Can God therefore command an act that is clearly unethical, and if so should we learn that we are to simply obey without protest? Kant stated that an ethical human being must assume that 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law'<sup>29</sup> Just as Rashi/Midrash suggested that perhaps Abraham misunderstood God, Kant suggested since God would never ask a human to violate ethical norms. Abraham should have questioned whether the voice was God's.<sup>30</sup> A well known Hasidic Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Lerner (1802-1854), known as the 'Izbicer' suggested a similar thought, although for a different reason. When chapter 22 is introduced '*Elohim*' as God speaks to Abraham not *YHVH*, the LORD (Gen. 22:1). In Jewish kabbalistic tradition this voice of God comes through a 'dim glass' rather than a clear statement.<sup>31</sup> In the Izbicer's view Abraham needed to decide despite the ambiguity. By acting to sacrifice Isaac Abraham refused the easy way out (after all he loved his son) and showed his faith in God.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE AKEDAH AS AN ETHICAL TEST:

Most Jewish commentators would agree with the late Shalom Spiegel, that 'the primary purpose of the Akedah story may have been only this: to attach to a real pillar of the folk and a revered reputation the new norm-abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead'.<sup>33</sup> It is clear that infanticide was practiced in the Middle East through most of the last millennium prior to the Common Era.<sup>34</sup>

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translated by Emmanuel Nathan.

<sup>29</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by H. J. Paton, (Harper and Row, N.Y., 1964) pg. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gellman, Jerome, '*Abraham! Abraham!*' (Ashgate Press, Aldershot, England, 2003) pg. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Gellman, pgs. 77-78.

<sup>32</sup> Gellman, pgs. 81-83.

<sup>33</sup> Spiegel, Shalom, *The Last Trial*, (Schocken, N.Y., 1969) pg. 69.

Rabbinic tradition has another reason for this test. God states to Abraham: 'It was my wish that the world should become acquitted with you and should know that it is not without good reason that I have chosen you from all the nations' (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 55:1). Since God had foreknowledge and omniscience He knew the end result. But did Abraham and Isaac?

There is, however, a minority opinion expressed by Harvard University's Jon Levenson<sup>35</sup> that in the Akedah God clearly ordered a father to offer up his son as a child sacrifice. Should such a willingness to sacrifice your son be considered a test of faith and piety? Should one emulate such behaviour or be abhorred by this model?

Some of Levenson's documentation for his thesis is from the biblical text; *'Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine'* (Ex. 13:1-2). *'You shall give Me the first-born among your sons. You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me'* (Ex. 22:28-29). While in other places a substitute is allowed. *'When the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites . . . you shall set apart for the LORD every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the LORD's. But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among your children.'* (Ex. 13:11-13). *'You shall redeem all the firstborn of your sons. None shall appear before Me empty-handed'* (Ex. 34:20).

The primary remaining example of the substitute is the *pidyon ha-ben* ritual required by all Jewish male first born (except the first born son of Cohanim – Priests) in fulfillment of the above commandments. In this ceremony (continuing to be followed by many Jews until this day), the father presents his first-born son to a Cohen on the thirtieth day after his birth and the Cohen asks the father, "Which do you prefer, your son or your money?" The father declares that he prefers his son and presents the Cohen with five silver dollars, the symbolic equivalent of five biblical shekels, in order to redeem his son. The Cohen accepts the coins with the ritual formula, 'These [coins] in place of that [the child]; this in exchange for that.' Rubinstein states that 'the fundamental purpose of the ceremony was to subliminally acknowledge and deflect our infanticide tendencies'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lawrence E. Stager and Samuel R. Wolff, '*Child Sacrifice at Carthage-Religious Rite or Population Control?*' *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February, 1984, 31-51.

<sup>35</sup> See Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*.

<sup>36</sup> From Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Religion of Sacrifice and Abraham, Isaac and Jesus*, *The Iconoclast – New English Review*, October 2009.

Levenson compares the Passover lamb to the first born male. The Bible commands the Jewish people in Egypt to place 'some of the blood' of the lamb on doorposts of their houses and declare: '*I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born . . .<sup>37</sup> both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the LORD. And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt*' (Ex. 12: 12-13). As with the Akedah ram, the Passover lamb is a substitute offering in place of the Hebrew first-born. The blood provides the evidence of the substitution.

Leroy Huizenga notes that the book of Jubilees connects the Akedah's function to the Passover lamb,<sup>38</sup> as do Levenson<sup>39</sup>, Geza Vermes<sup>40</sup> and the Midrash (Midrash Ex. Rabbah 15:11).

The late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, arguably the most important Orthodox thinker of twentieth-century America, seemed to have rejected the view held by most Jewish commentators that the purpose of the Akedah was to oppose actual child infanticide. Abraham implemented the sacrifice of Isaac not on Mount Moriah but in the depths of his heart. He gave up Isaac the very instant God addressed him and asked him to return his most precious possession to its legitimate master and owner. Immediately, with no arguing or pleading, Abraham surrendered Isaac. He gave him up as soon as the command '*and offer him there for a burnt offering*' (Gen. 22:2) was issued. Inwardly, the sacrificial act was consummated at once. Isaac no longer belonged to Abraham. He was dead as far as Abraham was concerned.<sup>41</sup>

According to Soloveitchik, because of Abraham's willingness to slay his son and the fact that he experienced the full horror of the sacrifice the very instant the command was given, there was no need any longer for the physical sacrifice and the ram became an acceptable substitute. Had Abraham not 'immediately surrendered Isaac; had he not experienced the Akedah in its full awesomeness and frightening helplessness, God would

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<sup>37</sup> Would Moses' uncircumcised son be included if Zipporah, his wife had not circumcised the boy. See article by Moshe Reiss '[http://www.moshereiss.org/articles/19\\_zipporah.htm](http://www.moshereiss.org/articles/19_zipporah.htm)'.

<sup>38</sup> Leroy Huizenga, *The Battle for Isaac: Exploring the Composition and Function of the Aqedah in the Book of Jubilees*, *The Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 12,1, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Levenson, pgs. 177-180.

<sup>40</sup> Vermes, Geza, '*Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*' (Brill, Leiden, 1961) pg. 215.

<sup>41</sup> David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, eds., *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch* (New York, Ktav, 2008) pgs. 11-12.

not have sent the angel to stop Abraham from implementing the command. Abraham would have lost Isaac physically.’<sup>42</sup>

Soloveitchik’s interpretation is consistent with Scripture, which clearly states that not only was Isaac’s sacrifice averted because of Abraham’s unconditional obedience, but God’s covenant was bestowed on Abraham and his progeny because of that very same obedience (Gen. 22: 15-18). If Abraham had not sacrificed Abraham in his heart, would God have allowed the sacrifice to proceed?

As opposed to Soloveitchik the late French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes that Abraham looked in the face of Isaac upon the altar and he saw God. By way of Isaac’s eyes, God proclaimed ‘Thou shall not kill.’ Thus, instead of the event being a suspension of the ethical it becomes the beginning of the ethical. For Levinas teaches, ‘The epiphany of the face is ethical.’<sup>43</sup> The face of Isaac can overcome the voice of God. Abraham encountered God in the face of his child.<sup>44</sup>

According to Levinas, having seen God in Isaac’s face, the second voice (that of the angel) overcame the first (that of God) and summoned Abraham back to the ethical. How did Abraham choose between God’s voice commanding the sacrifice of Isaac, and an angel, a mere messenger of God, countering God’s own direct command?

Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice, according to Levinas, – that is the essential matter.<sup>45</sup>

It is the human ‘face to face’ encounter between Abraham and his son lying helpless on his back that allowed him or perhaps even forced him to listen to the lesser voice of the angel and overcome God’s own voice. The greatness of Abraham is not his obedience but his recognizing the ethical ‘categorical imperative’. The Izbicer Rabbi (noted above) also believed that the angel was unnecessary. Abraham understood God did not intend Isaac to be sacrificed and had already stopped the ritual.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> Father James Mensch, “*Abraham and Isaac: A Question of Theodicy*,” in T. Wright, P. Hughes & A. Ainsley, trans. A. Benjamin and T. Wright ‘The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,’ in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London, Routledge, 1988) p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Levinas, pg. 77.

<sup>46</sup> Gellman, pg. 85-86.

James Mensch writes 'In my reading Levinas' assertion that "in the access to the face there is certainly also an access to God" implies that we need not distinguish between the ethical and God.'<sup>47</sup>

Claire Elise Katz suggests this as well; in arguing that Abraham was changed when he looked into the face of Isaac who was bound on the altar: 'The staying of the hand was the continuation, or affirmation, of an action that was already set into motion; Abraham had already begun to abort the sacrifice. He has turned from sheer obedience to the ethical.' For Katz, 'The test Abraham had to pass was an ethical test, not a test of obedience to God. For him, the test Abraham passed was to see the face of Isaac and abort the sacrifice. Abraham had to have seen the face of Isaac before the angel commanded him to stop.'<sup>48</sup>

Two Midrashim attest to this interpretation. One states that the knife had been dissolved by the tears of the angels in Heaven before the statement '*lay not your hand upon the lad*' (Gen. 22:12) Thus, by the time the angel appeared and spoke, Abraham no longer had the knife to slaughter Isaac (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 56:7). Does the disappearance of the knife suggest that Abraham could not have slaughtered his son? The second Midrash states that as Abraham held the knife 'tears streamed from his eyes, and these tears, prompted by a father's compassion, dropped into Isaac's eyes' perhaps explaining Isaac's dimmed eyes (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 56:8). Abraham's focus thus shifted from God to Isaac.

#### **ISAAC:**

Isaac did not return with his father; his father's action separated them, perhaps he went to his mother only to find she had died or as several Midrashim suggest he went to Paradise for three years.<sup>49</sup> Another Midrash suggested he died and was resurrected.<sup>50</sup> Then, it is possible that he went to Beer Lehai Ro-i (where Ishmael lived), for it is there that we next read about Isaac (Gen. 24:62.)<sup>51</sup>

Did Abraham reveal to Isaac that the Akedah, the sacrifice was a direct commandment from God? Did Abraham reveal the agony he went through?

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<sup>47</sup> Mensch, pg. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Claire Elise Katz, "*The Voice of God and the Face of the Other: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Abraham*," (<http://www.bu.edu/mzank/STR/trarchive/tr10/aar2001/Katz.html>).

<sup>49</sup> Ginzberg, L., *Legends of the Bible*, (Robson, London, 2001), pg. 286.

<sup>50</sup> Spiegel, pgs. 81-85. Spiegel asks whether the concept of resurrection preceded or followed the Christian Gospels.

<sup>51</sup> David J. Zucker, '*The Mysterious Disappearance of Sarah*,' *Judaism*, Fall/Winter, 2006, 55:3-4, pgs. 30-39.

Did Isaac ever ask him if he wished to be sacrificed for God? What did Isaac feel tied down on an altar with his father having a knife in his hand about to slaughter him? Did he look up into his father's eyes with tears? Did he scream? Did he pull against the ropes tying him down? <sup>52</sup> Did he see the angel; did he hear the angel's voice telling Abraham not to harm him? Afterwards Abraham untied Isaac, sacrificed the ram and they went down the mountain. Did they speak to each other; if so what did Abraham say to the son he was about to kill? Though relevant the Bible is silent about all these issues.

The aborted sacrifice had enormous implications for the victim, Isaac and his mother.

Isaac as described in Genesis is not a fully developed character as Abraham and Jacob are, despite the liturgical phrase 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob'. His story is told very briefly compared to his father and son. <sup>53</sup> Why Isaac should be punished by the trauma of the event in order for God to test Abraham is rarely discussed. The Rabbis consider Isaac an equal and voluntary partner in the Akedah (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 56:3).

Isaac lives in the shadow of his powerful father and his powerful son (actually two powerful sons) and he is a subdued personality. When his son Jacob calls on God as a witness, he refers to his God as '*the Fear of Isaac*' (Gen 31:42), underscoring the intergenerational extent of Isaac's trauma. <sup>54</sup> Even when God speaks to Isaac, it is only in reference to his father. The first time God speaks to Isaac, the Deity tells Isaac not to do down into Egypt as Abraham had done (and as his son and grandchildren) will do (Gen. 26:2). This is similar to the instruction Abraham gave to his senior servant (usually assumed by the commentators as Eliezer, but surprisingly not named in this text) when that figure was sent to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:2-9). The second time when God blesses Isaac He says '*I shall bless you . . . for my servant Abraham's sake*' (Gen. 26:24); Isaac receives the blessing for his father's sake, never for himself; this despite

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<sup>52</sup> Midrashim (Midrash ha-Gadol on Gen. 22:9) and the Koranic commentators (on Sura 37:102) assume Isaac (or the child in the Koran) asked to be tied down so as not to move and spoil the sacrifice.

<sup>53</sup> Abraham's story begins in chapter 11 and concludes in chapter 25 consuming approximately 248 verses. Jacob's story begins in chapter 25 and concludes in chapter 50 almost ending Genesis; it consumes perhaps 450 verses (excluding the Joseph story). Isaac's story including the Akedah is found in chapters 17, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27 and 28 consuming perhaps 90 verses.

<sup>54</sup> Nathan op cit.

Isaac being the one almost sacrificed and suffering from post traumatic stress.

Abraham and Isaac never speak a word to each other again in the Torah text; nor does God speak again to Abraham. Isaac, the victim and survivor lives longer than his father and his son. Some time after the Akedah Sarah dies. Isaac mourns her until Rebekah comes and he marries her (Gen. 24:67). He and his brother Ishmael bury their father; does Isaac mourn his father?

Rebecca agreed to marry her cousin Isaac (arranged by Abraham's servant) before ever seeing him. When she traveled many kilometers to marry him she descended from her camel upon first seeing him, and veiled herself, traditionally out of modesty.

However a Midrash (quoted by Rashi in Gen.24:67) tells a different story. '(S)he was dumbfounded in his presence' . . . and asked 'who is that man'. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg stated that 'the originating moment of their union is choreographed so that full dialogue will be impossible between them.' She continues that as a result 'deceptions, manipulations, masking will result . . . [and later] the twins struggled within her'; <sup>55</sup> implying the struggle between Isaac and Rebekah.

Isaac lives in a twilight zone of uncertainty; an inability to be assertive. Darkness and blindness represent his life. Isaac sees the camels; Rebekah sees Isaac (Gen. 24:63-64). Despite finding a mother substitute and upon entering his Sarah's tent with his new bride Rebekah 'she lit up the tent' (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 50:15, quoted by Rashi 24:67), Isaac's eyes remained darkened. While the Oedipal concept is obvious, Rebekah cannot be Sarah. Rashi (from Midrash Gen. Rabbah 65:5) explained that when the text tells us that Isaac '*was old and his eyes too dim to see*' when he gave the blessing to Jacob and not Esau the dimness was the result of the Akedah (Gen. 27:1). The same Midrash suggested Isaac lived a 'kind of death-in-life'. <sup>56</sup> As the Talmud says 'his ashes remain piled on the altar; <sup>57</sup> ashes can represent a negation of life.

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<sup>55</sup> Gottlieb Zornberg, Aviva, '*GENESIS: The Beginning of Desire*' (JPS, Philadelphia, 1995) Pg. 142-143.

<sup>56</sup> Zornberg, pg. 158.

<sup>57</sup> Zornberg, pg. 128,

Rebekah's function is to protect Isaac; her aggressive personality is subtly noted by her being called a '*na'ar*' and not a '*na'arah*' in her introduction with Abraham's servant on four separate occasions (Gen. 24:16, 28, 55, 57). '*Na'ar*' is the masculine meaning young man, '*na'arah*' is the feminine meaning young woman.

#### **ISHMAEL AND ISAAC:**

Ishmael and Isaac's fate is made comparable by a close reading of the text. This may be to help us recognize that both faced equal dangers at their father's hands. The more traditional interpretation reads the conflict between the two sons by blaming Ishmael and thus attempting to justify Sarah's demand.

Despite Ishmael being Abraham's first born son, circumcised with his father, being part of the family, assumed to be the heir for well over a decade and being loved by his father, he is nonetheless the 'other', the '*ger*'; his mother Hagar's name means 'the other'. His mother is silenced in her family and speaks only to God; Ishmael is completely silenced, he never utters a single word in the text.

God commanded Abraham's death sentence for Isaac and He approved Sarah's request which almost became a death sentence for Ishmael.

When Abraham went out to sacrifice Isaac he took two 'lads' with him (Gen. 22:3). The Midrash Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer suggests they were Abraham's servant Eliezer and Isaac's brother Ishmael (quoted by Rashi), neither of course, were lads. It would seem that Abraham told Eliezer to go to Ishmael's home and ask him to meet them on the road. It is unclear how old Isaac and Ishmael, were at the time of the Akedah. As noted before according to Jewish lore Isaac was an adult; Ishmael a decade and a half older. It is unlikely that Abraham would request Ishmael to meet him if they had no relationship for many years. Abraham probably kept that relationship a secret from Sarah. He also did not tell Sarah of the pending Akedah. His father did not suddenly remember Ishmael, but must have had a secret relationship with him.

In the same Midrash noted above the author suggests Abraham maintained a relationship with his son Ishmael after the expulsion and visited him. On the first visit Ishmael and Hagar were not at home; only Ishmael's wife was home. Abraham asked for some water and bread; the wife said 'there is no bread and there is no water', perhaps an ironic response reminiscent of the insufficient water and bread Abraham supplied on their expulsion. Upon Ishmael's return home his wife tells him of the visit and he divorced her. Three years later Abraham came again and Ishmael and Hagar were out; the new wife gave him bread and water. When Ishmael came back his new

wife told him what happened and the narrator tells us Ishmael knew his father loved him.<sup>58</sup>

Why did Abraham ask Ishmael to go with him? Did he feel that if Isaac were going to die he wanted his other son, his only remaining son with him? Did he consider that Ishmael could become the son of the promise should Isaac die? After the Akedah Abraham sends Ishmael back home since he can not have him appear at Sarah's.

As noted above when Hagar and Ishmael are in danger of dying from thirst, *'an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said'* (Gen. 21:17). This text is almost identical to the words Abraham heard when he is called to sacrifice Isaac *'an angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven and said'* (Gen. 22:11). The only difference is in one case God is referred to as Elohim in the other as YHVH. In both cases the angel intervenes to save one of Abraham's sons. Are the texts of both stories intended to compare God's care for both children?

Each journey begins with nearly identical wording; Abraham rose up early. In each case a child was carrying items that could lead to death. *'So Abraham rose early in the next morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulders with the child'* (Gen. 21:14). *'So Abraham rose early in the morning . . . took the wood of the burnt offering and placed it on Isaac his son'* (Gen. 22:3-6). The skin is then used for water which God finds for Hagar and the wood is used to sacrifice the ram.<sup>59</sup>

*'Then God opened her eyes and she saw (va-tere) a well of water, she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink'* (Gen. 21:19). *'Then Abraham looked up and saw (va-yar) there a ram behind him and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up for a burnt offering in his son's place'* (Gen. 22:13).<sup>60</sup>

Hagar saw the well whose water saved their lives and Abraham saw the ram which substituted for Isaac; both appropriated the means of

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<sup>58</sup> Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, translated by Gerald Friedlander, (Herman Press, N.Y., 1965) pg. 227-228. This author was writing after the advent of Islam. A very similar story is told in an Islamic hadith (commentary) by al – Tabari in his 'Prophets and Patriarchs', translated and annotated by William M. Brinner, (Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1987). There is great debate in the literature as to whose text came first. Carol Bakhas suggests there were influences in both directions for this early medieval text (Journal for the Study of Judaism, 2007, 38, pg. 555).

<sup>59</sup> S. Nikaido, *Hagar and Ishmael*, VT, 51,2, 2001, pg. 223.

<sup>60</sup> Op. cit pg. 228.

redemption. Immediately both Hagar and Abraham name the God and place that saved their children.

When Hagar first meets God's messenger 'she called YHVH who spoke to her 'El Ro-i', the 'God who sees me'. . . Therefore the well was called well of the Living One who sees me (Be'er Lahay Ro-i)' (Gen. 16:13-14). 'Abraham named that site[of the Akedah] the LORD (YHVH yir'eh) sees, to this day on the mount of YHVH it will be seen (b'har YHVH yera'eh)' (Gen. 22:14). After the Akedah, Isaac settled near the well of Beer Lahai-Ro-i.

In the Hebrew text the phonetic and morphologic resemblances are obvious.

After the ram was sacrificed Abraham 'returned to his lads' (Gen. 22:19); where did Isaac go? The next reference to Isaac has him coming from Beer-Lahai-Ro-i, where God prophesized to Hagar the birth and name of her future son Ishmael. Abraham takes Ishmael with him while Isaac goes to a place holy for Ishmael!

Both children become a nation due to their father Abraham. Both parents; Hagar first and then Abraham get their adult child a wife from their own tribes – Egyptian for Ishmael (as opposed to a Canaanite) and Abraham's Mesopotamian family lineage.

For obvious reasons Isaac's Akedah is a foundational story in Judaism, while Ishmael's expulsion is not. But much of the discussion we have engaged about the Akedah would equally apply to the expulsion of Ishmael; his death was as likely as Isaac's.<sup>61</sup>

The most interesting contrast is Abraham's reluctance to sacrifice Ishmael and his having no reluctance to sacrificing Isaac. Of course Abraham

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<sup>61</sup> The Koran includes the story of Abraham's abortive attempt to sacrifice his son. In the Koran the son is unnamed and Abraham sees in a vision that he is to offer the child as a sacrifice (Sura 37:102). Early Muslim commentators (10<sup>th</sup> century) debate which son is to be sacrificed (al-Tabari, pgs. 304-309). Later on the Muslim commentators universally state that it was Ishmael (Reuven Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intertextual Sacrifice' Journal of Semitic Studies, Spring 1989, 34,4, pgs. 100-113). Firestone discusses the many Islamic 'Midrashim' which are very similar to Jewish commentaries. The child tells his father 'to do as you are bidden' (37:102). This event is still celebrated by Muslims as Id-al-Adha when a lamb is slaughtered as a commemoration to the child; it is also called the Day of the Haji; Islam's holiest day. In addition the Koran states that Mecca was established by Abraham and Ishmael (2:127). In some traditions the father took Ishmael and Hagar to Mecca before abandoning them and returning to Sarah and Isaac.

believed God requested Isaac's death while God only approved Ishmael's likely death. But despite this both come from Abraham's seed, both being circumcised at God's request, both representing a multitude of nations (including twelve princes like Esau and Jacob, (Gen. 17:3-5,20) and both having covenants – although different - with God (Gen. 17:20-21). In the genealogies of Ishmael (Gen. 25:12 ff.) and Isaac (Gen. 25:19 ff.) both are noted as being Abraham's son. Aside from the patriarchal families, only Ishmael's death is noted in the Genesis (Gen. 25:17).

One can conclude that Abraham has two chosen sons. These two children of Abraham are the only children pre-named by God before their birth in the Torah (Gen. 16:11; 17:19).<sup>62</sup>

#### **CONCLUSIONS:**

Abraham has traditionally been upheld as a paradigm of Faith and a role model, yet a careful reading of the text suggest that he is a troubling figure. He often appears self-absorbed if not self-centered.

We have reviewed how Abraham motivated by fear for his own life gave his wife, Sarah on two separate occasions to two different kings who intended to have intimate relations with her. This was not only cowardly but immoral.

On two other occasions, he co-opts with Sarah allowing her to abuse Hagar who in the first case is pregnant with his child. Years later after Sarah achieves her own life goal (having her own biologic child) he acquiesces to Sarah's demand that he expel his older son into the desert, a clear and present danger, despite being personally distressed (Gen. 21:11). In this latter case God commanded him to follow Sarah's voice. Hagar and Ishmael were saved by God (Gen. 21:19-20) but suffered being sent out from the Abraham's camp. A noteworthy Midrash tells us that after Sarah's death Abraham remarried to a woman named in the biblical text as Keturah (Gen. 25:1); she was actually Hagar (Midrash Gen. Rabbah 61:4). Can this be interpreted as a recognition that Abraham regretted expelling Hagar and Ishmael?

In the case of the Akedah Abraham heeded to what he believed were the words of God and was prepared to sacrifice his younger child Isaac and was stopped by an angel. It is disturbing that Abraham was willing to argue, bargain, even plead with God over the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-32) but not over the sacrifice of his own son. He does not even confirm his own understanding of God's command. We

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<sup>62</sup> Two other are pre-named in the Prophets Josiah (I Kings 13:2) and Solomon (I Chron. 22:9). These four are noted in J.T. Berakot 1:6 with the statement that the 'wicked are strangers from the womb'.

noted above that a Midrash suggested that perhaps Abraham misunderstood God's own words.

Rabbinic tradition assumes that Isaac was a consulting adult and accepted God's will as did his father. That Isaac's personality suffered from the trauma of the Akedah seems clear to this author from the text.<sup>63</sup> It has been suggested that Jacob's success at stealing his brother Esau's blessing came from Isaac's dimmed eyes, damaged as a result of the Akedah (Rashi on Gen. 27:1 and Midrash Gen. Rabbah 65:5). As a result Jacob is exiled from his parent's home, goes to his Uncle Laban and marries his two daughters Leah and Rachel. He remains in exile for twenty years until he finally reconciles with his brother Esau. One could argue that not only is Isaac a victim of the Akedah but his two children are as well. One prominent modern commentator suggests Esau is the real victim.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the vast majority of commentators, both Jewish and Christian, consider Abraham a model human being. Are we intended to follow Abraham's example? In 1990 Christos Valenti believed God commanded him to sacrifice his daughter; he did!<sup>65</sup>

*Do what is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God' (Deut. 12:28):* says the Torah.

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva comments 'good in the eyes of God and right in the eyes of men or right in the eyes of God and good in the eyes of men'<sup>66</sup> Akiva certainly did not envision an opposition between good and right. When in Chapter 18 Abraham prays to God to save the people of Sodom, we consider that an example of the good. He asks God 'will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?' (Gen. 18:25) In chapter 22 on the Akedah Abraham acts out of faith in apparent conflict with justice.

The late Dr. Yeshayahu Leibowitz considered that the Akedah represented the 'victory of a God-centered religion over an anthropomorphic religion'.<sup>67</sup> Rabbi Dr. David Hartman another contemporary Israeli thinker rejects the

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<sup>63</sup> See author 's article in the Jewish Bible Quarterly, April 2004, *The God of Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob*

<sup>64</sup> Zornberg, pgs. 160-164.

<sup>65</sup> In 6 January 1990 Christos Valenti from California, U.S., sacrificed his young daughter whom he loved, claiming God commanded him to do so. A Jury of twelve (ten of whom were familiar with the story of Abraham and the Akedah of Isaac) found him guilty of first degree murder; the Judge over ruled the verdict and found Valenti legally insane (Delaney, Carol, *'Abraham On Trial'*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pgs. 35-68).

<sup>66</sup> Quoted from the Sifra by Hirsch, S.R., *The Pentateuch, Vol. V, Deut.*, Trans., by Isaac Levy, N.Y., Judaica Press, 1971) pg. 228.

Akedah, referring to it as an aberration and considers the ‘Sodom’ event as the representative of covenantal spirituality.<sup>68</sup> This suggests there is no compromise between these positions.<sup>69</sup>

The biblical text does not describe its ‘heroes’ as perfect human beings. Sometimes the text is clear; as in David’s illicit liaison with the married Bathsheba and his ordering the death of her husband Uriah (2 Sam.11). Sometimes as in the case of Abraham the biblical text is more subtle. The rabbinic tradition on Abraham is based less on the text and largely on unknown commentators known as Midrashim. The latter comments were often hagiographic and even mythological. Many of these texts were written during the period beginning with the Maccabean revolt through the Roman wars, the growth of Christianity and the Arab and Islamic conquest of Palestine. As James Kugel stated ‘Interpreters . . . assumed that the Bible was a book of lessons directed to readers in their own day. It may seem to talk about the past, but it is not fundamentally history.’<sup>70</sup> A recent scholar stated that ‘the “extraordinary” nature of the midrash [the Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer] lies in its distinctly mythic hue, audaciously drawing from the apocryphal works of the Second Temple period’.<sup>71</sup> Maimonides (1138-1204), the great rationalist, was very critical of that and some other Midrashim.<sup>72</sup>

Judith Plaskow noted that ‘[the] Torah . . . makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society’<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Gellman, pg. 105.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Mordecai Roshwald, *Modern Theology*, 1991, Vol. 7, pgs. 381-401.

<sup>70</sup> Kugel, James, *How To Read The Bible* (Free Press, N.Y., 2007), pg. 27.

<sup>71</sup> See Rachel Adelman, ‘*The Poetics of Time and Space – The Case of Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*’, (Ph.D. dissertation granted at the Hebrew University, Jan. 2008), from the unpublished Ph.D. manuscript, pg. 2; to be published as ‘The Return of the Repressed: Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha’ (Leiden, Brill, 2010). While she is referring specifically to PRE (which we used in this article) she notes that this is true of some other Midrashim. She notes that apocryphal texts were forbidden to be read by the Talmud (B.T. Sanhedrin 100b and P.T. Sanhedrin 10:1).

<sup>72</sup> Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963), pg. 330.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Plaskow, “Contemporary Reflection,” “Lech L’cha” in Ezkenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, pg. 107.

