SACRIFICING THE SON

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Abraham, the first monotheist, is generally considered a prototype, a paragon of religious faith and obedience to God's will. These qualities, first displayed in his unquestioning response to the original command to "Go forth" from his native land to an unknown destination (לך לך), reach their climax in the עקדה, "Binding," of his beloved and long-awaited son and heir, Isaac.

This episode has generated a multitude of discussions around problems of all kinds – theological, psychological, ethical and so on. On the most basic human level, one inevitably wonders how any human being – and especially so moral a person as Abraham has been shown to be – could respond so unquestioningly to so horrendous a command. This, after all, is the man who bargained with God about the number of uncorrupt citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah that would suffice to spare these cities from destruction. Yet here there is neither questioning nor bargaining. (Earlier, when Sarah asked him to cast out Hagar and his firstborn, Ishmael, the request *did* irk him and it was only God's reinforcement of the request that led him to "heed her voice.")

Precisely because of the major rôle that Sarah plays in the entire family story of the profound longing for a child, the extensive period of barrenness, the joyous birth and its festive celebration, her absence in this crucial paradigmatic episode of the Akedah demands an explanation which is not to be found in the Biblical text. Does she know about God's command? If so, is she as acquiescent as Abraham or is there an initial conflict between husband and wife, as in the case of Ishmael? If she does not at first know, does she ever find out? And if she does, what is her response then? Is it significant that the next time her name is mentioned it is in the dry reference to her death?

Numerous midrashim have been composed in the attempt to “fill in the white space around the black letters” of this enigmatic episode in the saga of the first monotheist Biblical family.

Some indication of rabbinical exegetic responses both to Abraham’s apparently unquestioning obedience in the Akedah episode and to Sarah’s rôle, may be found in the non-Pentateuchal *Haftorah* readings which accompany readings from the Torah on Sabbaths and Festivals and which usually constitute a kind of parallel to – or commentary on – the Torah reading). Uniquely, the “Binding of Isaac” story is read twice in the course of the year: initially on the first day of the New Year (Rosh Ha-Shana), one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, and again in the course of the regular readings, which in the space of a calendar year cover the entire Pentateuch. It is surely significant that on both occasions the Haftorah selection presents an episode that relates to a *mother* who ”loses” her son.

The first of these stories is that of Hannah, which we read on Rosh Ha-Shana. The *Book of Samuel* opens with the description of a devout family – Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah (which means “graciousness” or “favor”) and Peninnah (“Pearl”). While Peninnah has borne both sons and daughters (no number is specified), Hannah is barren. Like the instantly fertile Hagar in the earlier story, Peninnah taunts the barren Hannah and makes her life miserable. But Hannah is her husband’s favorite and he displays his preference by giving her a larger portion of the sacrificial offering. This situation apparently continues “year after year.” Hannah is inconsolable, despite her husband’s evident love and concern: “Am I not more (devoted) to you than ten sons?” he asks, with a notable degree of pathos.

Finally, the grief-stricken Hannah takes action, turning in prayer directly to God, “weeping all the while.” Her prayer is in the form of a vow, entering into a *quid pro quo* bargain with the Almighty, while also stressing her subservience to Him. (Note the threefold repetition of her self-description as His “handmaiden,” (verse 11.) If God remembers her and grants her a son, she will in due course return him to God, dedicating him to a life of priesthood.

When Hannah’s prayer is answered, she appropriately names her son Shmuel (Samuel, שמעאל), “I asked God for him.” (The name can also be read as a contraction for “God has heard.”) Now the time has come for Hannah to fulfill her part of the bargain, but she clearly finds it hard to surrender the son she so longed and prayed for. The next time Elkanah and all his household go up to offer the annual sacrifice, she stays at home, giving as explanation that she is waiting until the child is weaned, since once he appears before the Lord he must remain there for good. Elkanah accedes to her wishes and she stays at home, nursing her son “until she weaned him.” While the period of time is not specified, we may conjecture that it is a matter of several years, until the boy could be independent of his mother. When Hannah finally feels she can no longer delay keeping her promise, she takes materials for a sacrifice and goes with Samuel to the house of the Lord in Shilo. The pithy text stresses the boy’s youth – והנער נער, “and the boy was a boy” (v. 24). Yet one more delay – for the sacrifice of the bullock she has brought as a token of thanksgiving (a possible substitute for the son, like the ram for Isaac?) – and then comes the inevitable moment of separation. She brings the boy to Eli, the High Priest, identifies herself as the woman whose form of praying he had mistaken for drunkenness, and presents the boy to him (v. 25). The words and repetitions here, particularly notable in the Hebrew text, dramatically convey how, even at this late stage, she is playing for time, indicating how much the child means to her (“For this child I prayed”), as well as the mingling of reluctance and readiness with which she keeps the bargain she struck with God. The Hebrew text has a wonderful (and unfortunately untranslatable) word play with the root לאש, which is the root not only of the verb "to ask," but also of the verbs "to borrow" and "to lend." Since God has given her what she *asked* Him for, she is *lending* that gift to God for life. The word "lending" implies that she considers herself as still retaining a hold on her son, though he will no longer be part of her household. We feel how hard it is for Hannah to give up what she so longed for, and yet how indebted to God she feels for having granted her prayers.

Chapter II opens with Hannah's second prayer, a soaring, poetic expression of religious faith in God's rule and providence, which expresses not only Hannah's personal exultation over her rival Peninnah, but also a general affirmation of God's unique greatness. In both content and tone, this prayer resembles other great songs of praise – that of Moses (and Miriam) after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15) and that of Deborah after the defeat of Sisera's army (Judges 5). This similarity surely affects Hannah's status in our eyes; it is no wonder that the rabbis listed her among the seven women prophets of Israel.

Her prayer over, Elkanah returns home (v. 11), while Samuel stays with Eli. And where is Hannah? This is not specified. (Nor is what happened to Isaac after the aborted sacrifice.). Perhaps in body she returns with Elkanah while in spirit she stays with her son?

Such an interpretation can be supported by the later (and last) reference to her (2:18-21). The child Samuel ministers before Eli, "being a child girded with a linen ephod." His mother makes him a little coat (note the tenderness implied in the adjective) and brings a new one with her every year when she comes with Elkanah to offer the annual sacrifice. The Hebrew verb העלתהו (v. 19) used for her bringing of the garment is identical with that used for bringing the sacrifice, indicating that for Hannah both "offerings" are equally important expressions of her dedication – to her son, as well as to God of whom she had "asked" him. Although Hannah bears five more children, her first-born, Samuel, clearly remains the apple of her eye. She has found a way other than taking her child's life by which to express her faith and obedience; though absent, "taken" by God, her son is still alive. Might Sarah, unlike Abraham, have made a bargain with God, to "lend" him her son, rather than take his life?

When we next publicly read the story of the "Binding of Isaac," Parashat Va-era, it is followed by an episode taken from the Book of Kings (4:8-37) – one of the many legends associated with the prophet Elisha. Like all legends, it is typified by a lack of rationalization of events, presenting them in neither emotional nor psychological depth, and always dealing with wondrous or mysterious events which are enveloped in a veil of incomprehensibility. Like most legends, the story begins with the time-worn phraseויהי היום (Once upon a time…). Dramatic and presented largely in dialogue form, the story of Elisha and the Shunamite can readily be divided into four distinct "acts," the first of which (which we can entitle "The Prophet") itself comprises both a kind of prologue and the prophecy which is the mainspring of the drama (8-16).

The prologue presents the major protagonists, Elisha and the unnamed woman who, recognizing that he is "a holy man of God," not only entertains him to a meal every time he passes through Shunam, but realizes that, since he pays regular visits to the place, he may also need comfortable overnight accommodation. In typically female detail, she enumerates the necessary items (v. 10): a small enclosed upper chamber (i.e. privacy), a bed, a table, a chair and a lampstand.

One day Elisha realizes that he should repay this gracious hospitality in some appropriate manner and offers to speak to the authorities on her behalf (12-13). When she rejects this offer as unnecessary, because she is sufficiently respected in her community ("I live among my own people"), it is his more perceptive servant Gehazi who points out that "she has no son, and her husband is old." Thus prompted, Elisha prophecies to her that "At this season next year, you will be embracing a son." Her somewhat incredulous and humble response, perhaps comparable also to Sarah's laughter of skepticism and disbelief (v. 16) is "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (a synonym for the self-deprecating word - אמה- that Hannah uses about *her*self).

Act II, "The Death of the Child" (17-24), tells of the promised birth but at once goes on to depict most graphically the manner of the child's sudden death. While out with his father in the field, he cries to his father ראשי!ראשי! "Oh, my head, my head!" The father bids a servant carry the boy to his mother, who holds him on her lap until noon, when he dies. Without further ado, she lays him on *Elisha's* bed, closes the door, and bids her husband provide her with a servant and a she-ass so that she can hurry to the man of God and back. Puzzled, he asks for the reason (v. 23), since this is neither a new moon nor a Sabbath, two occasions on which such a visit was apparently customary. Her curt reply is "Shalom!" ("It's all right" or "Goodbye") and she hastens away.

Act III, "The Demand," (v. 25) takes place on Mount Carmel, at Elisha's abode. Recognizing her from afar, he again sends his servant Gehazi, this time to enquire after her husband and child. The Shunamite, with the same curtness we've already witnessed, dismisses Gehazi and presses on to Elisha, prostrating herself before him and clasping his feet – an audaciously physical act which apparently appalls Gehazi (v. 27), who tries to push her away. Elisha, however, recognizes both her "bitter distress" and the fact that it has not been revealed to him by God. Thus reassured, the Shunamite reproaches Elisha: (v. 28) "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I say: 'Don't mislead me?'" Typically, as we've now learned, Elisha again sends Gehazi as a proxy: he is to take Elisha's staff and hasten to place it on the boy's face. But the boy's mother, אם הנער, is not prepared to accept a proxy and insists (v. 30), "As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you" – so vehement a protest that Elisha feels compelled to obey.

Act IV, "The Miracle," (31-37). Prior to the arrival of Elisha, Gehazi has already attempted to resuscitate the child by using Elisha's staff, as instructed, but to no avail. Isolating himself with the boy, Elisha first prays and then, placing himself over the child, "put(s) his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands." This is an act of ultimate identification with the victim – and it is successful: the boy comes back to life. When the Shunamite returns at Elisha's call (again conveyed via Gehazi!), she once more falls at Elisha's feet, but this time presumably in grateful acknowledgement of his powers (v. 37). She bows low to the ground, then she picks up her son and leaves. Not a word is spoken; no song of praise is sung.

What we have here is a mother's more extreme response to loss of her son. The Shunamite simply refuses to accept being deprived of the child that God (through his prophet) had promised her. It is as if she were saying "Sorry, but you just can't take away what you gave me! Although I lacked a son, I did not ask for one. It was You, through your prophet, who recognized my desires. Unasked, you fulfilled them. You cannot go back on your word. I WILL NOT LET YOU!" Of the three parents, she is the most extreme and defiant.

Both Hannah and the Shunamite are devout and God-fearing women, comparable in their respective ways to Abraham himself. Yet, unlike him, neither of them readily surrenders the child God has granted her. Hannah maintains a touching relationship with Samuel despite the physical separation that results from the fulfillment of her vow; the Shunamite compels God to return the son He has taken from her.

From their response, we may perhaps deduce how Sarah would have responded had *her* faith, rather than that of her husband, been tested by a demand to sacrifice her child. Mothers do not willingly give up their sons, even when God demands such a sacrifice. Implicit in these stories is Judaism's awareness (and that of the Jewish God) that a mother's love is essentially different from that of a father. We women want our children to live and we expect a loving God to respect our wishes.

A comparable difference between parents, this time in contemporary Israel, has recently been borne out by qualitative research conducted by psychologist Hanni Mann-Shalvi for her doctoral degree. Interviewing twelve Israeli-born couples in which both spouses had served in the IDF, she found that, from the moment that an ultrasound examination indicated that their child was male, the awareness that their as yet unborn son would at the age of 18 be drafted into the military, began to shape their respective attitudes to the child and also to impact on their relationship with each other.

The fathers found themselves in conflict: their basic rôle as fathers is to protect their families (including their sons) from the dangers of the outer world, to keep them safe, and gradually introduce external reality into the sheltered mother-child relationship. Their sons need them as rôle models in order to be able to develop a masculine identity. The fathers found themselves in a no-win situation: in order to defend their family in a reality of continued threat they identified with ideology and values that support the recruitment to the army and the willingness to sacrifice one's life. By implication, therefore, they would want their sons to follow in their footprints and risk *their* lives too. Yet as fathers, they did not want their sons to die. To put it another way: they cannot present themselves as rôle models and models of manhood, since their own manhood was developed at a time of war and heroic deeds.

The dominant Israeli masculine identity is that of a combat soldier, which entails a risk to the soldier's life. All of the mothers expressed deep feelings of helplessness and found themselves adopting overprotective patterns. Mothers felt unable to carry out their rôle. They cannot, on the one hand, ensure the safety of their sons' life and at the same time allow them to develop an individuated and differentiated masculine identity. If they do the one, they fail at the other.

The couple relationship allowed some kind of unconscious solution: a couple conflict that centered on the sons' future draft to the military and accompanied the sons' life cycle was identified. The mothers held the fathers responsible and blamed them in advance for the son's (potential) death during his military service. The fathers took the responsibility upon themselves, but (from time to time) weakly protested against the mothers' overprotective patterns of motherhood.

The conflict shifted tension from the parental relationship to the couple arena. Due to the inability of both fathers and mothers to fulfill their basic rôles as parents and to contain the conflict, they unconsciously collaborated by splitting the internal conflict and changing it into an interpersonal conflict between themselves.

By doing so, the partners allowed each other to cope with only one half of the conflict. Thus, the son received from them, as a unit, all the emotional messages that each could not transfer on his/her own, messages that are required in the maturation process.

One meaning of this split is that the couples cannot enjoy an integrated parental experience, and do not have the ability to inculcate the sons with integrated maternal and paternal identities. They are bound to keep alive a fixated relationship that is characterized by conflict and tension.

In modern Hebrew literature, the “sacrifice” of sons, for which the binding of Isaac is a prototype, has been a persistent topic addressed by succeeding generations of poets, beginning in the 1948 War of Independence. The Akeda serves as an analogy to the country’s sacrificing of its sons in battle. Significantly, it is primarily *male* poets who have reworked the archetypal myth. I therefore want to end with two examples of this phenomenon. The first is by Haim Gour, currently celebrating his 84th birthday, who belongs to what is know as דור פלמ'חה. i.e., the pre-state and War of Independence generation.

The ram came last of all.
And Abraham did not know that it came
To answer the boy’s question –
First of his strength when his day was on the wane.

The old man raised his head.
Seeing that it was no dream
And that the angel stood there –
The knife slipped from his hand

The boy, released from his bonds,
Saw his father’s back.

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed.
He lived for many years,
Saw what pleasure had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring.
They are born
With a knife in their hearts.
(Tr. T. Carmi)

And finally, here is yet another midrash, by Yehuda Amihai, to my mind one of the greatest modern poets, one who has, aptly, been referred to as the “anti-political political poet.” In his poem, it is the innocent anonymous soldier, represented by the ram, who is the real victim or, as Amihai states in the title of his poem, the “real hero.” (Kartun-Blum, 46)

The real hero of the sacrifice was the ram
Who had no idea about the conspiracy of the others.
He apparently volunteered to die in place of Isaac.
I want to sing a memorial song about the ram,
His curly wool and human eyes,
The horns, so calm in his living head.
When he was slaughtered, they made *shofars* of them,
To sound the blast for their war
Or the blast of their coarse joy.

I want to remember the last picture
Like a beautiful photo in an exquisite fashion magazine:
The tanned, spoiled youngster all spiffed up,
And beside him the angel, clad in a long silk gown
For a formal reception.
Both with hollow eyes
Observe two hollow places,

And behind them, as a colored background, the ram
Grasping the thicket before the slaughter.
And the thicket was his last friend.

The angel went home
Isaac went home
And Abraham and God left much earlier.

But the real hero of the sacrifice
Is the ram.
(tr. Benjamin and Barbara Sarshav)

It may be relevant to our discussion to note that not a single one of Israel's major women poets has written about the *Akeda*. But I leave that issue to the psychologists.

Bibliography: Kartun-Blum, Ruth. *Profane Scriptures* (Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1999).

Kartun-Blum's book is lavishly illustrated with drawings by Menashe Kadishman, in whose oeuvre the ram figures obsessively as a symbol of sacrifice, both biblical and contemporary.