

Redeeming the Akeidah, Halakhah and Ourselves

Introduction

The *Akeidah*—the story of the binding of Isaac as told in Bereishit 22—is one of the most central narratives and texts in the Jewish tradition. Not only is it in the Torah, not only is it the culmination of the cycle of narratives around Avraham, but it is also a key liturgical piece. It serves as the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah and it is the inspiration for countless religious poems, especially the *Selihot* said during the High Holiday period. As Jews, we invoke this chilling story of Avraham's near sacrifice of his son with pride on a daily basis, as we contrast our human worthlessness with our covenantal worthiness:

...מה אנחנו... הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך, ואנשי השם פלא היו, וחכמים ככלי מדע, ונבונים ככלי השכל.
כי רוב מעשיהם תהו, וימי חייהם הכל לפניך, ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין, כי הכל הכל:
אבל אנחנו עמך, בני בריתך, בני אברהם אביך, שנשבעת לו בחר המוריה, זרע יצחק יחידו, שנעקד על גבי
המזבח...

What are we?... Are not all mighty men like nothing before you, the great ones as if they had never been, the wise as those without knowledge and the intelligent as those without understanding? For most of their actions are worthless and the days of their lives are like breath before you. The advantage of humans over beasts is naught.

And yet, we are your people, members of your covenant, the descendants of Avraham who loved you, to whom you made promises on Mount Moriah, the offspring of Yitzhak, his only son, who was bound on the altar...

The Akeidah is thus a proud banner that we wave when we try to get God's attention, perhaps most pointedly in the climactic midpoint of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Ha-Shanah:

ותראה לפניך עקדה שעקד אברהם אבינו את יצחק בנו על גבי המזבח וכבש רחמיו לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם
כן יכבשו רחמך את כעסך מעלינו ובטובך הגדול ישוב חרון אפך מעמך ומעירך ומנחלתך... ועקדת יצחק
היום לזרעו ברחמים תזכור

May the Akeidah be visible to you, how Avraham our father bound his son Yitzḥak on the altar and controlled his mercy in order to do your will with a full heart. So too may your mercy control your anger with us... In mercy, keep in mind the binding of Isaac when thinking of his descendants today.

The Akeidah, however, also seems to be an act of attempted murder of an innocent, and anyone today who would claim divine sanction to kill his own child would be locked up, left for mad, and hounded out of any sane religious community. And beyond dealing with Avraham's willingness to carry out this task, how can we deal with the fact that God commanded this seemingly immoral act? How do we respond to this basic dilemma?

The Akeidah cannot be deleted from the Bible; heretofore, no branch of Judaism has yet suggested writing a Torah Scroll censored of "inappropriate" material. Avoiding the message of this text entirely is thus not an option.

Some have tried to address the moral dilemma presented by the Akeidah by declaring that Avraham failed the test given to him by God. Where Avraham ought to have resisted out of moral courage, he blindly followed an immoral command. This, too, is an untenable response. It cannot be squared with God's blessing of Avraham in Bereishit 22 for his willingness to carry out the task, nor can it be squared with our constant liturgical lionization of our first ancestor for his willingness to piously fulfill God's command. One could, theoretically, surgically remove this image from the liturgy, but, as we have seen, the incision would be very deep and very painful, leaving behind significant scar tissue.

The only tenable readings of the Akeidah for contemporary Jews are therefore those that preserve its centrality and ongoing vitality. In this essay, I will attempt to sketch out some possible models for interpreting the Akeidah, highlighting their consequences for how we think about serving God. In the end, I will turn us to what I believe to be the only tenable reading of this story, not only for historical and literary purposes, but philosophical and religious ones as well.

I. Defining the problem

Let us return to the problem and define it more sharply. Our sense of moral disquiet with Avraham's actions during the Akeidah is not limited to our modern, contemporary context. Seeds of this discomfort may already be present in the biblical record; the Rabbinic record is explicitly uneasy with the act of child sacrifice that Avraham is asked to undertake.

The Torah warns the Israelites not to follow the ways of the indigenous and idolatrous nations of the land they will inherit:

דברים יב:כט-לא

²⁹כִּי־יִכְרִיתִי יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בֹא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֵיךָ וַיִּרְשֶׁתְּ אֹתָם וַיִּשְׁבֶּתְּ בְּאַרְצָם: ³⁰הַשֹּׁמֵר לֹדֹף פֶּן־תִּנְקֶשׁ אֶחָדֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי הַשִּׁמְדָם מִפְּנֵיךָ וּפֶן־תִּדְרֹשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר אֵיכָה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה־כֵּן גַּם־אֲנִי: ³¹לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לִיקְנוֹת אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָל־תּוֹעֵבֶת יְקֹנֶה אֲשֶׁר שָׂא עָשׂוֹ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בָּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ בָאֵשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

Devarim 12:29-31

²⁹When the Lord your God cuts down in front of you the nations that you are coming to dispossess, and you take over from them and live in their land: ³⁰Be careful that you are not ensnared by them after destroying them, lest you seek out their gods, saying: "How did these nations worship their gods? I will do the same!" ³¹Do not act in these ways to the Lord your God, for they performed for their gods all manner of atrocities that the Lord hates. They even burned their sons and daughters in fire to their gods!

This passage, on a surface level, seems to condemn the very sort of child sacrifice that God demanded of Avraham and condemns such religious acts with the language of תועבה /abomination. Other Biblical passages associate child sacrifice with slaughtering innocents. Reacting to the historical reality of child sacrifice to Ba'al in ancient Israel, Yirmiyahu responds ferociously and resolutely:

ירמיהו יט:ג-ה

³וְאָמַרְתָּ שְׁמָעוּ דְּבַר־יְקֹנֶה מַלְכִּי יְהוּדָה וַיִּשְׁבִּי יְרוּשָׁלַם כֹּה־אָמַר יְקֹנֶה צָבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי מֵבִיא רָעָה עַל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר כָּל־שְׁמָעָה תִּצְלַנָּה אֲזִנִּיו: ⁴יָעֹן אֲשֶׁר עֲזָבֵנִי וַיִּנְכָּרוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּקְטְרוּ־בוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יַדְעוּם הִמָּה וְאֲבֹתֵיהֶם וּמַלְכִּי יְהוּדָה וּמַלְאוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה דָּם נָקִים: ⁵וּבָנָיו אֶת־בְּמֹת הַבַּעַל לִשְׂרֹף אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם בָּאֵשׁ עֹלֹת לַבַּעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־צִוִּיתִי וְלֹא דִבַּרְתִּי וְלֹא עָלְתָה עַל־לִבִּי:

Yirmiyahu 19:3-5

³You shall say: “Hear the word of the Lord, kings of Judah and residents of Jerusalem! So says the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: I will bring evil to this place, such the ears of any who hear of it will ring. ⁴Because they have abandoned me and made this place foreign. They offered incense in it to other gods that neither they nor their ancestors, nor the kings of Judah knew. They filled this place with the blood of innocents. ⁵They build the high places of Ba’al so that they could burn their children in fire as offerings to Ba’al, which I did not command, nor speak, nor ever considered.

Tehillim 106:34-38 decries the Israelites for blending with the indigenous nations and adopting their practices, including worshipping idols and sacrificing their children to demons. The language of moral condemnation of child sacrifice at the end of this passage is very clear: וַיִּשְׁפְּכוּ בְּדַמֵּיהֶם בְּנֵי-בְנֵי־אֱלֹהִים וּבְנֹתֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר זָבְחוּ לְעִצְבֵּי כְנָעַן וַתִּחַנֶּנּוּ הָאֲרָץ בְּדַמִּים “They spilled innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan. The land was corrupted with blood.”

The Rabbinic tradition picks up from this point and makes clear in a number of places that child sacrifice is unacceptable and God does not want it. The most direct statement of this comes in the form of an expansion on Yirmiyah’s words:

ספרי דברים פסקא קמח

רבי יוסי אומר אלעזר בני אומר בו שלשה דברים אשר לא צויתי בתורה, ולא דברתי בעשרת הדברות, ולא עלתה על לבי שיקריב אדם את בנו על גב המזבח, אחרים אומרים אשר לא צויתי על יפתח, ולא דברתי על מישע מלך מואב, ולא עלתה על לבי, שיקריב אברהם בנו על גבי המזבח

Sifrei Devarim #148

R. Yose says: My son Elazar says three things about this [verse]: “Which I did not command”—in the Torah, “which I did not speak”—in the ten commandments, “and which I never considered”—that a man would sacrifice his son on the altar. Others say: “Which I did not command”—with respect to Yiftah, “which I did not speak”—with respect to Mesha, the king of Moav, “and which I never considered”—that Avraham would sacrifice his son on the altar.

This *midrash* expands on the tripartite language of Yirmiyahu condemning the practice of sacrifice to Ba'al and makes clear that child sacrifice has no place in Jewish ritual. The second interpretation here is particularly important for our discussion of the Akeidah. The *midrash* imagines that Yirmiyahu is implicitly referring here to the three notable examples of child sacrifice in the Torah: those performed by Yiftah, the Israelite judge, by Mesha, a king of Moav and adversary of the Israelites, and (almost) by Avraham on his son Yitzhak. We will return to the first two examples later, but the *midrash* is clear: God does not desire child sacrifice, and this includes the sacrifice of Yitzhak by Avraham. In fact, God never even dreamed of the outcome of Yitzhak's sacrifice as being acceptable.

Our dilemma is thus much clearer: God commands Avraham to do something that other biblical sources and the Rabbinic tradition find to be unacceptable, and even posit as against God's will. Doesn't this mean that Avraham was ordered to execute an immoral command by God? How do we process the fact that God commanded something immoral? How do we process Avraham's willingness to do this? How do we process the tradition's praise of him for doing so and our liturgy's invocation of this act as religiously heroic and worthy of admiration?

Our responses to these questions have profound implications not only for biblical interpretation, but for our very conceptions of morality and sense of duty to the divine. Indeed, to the extent the Akeidah becomes an exemplary story, it will affect our broader conception of what we ought to expect of *halakhah*, our transgenerational discourse on how to properly fulfill God's will through the religious details of our daily lives.

We will now turn to explore a number of possible solutions to this problem.

II. Akeidah as moral surrender

One option is to view the Akeidah as a model for moral surrender. Perhaps the central point of the Akeidah is precisely this: Do not trust your moral instincts when confronted with what you understand to be a divine command. Indeed, God's command to Avraham was, at least in human terms, immoral. Nonetheless, Avraham was willing to heed this command and thereby passed the test of the Akeidah. The most haunting reading of our story in this vein is offered by the 19th century Danish Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard opens his philosophical

work *Fear and Trembling* with a number of retellings of the biblical tale, intended to draw out perspectives obscured by the original text. The following passage captures best how Kierkegaard approached this story:

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

And God tempted Abraham and said unto him: take Isaac, thine only son, whom thou lovest and go to the land Moriah and sacrifice him there on a mountain which I shall show thee.

It was in the early morning, Abraham arose betimes and had his asses saddled. He departed from his tent, and Isaac with him; but Sarah looked out of the window after them until they were out of sight. Silently they rode for three days; but on the fourth morning Abraham said not a word but lifted up his eyes and beheld Mount Moriah in the distance. He left his servants behind and, leading Isaac by the hand, he approached the mountain. But Abraham said to himself: “I shall surely conceal from Isaac whither he is going.” He stood still, he laid his hand on Isaac’s head to bless him, and Isaac bowed down to receive his blessing. And Abraham’s aspect was fatherly, his glance was mild, his speech admonishing. But Isaac understood him not, his soul would not rise to him; he embraced Abraham’s knees, he besought him at his feet, he begged for his young life, for his beautiful hopes, he recalled the joy in Abraham’s house when he was born, he reminded him of the sorrow and the loneliness that would be after him. Then did Abraham raise up the youth and lead him by his hand, and his words were full of consolation and admonishment. But Isaac understood him not. He ascended Mount Moriah, but Isaac understood him not. Then Abraham averted his face for a moment; but when Isaac looked again, his father’s countenance was changed, his glance wild, his aspect terrible, he seized Isaac and threw him to the ground and said: “Thou foolish lad, believest thou I am thy father? An idol-worshipper am I. Believest thou it is God’s command? Nay, but my pleasure.” Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his fear: “God in heaven, have pity on me, God of Abraham, show mercy to me, I have no father on earth, be thou then my father!” But Abraham said softly to himself: “Father in heaven, I thank thee. Better is it that he believes me inhuman than that he should lose his faith in thee.”

Kierkegaard here presents a model of the Akeidah as a moral atrocity, plain and simple. The proposed act of sacrifice of Yitzḥak is so monstrous that anyone associated with it cannot be considered human, much less moral. Avraham's tortured role-playing at the end of this scene reflects his conviction that no reasonable person would ever continue to believe in and serve a God who would demand such horrendous things. Not wanting Yitzḥak to die a heretic, Avraham tells his son that God has nothing to do with this, so that Yitzḥak may hate his earthly parent but not his heavenly one.

In the heart of his philosophical work, Kierkegaard describes Avraham as a “knight of faith,” a person who displays his complete devotion to God by placing faith above all else, including moral instincts. Kierkegaard describes this triumph of obedience to God above morality as “the teleological suspension of the ethical,” the notion that the deepest level of relationship with God is one in which one simply does what one is asked, without checking the command against ethical and moral intuitions that might otherwise guide a righteous life.

Kierkegaard's description of Avraham is an honest and powerful attempt to square our instinctive revulsion from child sacrifice with God's unequivocal command. It must be that the religious challenge for Avraham is to overcome the revulsion in favor of serving God. This approach confronts the facts of both the biblical story and our moral feelings head on. However, it is not clear how one can square this with the Avraham of Bereishit 18. There, when Avraham hears of God's plan to destroy the city of S'dom, his reaction is anything but subdued acceptance:

בראשית יח: כג-כו

23 וַיָּגֶשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵפֶה תִסְּפֶה צָדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע׃ 24 אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵף תִּסְּפֶה וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא לְמָקוֹם לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ׃ 25 חֲלִלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂה! כִּדְבַר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית צָדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כְּצָדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כֹּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט׃ 26 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אִם־אֶמְצָא בְּסָדָם חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׁאַתִּי לְכָל־הַמָּקוֹם בְּעִבוּרָם׃

Bereishit 18:23-26

23 Avraham came close and said: “Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? 24 Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city, will you really sweep it away? Will you not bear with the place because of the fifty innocent that are in its midst?

25 Heaven forbid for you to do a thing like this, to deal death to the innocent along with the

guilty, that it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty. Heaven forbid for you! The judge of all the earth—will he not do what is just?”²⁶ God said: “If I find in S’dom fifty innocent people, in the midst of the city, then I will show favor to the whole place for their sake.”

The lid flies off of Avraham’s moral outrage in this passage. Perhaps most striking is his well cultivated sense of justice that is independent of God. Despite the fact that God has just told him directly that the divine will wishes to see the city destroyed, Avraham *evaluates* this command in light of *his own* sense of what is right and wrong. Based on this internal moral compass, he argues with God, eventually succeeding in securing amnesty for S’dom provided at least ten innocent people can be found. (They were not.) How can Kierkegaard square the Avraham of S’dom—what I will now call Avraham I—with the Avraham of Moriah—Avraham II?

Another philosopher, the 20th century Jewish Israeli Yeshayahu Leibowitz, interpreted the Akeidah similarly to Kierkegaard and helps answer our question by providing a fuller picture of Avraham’s character in the Torah:

ישעיהו ליבוביץ, "אברהם ואיוב", יהדות, עם יהודי, ומדינת ישראל, 393

...שאינן יראת ה' של אברהם שרק הוא נקרא "מאמין" כיראת ה' של כל שאר אישי חומש בראשית, ואין ההבדל בין שתי היראות הללו מתגלה אלא בעקידה. יראה זו זהה עם האהבה, ואמנם אברהם הוא הדמות המקראית היחידה הזוכה לכינוי "אוהב ה'" (ישעיהו מא, ח) כסגורם של נאשמי סדום אברהם טוען טענות מבחינת הצדק והמשפט והרחמים—שהם קטגוריות אנושיות, ועליהן הוא "מואיל" להתווכח עם ה'. אולם כשעמדה אמונתו במבחן—גדום, אע"פ שכאן דווקא יכול היה לטעון טענות נמרצות, לא רק מבחינת הצדק אלא אף מבחינת האמת: "שהיה לו פתחון פה לומר אתמול אמרת לי כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע ועכשיו אתה אומר לי לשחטו ולא אמר כלום (תנח' בוכר). שתיקתו של אברהם...מעידה שאמונתו אינה אמונה "על תנאי" ואינה מוגדרת בגדרי המוסר האנושי.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Abraham and Job", *Judaism, The Jewish People and the State of Israel*, 393

...The fear of God possessed by Avraham—the only one to be called faithful (*ma'amin*) [see Bereishit 15:6]—is unlike the fear of God of any other personality in Bereishit, and the distinction only becomes manifest in the context of the Akeidah. This fear is identical to love, and indeed Avraham is the only biblical character described as “a lover of God” (Yeshayahu 41:8). When he defends the people of S’dom, Avraham advances claims

based on justice and law and mercy—all human categories—and based on them, he “deigns” to argue with God. However, when his faith was put to the test—he is silenced, even though he could have advanced very strong arguments, not just based on justice, but based on truth itself: “He could have said, ‘Yesterday you told me that Yitzḥak will be your genealogical line, and now you tell me to slaughter him?’ And yet he said nothing.” Avraham’s silence demonstrates that his faith is not a conditional faith and is not limited by the limitations of human morality.

Leibowitz quite deftly dispatches the potential problem of Avraham’s split personality. The moral audacity of Avraham I at S’dom, he argues, is the hallmark of religious immaturity, the words of a prophet not yet ripe. Only over time is Avraham educated to understand that God’s plan may at times conflict with human understanding of morality, a process that culminates in the Akeidah and Avraham’s willingness to perform the ultimate moral crime—the slaughter of an innocent child—in the service of God. It is this progression towards being a true knight of faith that firmly and finally establishes God’s utter transcendence, on the moral plane as well as on the physical one. And so Avraham discards the moral instinct he vented earlier in favor of total submission to God.

Before we critique the approach of Kierkegaard and Leibowitz, let us give it its due and appreciate its power. Leibowitz beckons us with the model of faith we find in love. And here he is correct, to a degree. Is not the essence of true love being willing to do for someone else that which one does not understand? To enter into a true relationship with another is to be willing to move beyond one’s own frame of reference. Love that only reinforces one’s original preferences and tendencies is nothing but narcissism. If love of God never comes in conflict with human desires, then it is anthropocentrism at best, and idolatry at worst. Avraham’s willingness to abandon all he took for granted is indeed a powerful sign of his love for God and a critical example to his descendants if they are to live with God as their forefather did.

You should be able to feel the power and allure of this approach. It seems to exude humility, an ethic of service, duty, piety, and deference to God and the Jewish tradition. The knight of faith is willing to doubt any personal conviction, no matter how deeply cherished, in favor of an authority whose thinking may be beyond their grasp. The ramifications for halakhic thinking should be clear as well. We should never question authoritative sources based on our own potentially flawed opinions. Indeed, how else could one imagine learning *anything* from the

written and oral Torah? To truly learn, all of our preconceptions must be up for negotiation and reevaluation. Without the willingness to reject my assumptions in favor of a more sophisticated picture, I cannot truly be said to be engaging in anything resembling learning.

But while this reading of the Akeidah may at first seem honest, even intuitive, it suffers from three major problems: exegetical, philosophical and practical.

The exegetical flaw lies in this reading's interpretation of Avraham I. The Avraham of S'dom must be sidelined in a fashion that draws no support from the biblical text itself. According to Leibowitz, Avraham I responds to God in an inferior fashion, but the Torah itself only seems to affirm Avraham's conduct there, and God engages deeply with Avraham's critique and changes the divine plan. Nothing about the Avraham story suggests that the Avraham of S'dom is lesser than the Avraham of the Akeidah. Where Leibowitz sees religious progression and hierarchy, the text presents equally significant episodes of Avraham living a life with God. This approach thus does not make good sense of the text.

The philosophical problem emerges from the notion that it is religiously sound to posit a relationship with God that demands surrender of human ethical instincts. Here, probing Leibowitz's use of the Bible's love metaphor is most instructive. Anyone who has been in love would acknowledge that submission to the needs of the other—at least at times—is an essential feature of any loving, enduring relationship. However, when one party to a relationship demands that the other inflict pain on itself in order to show true devotion, we rightly consider that relationship to be abusive. The love metaphor, so illustrative and powerful as a general guide to our relationship with God, becomes toxic when applied to the teleological suspension of the ethical. To claim that sometimes God demands of us that we do what we find to be morally repugnant is to posit an abusing God, one who is even more abusive for presumably having endowed us with the capacity for moral instincts in the first place.

The philosophical problem goes deeper: If you reach a point where your moral instincts tell you that something ought to be a certain way and simultaneously declare that God and *Hazal* clearly think otherwise, you are essentially saying that, in your terms, God and our Sages are not truly moral. You can protest that divine morality is different from human morality all you want. In practice, you will have thereby confessed total alienation from God and Torah. This supposedly sacred way of living is at odds with the basic frame you use on a daily basis to guide your actions and to judge the character of others.

This leads to the third major problem with this approach, which is practical. Is there really that big a difference between proclaiming fealty to God and Torah *despite* its immorality and jettisoning its strictures *because* they are immoral? Or, in other words, is the supposedly humble approach of the Akeidah laid out by Leibowitz just deep cynicism and alienation masquerading as piety? And how long before submissive obedience steeped in alienation gives way to revolutionary rebellion? If we only obey God because of God's authority—and not because of deep identification with the message God delivers—why would we expect our long term relationship with God to be any different than our relationship with Par'oh and other tyrants, whose repressive regimes we escaped at the first opportunity? This reading of the Akeidah is not only incomplete, in my view; it is religiously dangerous and irresponsible.

These problems, among others, have led some to suggest a different interpretive path.

III. Putting the Akeidah in perspective

The most eloquent critic of this first view of the Akeidah is R. David Hartman. His words largely speak for themselves, and I will quote them at length. R. Hartman's thought on the matter has developed over the years. Already in *A Living Covenant* (1985), he indicates his deep discomfort with the model of ethical submission laid out by thinkers like Kierkegaard, Leibowitz, and Hartman's teacher, R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. He lays out his intention to advocate for an approach "which completely rejects the Akeidah model for covenantal *halakhah*."¹

Hartman's first step is to revive and reclaim Avraham I and to insist his equal footing with Avraham II. He begins to do this in *A Heart of Many Rooms* (1999):

R. David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms*, 14

The God of Abraham, therefore, takes two very different forms in the book of Genesis: a God who demands total surrender to His command [the God Abraham encounters at the Akeidah] and a God who invites independent moral critique and judgment [the God Abraham encounters at Sodom]. These two paradigms have informed religious life as well as interpretation and exegesis throughout Jewish history. For many teachers from

¹ David Hartman, *A Living Covenant*, 132.

the time of the Talmud to the modern period, including Yeshayahu Leibowitz and my own teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac, was the dominant paradigm of religious life and thought. For them, the survival and continuity of the tradition require the unconditional surrender and loyalty that the Akeidah represents. To be claimed by God, I must be willing to sacrifice my intellect and intuition, to give up everything I know and cherish as a human being, in deference and obedience to the word of God.

Contemporary critiques of those who appeal to moral considerations in questions of religious practice and change often invoke an Akeidah mode of reasoning, arguing (or implicitly presupposing) that religious life would lose all credibility if submission and surrender were any less than total. The belief that “if you change anything, everything will collapse” owes its logic and conviction to the silence of Abraham in the binding of Isaac story.

Yet, Abraham, in pleading for Sodom, felt that God was not beyond his own understanding of moral argument and persuasion. This other paradigm, therefore, says: “Bring your moral intuitions, your subjective sense of dignity and justice into your understanding of the reality of God.” Not only does it not threaten or undermine religious consciousness, but it is actually necessary for recognizing the validity and applicability of the divine command.

Here we clearly see Hartman objecting to the exclusive dominance of Avraham II over Avraham I. Where Leibowitz saw progression in Avraham’s character, Hartman sees balance and struggle, a desire to integrate two modes of the religious experience of God, both sanctioned and sanctified by the Bible.

These modes, however, are not harmonious for Hartman. Instead, they live in locked battle with one another within the religious personality of Avraham and they vie for supremacy among his descendants. We dare not obscure Avraham I by overly focusing on Avraham II. But Hartman goes further, arguing that we must in fact choose between Avraham I and Avraham II. He most clearly laid out his approach in *From Defender to Critic* (2012), published near the end of his life:

R. David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic*, 160, 164, 227

These stories, seen side by side, present us with the paradox that is Abraham. The forefather of the great monotheistic traditions contained within him two incompatible realities: one of heroic self-affirmation, and one of self-denial. In one story, the protagonist maintains the ability to render an independent moral awareness, to know what he knows. He is an actor with full authority over his moral universe. In the other story, he is unable to recognize even his most primal paternal instinct. In one story, he acts; in the other, he simply obeys. The fact that two such dichotomous approaches are embodied by the very same person only highlights the polarity of these two narratives...

The ultimate question for me, then, is which story do we embrace? Which Abraham presents the truest picture of what it means to be a person and a Jew?...

Abraham's moral confrontation with God at Sodom is the central paradigm for my philosophy of Judaism. The legitimacy of Abraham's claims—and God's fundamental acceptance of these claims—clearly illustrates for me the precept that our relationship with God must empower us to take responsibility for and trust our innermost convictions. The most important lesson we learn from our forefather Abraham is the legitimacy of personal moral intuition.

R. Hartman's approach to the Akeidah largely addresses the problems with the approaches of Kierkegaard, Leibowitz, and R. Soloveitchik. In keeping with the biblical text, Avraham I is no longer sidelined. There is no implicit intrinsic hierarchy between the episodes of S'dom and the Akeidah, and God's engagement with Avraham I is taken by Hartman—as it is by the biblical text—as an endorsement of evaluating our understanding of divine commands in light of our ethical impulses.

On the philosophical plane, Hartman is at his strongest. Hartman's God longs for us to engage the divine command from where we sit as human beings, with ethical instincts of our own, and thus does not abusively demand that we self-negate in order to serve. Hartman emphasizes God's partnership with humanity and sees engagement with conflicts between the divine will and human ethics as a joint endeavor spanning heaven and earth. The corollary approach to *halakhah* is thus a quest for human creativity to help God match the divine law to the moral needs and instincts of human beings. Hartman was not primarily a halakhist himself, so the details here are few. But the thrust of the matter is that God wants human beings, when they find aspects of *halakhah* to be morally troubling, to use the language of the tradition to

rearticulate its norms in a way that resolves the conflict. And this holds out hope that people will embrace this *halakhah* as willing servants of God, rather than chafe at its sometimes apparently callous and inhuman demands.

Overall, Hartman's approach promises to create a loving relationship with God that is healthier than the love posited by Leibowitz. But his approach suffers from significant limitations as well. For one, the biblical Avraham seems to suffer from a multiple personality disorder. Unlike the often tortured and hesitant Ya'akov, Avraham seems to act with resolute certainty most of the time, whether in confronting God, waging battle, sacrificing his son, and marrying him off. Hartman purchases Avraham's complexity at the cost of his coherence.

We begin to get an inkling of the philosophical shortcomings of this approach when searching for Avraham II in Hartman's framework. What role does the story of the Akeidah play for Hartman if it does not do Leibowitz's work? Here is Hartman's answer:

R. David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic*, 171

I maintain that the Akeidah is not constitutive of Judaism. It is a moment in a religious life, but it is just that: a moment. It is not the organizing framework for how to live... There are moments when the life of faith requires submission or silence... Eventually, we all reach a moment in our lives when we feel the world is absurd, when we wonder why we should continue. The Akeidah means we acknowledge—and allow a place for—resignation as a moment in the spiritual life.

Hartman affirms that Avraham II remains a part of Jewish religious life, but a small part. And here we see the ironic Achilles heel of this approach, an approach designed to be so different from that of moral surrender. Hartman's Akeidah is in fact still the Akeidah of Kierkegaard, Leibowitz, and Soloveitchik, albeit in miniature. He attempts to modify it somewhat; instead of speaking of moral surrender, he speaks of silence in the face of tragedy. Putting aside that this is somewhat of an obfuscation—Avraham does not suffer a tragedy, he willingly *executes* a divine command—it concedes the Akeidah as a locus of moral restraint, if not outright submission.

Hartman's theological dualism does the work of raising the volume of Avraham I; S'dom vies for our attention and ought to capture it. But this very dualism keeps the Akeidah alive in the very form Hartman rightly rebels against. Hartman's Bereishit 22 still denies human ethics a place at the heart of the religious conversation. We can attempt to drown out that chapter with

the louder voice of Bereishit 18. But to the extent that the Akeidah is not shouted down by other louder paradigms, the still small voice of Avraham at Moriah continues to beckon us to serve God in spite of our ethical selves.

And this begins to undo Hartman's philosophical gains. Isn't the critique of Leibowitz's Akeidah that God should *never* be abusive, that healthy love *never* demands that one's partner become a monster? Doesn't the possibility of the Akeidah rearing its head anywhere make possible its manifestation everywhere? Once it is possible to say that God is entitled to turn us against our own ethical instincts because God knows better, how can we force God to limit this ethical override to a relatively small number of experiences? Aren't we left with a God who is still abusive and unethical, just some of the time?

On the practical plane, this remnant of the teleological suspension of the ethical can also be highly destabilizing. At any moment, a Jew attempting to live a life in communion with God can be crippled with doubt as to whether this is a moment when moral self-abnegation is demanded. Heroic attempts to reinterpret the tradition can be attacked as flouting the model of the Akeidah, meant to function (even if infrequently) as a counterforce to moral intuition. And the same risk remains that Hartman's Akeidah in miniature will still foment rebellion against God's law and even against the discourse of *halakhah*. Perhaps the revolution will take more time to gather strength, but the eventual upheaval may be no less dramatic.

There is in fact a way to build on R. Hartman's revival of Avraham I, to retain the core philosophical advantages of his approach, and to reclaim both Avraham II and his ethical legacy to us.

IV. Recapturing the ethical Abraham

This way forward is based on the following simple assertion: *Avraham would not have understood the command to sacrifice his son as immoral, because in the world in which he lived, child sacrifice was not immoral*. This assertion, while shocking at first, seems to be the best reading of the Bible, and one that the authors of the Rabbinic *midrash* on Yirmiyahu we saw above were well aware of.

Consider the following passage:

שמות כב:כח-כט

²⁸מִלְאֲתֶךָ וְדִמְעֶךָ לֹא תֹאָחֵר בְּכוֹר בְּנֶיךָ תִּתֵּן לִי:

²⁹כֵּן תַעֲשֶׂה לְשֹׂרֶךְ לְצֹאֲנֶךָ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים יִהְיֶה עִם אִמּוֹ בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי תִתְּנוּ לִי:

Shemot 22:28-29

²⁸Do not delay the fullness of your harvest nor the outflow of your presses. Give me your firstborn sons. ²⁹Do likewise with your oxen and sheep. Let it remain with its mother for seven days; on the eighth day, give it to me.

Without any further information, the reader of this text would take the parallelism here to indicate that human firstborns are “given” to God in the same fashion as oxen and sheep. כן תעשה/“Do likewise.” Other biblical sources,² of course define this “giving” as being manifested through redemption, with money being given in place of the firstborn son. And I am not suggesting that the passage above actually calls for child sacrifice. But the use of the identical idiom and language for the “giving” of one’s son and one’s animal should make us realize that we are dealing here with a different culture, one in which perhaps offering up one’s child to God was not seen as morally outrageous nor beyond the pale.

Indeed, narrative passages in the Bible confirm this cultural and religious background. Let’s begin with the story of Yiftah, the Israelite judge from the pre-monarchic period. Yiftah is engaged in a war with Ammon and calls out to God for help, promising to make a significant gift to God in return. What happens next is unexpected and tragic:

שופטים יא:ל-לב, לד-מ

³⁰וַיִּדָּר יִפְתָּח נָדָר לִיקְנוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אִם נָתַן תִּתֵּן אֶת בְּנִי עִמּוֹן בְּיָדִי: ³¹וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדִּלְתִּי בֵּיתִי לִקְרָאתִי

בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי עִמּוֹן וְהָיָה לִיקְנוֹת וְהָעֲלִיתָהּ עִוְלָה:

³²וַיַּעֲבֹר יִפְתָּח אֶל בְּנֵי עִמּוֹן לְהִלָּחֶם בָּם וַיִּתְּנָם יְקֹנָה בְּיָדוֹ:....

³⁴וַיָּבֵא יִפְתָּח הַמַּצְפָּה אֶל בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה בָתוּ יֹצֵאת לִקְרָאתוֹ בְּתָפִים וּבְמַחֲלוֹת וְרַק הִיא יְחִידָה אֵין לָהּ מִמֶּנּוּ בֶן אוֹ בַת:

³⁵וַיְהִי כִרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֵהָה בָּתִּי הַכֹּרֶעַ הַכֹּרֶעֶתָנִי וְאֵת הָיִית בְּעַכְרִי וְאֲנֹכִי פְצִיתִי פִּי אֶל

יְקֹנָה וְלֹא אוּכַל לְשׁוּב: ³⁶וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אָבִי פְצִיתָה אֶת פִּיךָ אֶל יְקֹנָה עֲשֵׂה לִּי כְּאֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִפִּיךָ אַחֲרַי אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

לָךְ יְקֹנָה נְקָמוֹת מֵאִיבֶיךָ מִבְּנֵי עִמּוֹן: ³⁷וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל אָבִיהָ יַעֲשֵׂה לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה הֲרַפָּה מִמֶּנִּי שְׁנַיִם חֲדָשִׁים וְאֶלְכָה

וְנִרְדָּתִי עַל הָהָרִים וְאֶבְכֶּה עַל בְּתוּלִי אֲנֹכִי וְרַעִיתִי וְרַעוּתִי: ³⁸וַיֹּאמֶר לָכֵי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵי חֲדָשִׁים וַתֵּלֶךְ הִיא

² See Shemot 13:13, 34:20 and Bemidbar 18:15-16.

וְרַעוּתֶיהָ וַתִּבֶּךְ עַל בְּתוּלֶיהָ עַל הָהָרִים: ³⁹וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים וַתָּשָׁב אֶל אָבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ אֶת נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר
וְהָיָא לֹא יָדְעָה אִישׁ וַתְּהִי חֹק בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁴⁰מִיָּמִים וּמִיָּמָה תִּלְכְּנָה בָנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְתַנּוֹת לְבַת יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי אַרְבַּעַת
יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה:

Shoftim 11:30-32, 34-40

³⁰Yiftah vowed a vow to the Lord and said: “If You will indeed deliver the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the Ammonites, it shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering.”

³²So Yiftah went to fight the Ammonites; and the Lord delivered them into his hand...

³⁴Yiftah came to Mizpah, to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said: “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you cause me trouble; for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot take it back.” ³⁶She said to him: “My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me in keeping with what has come out of your mouth; for the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, from the Ammonites.”

³⁷And she said to her father: “Let this thing be done for me: Leave me alone for two months, let me leave and go down to the hills and bewail my virginity, I and my companions.” ³⁸He said: “Go.” He sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. ³⁹And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she had not been intimate with a man. It was a custom in Israel, ⁴⁰that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Yiftah the Gileadite four days a year.

Yiftah makes a vow—a rash, careless vow—failing to think of the possible consequences. Clearly not intending to sacrifice his daughter, he is trapped by his words, in keeping with the biblical notion that a vow cannot ever be undone.³ And yet, while the story implicitly casts Yiftah as a fool and even a failed leader, there is no sense that he has done something immoral or

³ Mishnah Hagigah 1:8, though it assumes the possibility of releasing vows, is surprisingly transparent about the total lack of biblical evidence for this notion.

wicked. Later Israelite women mourn Yiftah's daughter not as a victim, but as a martyr for a holy cause.

If we have any doubts about the Bible's view of the religious effectiveness of the practice of child sacrifice, they are cast aside by the story of Mesha, king of Moav. Mesha is locked in battle with the Israelites, and at a key moment in the battle, when he cannot break through to his Edomite allies and all hope seems lost, he decisively parries the Israelite attack, not by means of arms, but by sacrificing his son:

מלכים ב ג:כו-כז

וַיֵּרָא מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב כִּי חִזַּק מִמֶּנּוּ הַמִּלְחָמָה וַיִּקַּח אוֹתוֹ שְׁבַע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ שְׁלֹף חֶרֶב לְהִבָּקִיעַ אֶל מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ: ²⁶וַיִּקַּח אֶת בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר יִמְלֹךְ תַּחְתָּיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עֲלֵה עַל הַחֹמָה וַיְהִי קֶצֶף גָּדוֹל עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעָלָיו וַיָּשֻׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ:

II Melakhim 3:26-27

²⁶When the king of Moav saw that he was being overwhelmed in battle, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom; but they could not.

²⁷Then he took his eldest son who would have reigned in his stead and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath upon Israel; and they departed from him, and returned to their own land.

This story is particularly striking in that this sacrifice results in an *Israelite* defeat. While the source of the “great wrath” here is unclear, what is clear is that this human sacrifice does something in the world and can even hold God's chosen nation at bay.⁴

Child sacrifice emerges as a natural part of the religious and ritual landscape in the prophetic tradition as well:

מיכה ו:ו-ח

בַּיָּמָה אֲקַדֶּם יְקֹנָה אֶפֶר לְאֱלֹהֵי מְרוֹם הָאֲקַדְמָנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת בַּעֲגָלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה: ⁷הִירָצָה יְקֹנָה בְּאֵלֵי אֵילִים בְּרִבְבוֹת נְחָלֵי שָׁמֶן הָאֵתָן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי פָרִי בְטָנֵי חֲטָאת נִפְשֵׁי: ⁸הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֶה טוֹב וּמָה יְקֹנָה דוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצָּנֵעַ לִכְתּוֹב עִם אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

⁴ For Rabbinic analyses of Mesha's actions, see Sanhedrin 39b and Pesikta De-Rav Kahana Ki Tissa Piska 2. Note that, in keeping with our reading of the biblical text here, these sources seem to assume that the sort of child sacrifice performed by Mesha, if done with proper intentions, can indeed provoke a positive divine response.

Mikhah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with newborn calves? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body to purify my soul?” ⁸It has been told to you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

In this passage, the prophet Mikhah emphasizes that God’s ultimate desire is not for rote sacrifice, but for just and merciful behavior, combined with a humble disposition towards God. But the culture of worship that Mikhah is supplementing and implicitly criticizing is one that seamlessly mixes offerings of oil, animals, and children. Child sacrifice is not criticized here any more than are other forms of sacrificial worship.

With this background in mind, we can make much greater sense of Avraham. Simply put, *Avraham I of S’dom and Avraham II of the Akeidah are one and the same*. This is a man who bravely follows God into the unknown, raises his voice to challenge God when the divine plan and the ethical imperative seem to be in conflict, and humbly submits to fulfill God’s very difficult (but not unethical) demands, even extending to sacrificing one’s son.

In 1976, Robert Gordis clearly articulated this reading of Avraham, directly attacking Kierkegaard’s appropriation of the Akeidah:

Robert Gordis, “The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard’s Teleological Suspension of the Ethical”, *Judaism* 25 (1976): 414-419

When the Akeidah narrative is read in the larger context of the book of Genesis, it offers no support for the doctrine of “the teleological suspension of the ethical.”... Just four chapters earlier, when God reveals his decision to destroy the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham does not hesitate to dispute the decision... Here there is no hint of “submission” by the “knight of faith” to the incomprehensible will of God. Abraham feels that God’s decision is in violation of the ethical law and he expresses his unshakable conviction that God cannot violate the principles of righteousness, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth act justly?”... How, then, can Abraham, himself, have submitted to an active violation of the ethical law? In view of Abraham’s ringing affirmation of the binding

character of the moral law, how is this uncomplaining acceptance of God's command to sacrifice his son to be understood?

Gordis' answer is that, in Avraham's time, child sacrifice was different in degree, but not in kind, from other forms of material devotion to God. "To be sure, offering up one's child was an infinitely more painful gift to one's God than sacrificing the firstborn of one's cattle or the tithing of one's crops." But at root, Avraham would not have been ethically scandalized by God's request. At the Akeidah, Avraham "was being subjected to the most painful test possible, but he was not being asked to violate the moral law as he understood it." Gordis argues further against the proposal that the Akeidah is a story itself teaching about the evil of child sacrifice. He rejects this, given that there is no context for it in the story of the Akeidah, and because Avraham is explicitly rewarded by God precisely *because* of his willingness to sacrifice his son, not despite it.

It may be that the passage we began with from Devarim, which harshly condemns parents who burn their children in the fire, is the beginning of a process of phasing out child sacrifice. Even this, however, is not as clear as it might be at first glance. A parallel formulation of this action seems to be described a few chapters later:

דברים יח:ט-יב

⁹כִּי אַתָּה בָּא אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא-תִלְמַד לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּתוֹעֵבֹת הַגּוֹיִם הָהֵם: ¹⁰לֹא-יִמָּצֵא בְּךָ מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ-וּבִתּוֹ בָּאֵשׁ קָסָם קְסָמִים מַעֲוֹנָן וּמְנַחֵשׁ וּמְכַשֵּׁף: ¹¹וְחָבֵר חָבֵר וּשְׂאֵל אוֹב וְיִדְעֹנִי וְדָרַשׁ אֶל-הַמֵּתִים: ¹²כִּי-תוֹעֵבֶת יְקֹנֶה כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֱלֹה וּבִגְלָל הַתוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵלֶּה יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מוֹרִישׁ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֶיךָ:

Devarim 18:9-12

⁹When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you are not to learn to do according to the abominations of those nations. ¹⁰There is not to be found among you **one having his son or his daughter cross through fire**, an augurer of augury, a hidden-sorcerer, a diviner, or an enchanter, ¹¹or a tier of (magical) tying-knots, or a seeker of ghosts or favorable-spirits, or an inquirer of the dead. ¹²For an abomination to the Lord is anyone who does these things, and because of these abominations the Lord your God is dispossessing them from before you!

Here, the cultic action done to children by the Canaanites is described as *מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ וּבָתּוֹ בָּאֵשׁ* /“one having his son or his daughter cross through fire”, which much less clearly refers to sacrifice, especially since it is listed amidst a host of other non-lethal idolatrous rituals.⁵ Perhaps the act described both here and in the earlier chapter is not even an act of child sacrifice at all. But even if the act of burning one’s children in fire is a reference to child sacrifice, it is far from clear that it is being condemned here because child sacrifice *per sé* is *unethical*. Rather, it may be that *idolatrous* child sacrifice is unacceptable. The verse describes this sin as a *תועבה* /abomination, a term not restricted to otherwise unethical acts. It is not at all clear that Devarim on its own provides condemnation of child sacrifice to the God of Israel for noble purposes.

But no one can deny that by the Rabbinic period, there already exists a clear strain of thought that rejects child sacrifice as beyond the pale and against the divine will. As we saw above, Sifrei Devarim reads God’s prophecy as clarifying that God does not (any longer?) desire human sacrifice. This text specifically singles out the three stories in the Bible that indicate otherwise: Yiftah, Meisha, and Moav. But read properly, this text reveals an awareness that the plain sense of the Bible is that child sacrifice was an acceptable and effective form of worship, even as it claims that God’s deeper intentions ought to be understood as moving the world away from this practice.

Only if we read this presumption back into the original command to Avraham might we generate the notion of an immoral command. But the anachronism of that move speaks for itself and cannot possibly jibe with a biblical text that portrays Avraham as an exemplar of the assumption that God’s word must be good. It is Avraham himself who evaluates God’s command in light of a concept of *מִשְׁפָּט* /justice that is prior to his conversation with God at S’dom! Kierkegaard’s ethical monster is only created by retrospectively writing the Rabbinic rejection of child sacrifice into Avraham’s consciousness and then lauding him for ignoring the Rabbis’ ethical qualms. This disrespects Avraham, divides him against himself, and distorts his relationship with God. Instead, we should see Avraham as a holistic, ethical being willing to challenge God and to serve God even when it is exceedingly difficult to do so. Gordis completes his assault on Kierkegaard’s reading as follows:

⁵ See II Melakhim 16:3, which uses a similar formulation.

Kierkegaard's interpretation of the text must be pronounced an anachronism made possible only by ignoring the testimony of history. It is a grafting of an alien concept upon the authentic biblical and Jewish understanding of God's will which does not command or condone the violation of the moral law, either by God or by man. Men's insight into the content of morality changes and, it is hoped, grows deeper with time. But, from the biblical period to the present, the maintenance of the ethical law and obedience to its precepts remain the categorical imperative of Judaism.

This reading not only recaptures the ethical Avraham, but it redeems the narrative of the Akeidah as a central religious text that can motivate us in ongoing ways. The Akeidah stands as an eternal reminder of the periodic need to make very painful sacrifices to serve God and to do what we know needs to be done. Avraham lived in a world in which child sacrifice was an integral part of the religious framework of life. No man longed to sacrifice his firstborn, and yet he knew that doing so was an act of appropriate gratitude to God, who enabled him to have children in the first place, and that showing such devotion to God might also bend the divine will to do great things in the world.

Why can't we embrace this in our own world? I think there are a few factors. We no longer have animal sacrifice as part of our lived experience and most Jews, I think it is fair to say, have doubts as to its efficacy were we to renew it. We also have a strong notion of individual rights and serious limitations on what parents are allowed to do to their children without their full consent. Against this backdrop, what was once seen as an act of holy sacrifice would today be rightly seen as a deranged act of murder. Avraham would never have agreed to murder his son, just as he was horrified that God was set to murder the innocent people of S'dom. But human sacrifice was not murder to him, even as it seems so to us.

And yet, we have many analogues today to the sacrifice Avraham was ready to perform, and these are not in conflict with our broader ethical commitments. Who would think that the parents who sent their children to certain death on the beaches of Normandy were ethically lapsed? What of the parents who survived the Sho'ah only to send their children to die in Israel's War of Independence? Consider cases where human life is not on the line: Don't we celebrate immigrants and others who abandon all of their material wealth in one country in order to pursue a better life for their children in another? When we believe a cause is just and is of ultimate significance, the willingness to die and even to put others at risk is rightly understood as

heroic, not immoral. No one who believes in a culture of life can *celebrate* such choices, but these painful choices are in fact part of the moral fabric of being committed to ideas and agendas that are larger than oneself.

It is in this spirit that Jews have invoked the Akeidah over the centuries. Those who risked teaching Torah in public under the Romans, those who died in martyrdom in the Crusades, those who invested their life's resources and lived in poverty to give their children a Jewish education, and those who sacrificed home, hearth, and life to create the State of Israel, all continue the tradition of Avraham at the Akeidah. This last model of reading the Akeidah allows us to celebrate this heroic moment in our liturgy as we aim to emulate Avraham, albeit with important translations and modifications for our own time.

The consequences for how we approach *halakhah* are clear. God would not command Avraham—and does not command us—to do things that we understand to be immoral. When we experience a gap between our understanding of the divine will and the ethical imperative, something is in need of fixing. It is possible that our ethical instincts are wrong and must be refined. Alternatively, we may have incorrectly understood the divine will or incorrectly applied it to our lives. A deep process of learning and searching may be required to narrow that gap to zero, but eliminated it must be. The process of *halakhah* can never end in a place where God and morality are in conflict, and the job of the learner—and certainly the *posek*—is to understand how apparent conflicts are merely incomplete understandings. There is no possibility of rebellion against God's word, because God's human servants know that the divine word is meant to be fully compatible with who they are meant to be. Observing *mitzvot* is at times exceedingly hard and requires great sacrifice and investment. But the figure of Avraham, properly understood, provides no support for the notion that God's command is ever meant to supersede our ethics. *Mitzvot* come to tame the *id*, not to override the *superego*.

V. Challenges and Responses

To my mind, this last approach is the only tenable way to read the Akeidah within the tradition, exegetically, philosophically, and practically. It presents a pedagogic challenge to be sure. We must teach this story as an enduring record of an eternal value—making extraordinary sacrifices

to fulfill God's will and to push ourselves to our limits in our Jewish lives—and we must identify with Avraham first-hand. Simultaneously, we must understand that the particular details of the story—child sacrifice as an appropriate mode of devotion and service—are of another age. That same action, if performed today, would be evil and abominable, due to shifting assumptions.

This a delicate balance, but not fundamentally unlike other challenges of translating a text with markers of the Late Iron Age to our contemporary world. In my earlier essay on category shifts, I explored how this sort of reevaluation of details is a central element in the dynamics of *halakhah*. We are stuck with this pedagogic challenge. Since I am neither interested in replacing the Torah with something new, nor can I teleport myself back to the Late Iron Age, I see this pedagogic challenge as a part of my commitment to the eternity of the Torah and approach it with שמחה של מצוה—the joy that one should experience when doing a difficult but meaningful task.

The deeper challenge here is on the philosophical plane. Once we have noted the historical development of the attitude towards child sacrifice, doesn't that undermine our own confidence in what is or is not moral? Shouldn't this last reading of the Akeidah, designed to avoid any conflict between the ethical Avraham and the knight of faith at the Akeidah, paradoxically undermine our certainty that our ethical instincts ought to be trusted?

This is a serious objection, to which I have two answers.

First, the historical development we are positing here is from a world in which child sacrifice was acceptable and viewed as effective to one in which it is seen as nothing but murder dressed up as ritual. The fact that something once morally innocuous becomes morally repugnant does not mean that it is obvious or necessary to posit that things move in the other direction. Maximally, this rendering of the Akeidah tells us that indeed there may be an evolving sense of what is repugnant and problematic in a way that increasingly restricts our behavior on the ethical and moral plane. It tells us nothing about loosening restrictions, such that we would think that God wants us to be proactive in violating basic ethical instincts.

As a consequence, when we feel something to be ethically and morally repugnant, we cannot acquiesce to a situation where someone interprets *halakhah* to demand actions that override that instinct. The instinct may, in fact, be wrong, in need of correction. But it must be addressed, not ignored or steamrolled. By contrast, it may in fact be the case that we *should* be somewhat insecure as to whether all conventional actions and behaviors deemed to be neutral or

even positive might not in the end turn out to be rejected by God. Yes, the Akeidah may cause us to be suspicious of resting on our ethical laurels, because God may eventually take us to higher places.

Second, I think it is simply an inescapable fact of committed observant Jewish life to accept that the eternal divine will looks different when filtered through different social contexts. The rabbinic tradition is explicit on this point and declares that one cannot assume that an acceptable form of religious devotion in one age will always be well received by God. In the Torah's narrative of Ya'akov's life, we find that he sets up מצבו, or stone monuments, almost everywhere he goes. These are concrete manifestations of gratitude, commitment, and worship that are central to Ya'akov's religious expression. God seems to look upon them with favor, and certainly does not disparage them.

Yet, the Torah at Devarim 16:22 later offers a very different assessment of stone monuments: וְלֹא־תִקֵּים לָךְ מִצֵּבָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁנָא יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהֶיךָ / "Do not set up a stone monument, which the Lord your God hates." Rashi immediately jumps on the problem here and tries to reconcile Ya'akov's monument making with the Torah's unequivocal condemnation of the practice. Reading וְלֹא־תִקֵּים אֲשֶׁר שָׁנָא as "has come to hate," Rashi says: וְאֵף עַל פִּי שְׁהִיתָה אֱהוּבָה לוֹ בִּימֵי הָאֲבוֹת עַכְשָׁיו שִׁנְאוֹהָ / "Even though [the stone monument] was beloved to [God] in the days of the patriarchs, now God hates it, since [the Canaanites] turned it into an idolatrous practice." In other words, the religious appropriateness of this practice has undergone a dramatic shift, due to the context in the larger world and God's corresponding response to that new reality. Would we conclude from the checkered history of stone monuments in the Bible that God sometimes wants us to do things that are hateful to God? No, we would confront the difficult, sometimes confusing but inescapable fact that not everything that was once acceptable in God's eyes remains so. The Torah, by preserving Ya'akov's practice and then forbidding it, Rashi says, tells us that we indeed cannot be confident that God's eternal will can be applied without nuance or variation in a changing world.⁶ It may be tempting to seek out such a religion for its supposed stability. Alas, it is not the Judaism that the Torah or the rabbinic tradition describes.

⁶ I cannot resist adding that the phrase וְלֹא־תִקֵּים אֲשֶׁר שָׁנָא—read here by Rashi as "has come to hate"—appears in only one other place in Tanakh: Devarim 12:31, the verse that potentially speaks about the abomination of child sacrifice! Might it be that the Torah is telegraphing here as well that child sacrifice, once an acceptable practice, is now going through a transition to becoming an abomination?

Most important to me about this last reading of the Akeidah is that it reopens the possibility of fully serving God out of love, from a place of full identification with the divine will. The acid test of faith is no longer my willingness to submit my better moral judgment to a regime that I would find horrifying if anyone other than God had commanded it. Instead, Avraham I and Avraham II live on, not in dialectical tension, but in harmony. It is my task—always, in all circumstances—to raise moral quandaries when considering the will of God, because God’s will and morality can never be at odds. Avraham I accompanies us even to the high hill of Moriah, and guides us constantly in our study and application of *halakhah*.⁷ And Avraham II reminds us that they are many things we must do in life that are unspeakably difficult, even though we know they are the right thing to do. In those moments—armed with our confidence in a God who is our moral and ethical partner—we make supreme sacrifices, not of our ethics or values, but of the possessions—and sometimes even of the people—we hold dear. When we think back on those moments of challenge and faith, we call out with pride: “We are the descendants of Avraham who loved you... the offspring of Yitzḥak, his only son, who was bound on the altar!”

⁷ One particularly powerful text in this regard is Bemidbar Rabbah 19:33, where Moshe is cast as challenging God’s commands to him on several fronts and receiving divine approval to change the protocol from that point forward. The almost gratuitous use of Moshe to make this point leaves no doubt that it is meant to be a normative tale with consequences for how future leaders are to approach their encounters with Torah.