

DARSHANUT

Darshanut, derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

THE FORGOTTEN FIGURE AT THE AKEDAH

DAN VOGEL

The enigma of *Akedat Yitzhak* still attracts confrontation. Sermons every Rosh Hashanah, when the Akedah is the Torah reading, suggest rationalizations of three problems: How can a Just and Moral God command Abraham to sacrifice his son in the first place? Where is the logic in the demand, when the Torah just recorded God's promise to him that it is Isaac who will carry on the mission to create the Jewish nation-to-be? And anyway, did not God in His predictive omniscience know the outcome of Abraham's trial?

Regarding Isaac, the problem is that the Torah is largely silent about his participation in the drama. After all, the event is popularly called "The Binding of Isaac," not "The Trial of Abraham," though the first verse of the passage in the Torah does so speak of it (Gen. 22:1). Shalom Spiegel's masterful study, *The Last Trial*, shows how the figure of Isaac was rescued from oblivion by *midrashim* that answered the wonderment about what Isaac was doing all the

while that his father was preparing the altar, piling the wood on it, and sharpening the slaughter-knife.

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It is only natural that the tableau on Mount Moriah – Isaac bound helplessly on the altar, the slaughter-knife hovering over his throat – would have been transformed through the ages into the symbol of Jewish holocausts, large and gigantic. Isaac under the knife became the symbol of the turning-away of the face of God, as in a lamentation by Rabbi Ephraim ben-Jacob of Bonn (12th century): "Recall (O God) to our credit the many Akedahs, The saints, men and women, slain for Thy sake. . ." (Lines 97-8)¹

Not a word about the angel who stopped the sacrifice. Many of the midrashim that Spiegel discusses simply ignore entirely the second voice out of heaven that calls to Abraham to desist from harming the bound Isaac. Some, amazingly, go on to imagine that Isaac *was* slaughtered and somehow brought back to life.²

In modern literature, the same angle of vision of the Akedah prevails. In Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, the last tableau pictures the hero, Joseph K., spread-eagled on a rock, an Executioner hovering over him with a knife. The almost automatic comment of the critic Hillel Barzel is: "The binding of Isaac is reinvented in *The Trial* and in [Kafka's] 'The Penal Colony,' although these stories shift from divine intervention to earthly cruelty."³ Joseph K. dies "like a dog." Again, no mention of a rescuing angel.

Isaac-as-symbol appears even more directly in Elie Wiesel's cantata *Ani Maamin* (1974). The Three Patriarchs accost God in heaven with complaints about what is happening to their descendants, in spite of ancient promises, in the death camps of the Holocaust. Isaac at one point intones:

Do you [God] recall the Akeda / Over there, on the Moriah? /
 Among all the men on earth / It was me you claimed – /
 In holocaust. . . / You made me climb, then descend /
 Mount Moriah – / Crushed and silent. /
 I did not know, my Lord, I did not know /
 It was to see my children, / Old and young,
 / Arrive in Majdanek (pp.19, 33).
 Still no rescuing angel.

Spiegel reports another aggadic tale alongside the Isaac midrashim, perhaps a more appropriate one: the story of Hannah's sacrifice of her seven sons for the glory of God, a motif of which was "Abraham, be not proud – Isaac sur-

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vived, the sons were sacrificed."⁴ This aggada *did not* become a widespread parallel symbol of Jewish holocausts alongside the image of Isaac. Why not?

I suggest that the masters of the midrashim and later Jewish literature intuited an embedded meaning not found in the story of Hannah and her seven sons – a meaning derived from the fact that Isaac *was* saved, as related in the Torah, by the forgotten figure of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the angel who came to stop Abraham from completing the act of sacrifice. This act saved the Jewish *nation* then and symbolically in every ensuing generation forever. That is God's promise. (Gen. 22:17-18).

True, Isaac, *the symbol of the Jewish nation-to-be* in the Akedah story, has been symbolically bound and re-bound to be slaughtered throughout Jewish history. But inevitably a figurative angel has always come to stay the completion of the national sacrifice. The angel reappears in various guises – sometimes as a human being, like King Cyrus, who permitted the building of the Second Temple, or Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who reorganized national Jewry after the second *hurban*. Sometimes the angel is in the guise of a societal situation, like the dispersion of Jewish enclaves that lived on while others were being exterminated; at other times he is a political phenomenon, like the amazing political power of modern British and American Jewish minorities. Once, the angel was a stupendous historical event – the astounding rebirth of the State of Israel. Alas, the angel seems to come only after murders, slaughters, holocausts, but he does come, always with a new assignment from heaven to preserve the nation.

The pattern was established in the paradigmatic enactment on Mount Moriah: As Isaac survived, the Jewish nation will always survive. All the biblical prophets prophesy thus, and history testifies. Isaiah states this fact succinctly: *I hid my face from you, But with kindness everlasting, I will take you back in love* (Isa. 54.8).

Maybe, among all the suggested reasons for God's original command, the Akedah was decreed during Abraham's mission to the world because the Lord wanted this fact of future history to be witnessed and remembered forever: the Jewish nation is eternal. Take it as a consoling truth.

NOTES

1. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967) p. 152.

2. Spiegel, chaps. V ff.

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3. "Kafka's Jewish Identity: A Contemplative World-view," in Hans-Jungen Schroeder ed., *Jewish Self-portrait in European and American Literature* (Tubingen, 1996) p. 100.
 4. Spiegel, chapter II and note 3 on pp. 17-18.
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