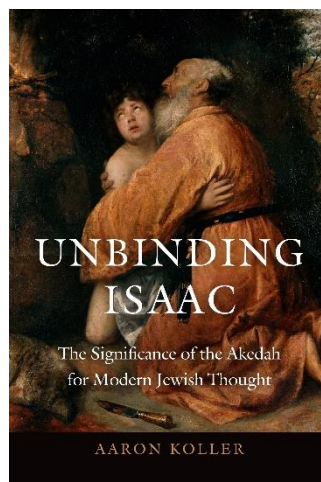


JPS Teacher's Guide

Aaron Koller, *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Jewish Thought* (2020)



Introduction

The short story of the Akedah has spawned endless commentaries, interpretations, questions, and insights. Before beginning the book, try to articulate, in writing if possible: What is the story about? Does it have a point? If so, what is it? Is there a hero of the story? If so, who is it?

The Introduction argues that the story has been read in so many different ways in part because it is so bare in its telling.

- What are the ways in which the story of the Akedah is compared in this chapter to other stories outside the Bible?
- What distinguishes biblical storytelling from other ways of telling stories? Do all biblical stories have certain stylistic elements in common?

St. Augustine (p. xxv) tells us that even common folk think of the Akedah often:

[The story of the Akedah is] so famous, that it recurs to the mind of itself without any study or reflection, and is in fact repeated by so many tongues, and portrayed in so many places, that no one can pretend to shut his eyes or his ears to it.

- What other stories in the Bible does that seem to be true about?
- Are there stories that you encountered only later, and were surprised to discover that they existed?
- What stories *should* be better known?

Chapter 1: Jewish Experiences of the Akedah

This chapter is meant to show the many *experiential*, rather than *philosophical*, ways in which Jews have read the Akedah. They have often asked not, “What is the ethical, philosophical, or theological teaching?” but “What does this mean about my life?”

The “merit of the Akedah” (זכות העקדה) appears often in the liturgy. Many siddurim have the Akedah printed in the morning service, to be recited every morning.

- How does “merit” work? Is it sort of a magical checking account, that we can draw from because our ancestors deposited into? Is there another way of understanding it?

Later in the chapter (p. 22), the famous poem “Inheritance” (ירושה) is quoted; it ends with a sort of “reverse merit”:

*“But he bequeathed that hour to his descendants /
they are born /
with a knife in their hearts.”*

(The full text of the poem, with an analysis, can be found here:

http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/ktav_et/maamar.asp?ktavet=1&id=434.)

- Is this any less magical? Does the story of the Akedah somehow scar Jews forever?

The central part of the chapter deals with the connections between the Akedah and martyrdom.

- What role does martyrdom play in Jewish religion and thought, according to these sources?

In medieval Ashkenaz (Germany and France), many Jews martyred themselves rather than be captured by Christian Crusaders and baptized. They even killed their own children to avoid that fate for them. Historians have discussed a number of crucial issues here.

- What was the justification for these deaths, especially the killing of children? Was this thought to be the halakha (Jewish law)? Or was it something beyond law? Professor Haym Soloveitchik argued that it was an emotional, rather than a legal, response. ([One article is here.](#))
- In Spain, centuries later, Jews often did agree to convert to Christianity rather than be killed or expelled – most famously, of course, in 1492. Some of those conversos secretly continue to practice their Judaism. But why did Ashkenazic Jews rush to martyrdom, while Spanish Jews chose conversion?

The chapter (pp. 10-11) discusses “martyr envy”:

Since Christianity, but not Judaism, was illegal for the first three and a half centuries of the Common Era, Christian martyrdoms were common, but Jewish martyrdoms were not. ... Because of this imbalance— which obviously was good for the Jews in mundane terms—Jews experienced what we might call “martyr envy.” The Akedah was seen as the right corrective to this.

- Does this idea make sense to you? Are there areas of life where you see this operating?

The Aramaic poem discussed on p. 16 is emotionally ambiguous:

*This is the day that they will say,
A father had no pity, and a son did not delay. ...
Isaac kissed his father Abraham,
Commanding him, saying to him: ...
Let your anger triumph over your mercy, Father
Be like a man who has no mercy on his son!*

- On your reading, is the piety sincere or satirical?

Less ambiguous are the texts on p. 17, where ancient poets criticize Abraham for not having mercy on his son. This is often thought to be a modern trope, but here we find it in texts from 1500 years ago:

*He forgot how a father is supposed to have mercy on a son/
a prayer or plea he should have offered*

- Is it possible to say that Abraham was entirely pious but not a good father?

The Syriac poems on pp. 18-20 discuss the role of Sarah in the Akedah:

*Sarah saw and her heart groaned, and she began to speak to Abraham:
“Why are you sharpening your knife? What do you intend to slaughter with it? . . .”*

*“Do not cut off this single bunch of grapes,
The only fruit we have produced; . . .
Do not break the staff on which we support ourselves.”*

*“You are not aware of how much I endured
— the pains and birth pangs that accompanied his birth.
Swear to me that he will not come to harm,
For he is my hope. Then take him and go.”*

As noted, there are no close Jewish parallels to these poems. But there is plenty of Jewish thinking about the place of Sarah. A poignant contemporary poetic reflection is Rivka Lubitz, “שרה והעקדה,” in *דרשוני: מדרשי נשים* (ed. Tamar Biala and Neḥama Weingarten-Mintz; Tel Aviv: Yedi’ot Aḥaronot Sifre Ḥemed, 2009). And a good discussion is Wendy Zierler, “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah,” *Nashim* 9 (2005), 10-26.

The final section of the chapter moves to modern Israel, where the Akedah looms very large. One example not discussed is A. B. Yehoshua’s novel *Mr. Mani*. Yehoshua wrote that he wanted “to annul the akedah through its fulfillment.”¹

- Based on the sources here, what roles does the Akedah play?
- If you could address the Akedah for modern Israelis, what would you do with it? Quash it? Rewrite it? Fulfill it? How?

Chapter 2: Kierkegaard

This is probably the densest chapter of the book, turning to one of the most influential religious thinkers of the past two centuries.

- How does the brief biography of Kierkegaard frame his thought? Do you see his biography and his philosophy as connected?

The book *Fear and Trembling* is the center of this chapter. It opens with a quote about Tarquinius Superbus (a real ancient name!):

¹ A. B. Yehoshua, “Mr. Mani and the Akedah,” *Judaism* 50 (2001), 61-65.

What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not

What does this epigraph say about how to read the book that it begins?

Kierkegaard – really, Johannes de Silentio – distinguishes between the “tragic hero” like the biblical Jephthah or the classical Agamemnon, and the “knight of faith” Abraham.

- What is the distinction?
- Why is what Jephthah did “ethical,” but what Abraham did not in the realm of ethics?

If Abraham’s actions are not ethical, of course, the question is why he would do it anyway.

How does Kierkegaard answer, or not answer, this question?

Much of Kierkegaard’s work in this book is on the question, What is true faith? A passage from a different book of Kierkegaard’s (called *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) is cited on pp. 38-39, where a woman tells her husband that he must be a Christian:

Aren’t you a Dane, and doesn’t the geography book tell us that the prevailing religion in Denmark is Lutheran Christianity? You aren’t a Jew, or a Mohammedan; so what can you be?

Kierkegaard obviously thinks this (fictional) woman does not understand what *faith*, and therefore *Christianity*, are.

- What does she think it means to be a Christian?
- What fault does Kierkegaard find in this view?
- What is his alternative view of what it means to be a person of faith?

On pages 42-45, a number of passages from the New Testament, Church Fathers, and the Mishnah are cited, for example:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead— and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb. 11:17–19)

“But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied” (Rom. 5:20)

Rabbi Ḥannaniah b. ‘Aqashia says: “The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to justify Israel, so He gave them many laws and commandments, as it says, ‘The Lord wanted to justify him; he multiplied Law and glorified it’ (Isa. 42:21).”

- What is the crux of the question these texts ask about Abraham?
- How does this shed light on Kierkegaard’s approach to the Akedah?

The banishment of Ishmael (Genesis 21) and the Akedah (Genesis 22) turn out to have a lot in common, literarily speaking (discussed on pp. 47-49):

In both, God tells Abraham that he needs to get rid of his son— banish in the case of Ishmael, kill in the case of Isaac (Gen. 21:12–13, 22:7–2). In both, Abraham “wakes up early in the morning” and takes his supplies (21:14, 22:3). In both, the end draws near: Ishmael, about to die of thirst, is left under a bush by his mother (21:15–16), and Isaac is about to be slaughtered by his father (21:9–10). In both, at the last minute, an angel appears to offer a reprieve (21:17, 22:11–12) and then follows that with blessings for the future (21:18, 22:16–17). In both, the salvation is tied to the parent seeing something new— a well of water in the case of Hagar (21:19) and a ram in the case of Abraham (22:13). Both stories finally end with notices related to the children’s marriages (21:21, 22:20–24).

- What do you make of this relationship?
- Does it shed light on the character of Abraham and/or his development?
- Does it make you think of the Akedah in a different way?

Despite Kierkegaard's statement that Abraham "received Isaac back in love" at the end of the Akedah, there is good reason to think this is not correct.

- Textually speaking, what suggests that Abraham did *not* receive Isaac back so simply?
- What is Abarbanel's view of the relationship between Abraham and Sarah?
- How does this shed light on the family of the first patriarch and matriarch?

Chapter 3: Jewish Parallels from the Century of Kierkegaard

The chapter opens with a profile of aspects of European Jewish thought in the 19th century, the time of Kierkegaard.

- What are the major developments in Jewish life and thought of the era?
- How do the Gaon of Vilna and Moses Mendelssohn – despite their vast differences – both illustrate some of the innovations of the time?

The most famous innovation of the time is the rise of Hasidism.

- Are there ways in which Hasidic thought and Kierkegaard enlighten each other?

Three thinkers are treated in more detail in this chapter: Rabbi Mordechai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (the Izbicer), Rabbi Moses Sofer (the Hatam Sofer), and Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser (the Malbim).

- The Izbicer utilizes the notion of a "sin for the sake of heaven" (*averah li-shmah*). Why is this idea so tantalizing, and so dangerous, within Jewish thought?
- How do different interpreters deal with the alleged ambiguity of God's command to Abraham in Genesis 22?
- How does the Izbicer exploit this ambiguity?

The Malbim's view, as developed in his commentary on Genesis 22, is strikingly similar to Kierkegaard's.

- Do you find these parallels compelling?
- Since historical influence is not possible in either direction, what is the import of these similarities?

Chapter 4: Jewish Followers of Kierkegaard

This chapter introduces two prominent twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Joseph Ber Soloveitchik.

What do the two have in common?

Leibowitz has a brilliant reading of the Akedah, in the context of the stories of Abraham, as a corrective to some of the earlier (alleged) mistakes Abraham had made.

- What were those mistakes?
- How does the Akedah correct those?
- What central aspect of Leibowitz's thought does this lead to?

Leibowitz is subjected to harsh criticism here, both textual and philosophical.

- Philosophically, what is the issue that is discussed on pp. 70-71 (e.g., "There simply is no room for ethics in religion, according to Leibowitz, whereas for Kierkegaard, normally ethics and religion go quite nicely together")?
- What Jewish sources suggest that, contrary to Leibowitz, there is a profound emphasis on ethics within Judaism?
- Not discussed in the book here, but for thought: What are the stakes in this question in the modern world?

Moving to Soloveitchik, we find that this thinker has used the Akedah, and the notion of the "knight of faith," as a model for all lives lived under the *halakhah*.

- What is the model of the bride and groom that he discusses?

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and groom make a movement of recoil [when a drop of menstrual blood is seen]. He, gallantly, like a chivalrous knight, exhibits paradoxical heroism. He takes his own defeat.

- How does this stand in for a major feature of halakhic life, in Soloveitchik's thought?

On page 79, we read that for Soloveitchik, the point of the Akedah was "the breakage of the will."

- What does this mean in the context of the Akedah?
- Continuing on, what does this mean for modern halakhic life?
- What are the different models of prayer Soloveitchik describes in the passages cited on pp. 79-81?

The end of the chapter discusses the reception of Kierkegaard in early twentieth-century German circles.

- What took so long for people to get interested?
- How does this contextualize Soloveitchik's thought?

- Does this, in your view, enhance, detract from, or not affect your appreciation for Soloveitchik's approach?

Chapter 5: Criticizing Kierkegaard

The beginning of this chapter uses Soloveitchik not as an expositor of Kierkegaard, but as a critic.

- What about Soloveitchik's approach made him skeptical of Kierkegaard?
- For Soloveitchik, what is the corrective to the radical individual subjectivity latent in Kierkegaard?

The second problem with Kierkegaard discussed is the "erasure of Isaac" from the story.

- What does this mean in this context?
- How does Caravaggio's famous painting speak to this issue?

The next section of the book argues that the individualism of Kierkegaard's knight of faith is a Christian ideal, but not a Jewish one.

- What sources and practices are there for Judaism being more communally-oriented, and less focused on the individual?

On p. 104-109, the difference between Abraham's behavior regarding Sodom and Abraham at the Akedah is discussed. This contrast was made famous by David Hartman in a number of books, as in this claim of his:

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.

- What is the contrast developed by Hartman?
- What are the ethical and normative conclusions derived by Hartman based on this?
- How would Leibowitz read the same difference between the stories?
- What is the argument put forth in the book here to account for the difference in Abraham's behavior?

The last part of the chapter argues that the clash between faith and ethics is anachronistic.

- What is meant by that?
- How would the Akedah have been read in ancient times, then? (Sources from Chapter 1 may be useful here.)

Chapter 6: On Child Sacrifice

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is quoted at the beginning of the chapter, emphasizing the two halves of the Akedah story.

- Which half did Kierkegaard focus on?
- What difference does it make if we recenter the story to include both halves?

Though it may sound shocking, it is argued that the Torah is sympathetic to the impulse behind child sacrifice.

- Where is this seen in the Torah?
- What do you think of those verses? Do they mean child sacrifice?
- What *is* the logic of child sacrifice? (See also the passage from Moshe Halbertal cited at the end of the chapter, pp. 125-126.)

The Phoenicians, great bearers of the alphabet and culture throughout the Mediterranean, also apparently practiced child sacrifice.

- What sort of archaeological evidence is discussed for this practice?
- Is it really “uncultured” to offer one’s child as a sacrifice?
- How is the story of Mesha, king of Moab, similar to what is known of the Phoenician practice?

The chapter then moves to discuss other biblical texts about child sacrifice.

- Reading against the grain, what do the passages from Jeremiah, Micah, and Ezekiel suggest?

Chapter 7: Maimonides and the Complexity of the Divine Will

One of the most trenchant criticisms of the Akedah was penned by Immanuel Kant (cited on p. 129): “Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice, ‘That I should not kill my son is absolutely sure. But that you, who appear to me, are God in person, of that I am not sure at all even when your voice thunders from heaven.’”

Buber points out that within the Bible, there is sometimes confusion as to whether a voice is God's or not. ... Confusion appears to be possible, and Buber argues that this has to be dealt with before one can discuss obedience.

Sa'adia Gaon and Ralbag, as well as the Izbicer in the nineteenth century, all argued that the divine command was in fact ambiguous, and the crux of the test was whether Abraham would resolve the ambiguity in the way that was comfortable for him or in the way that accurately captured the will of God.

The notion that it is fundamentally unknowable whether it is God speaking seems obvious to us. And yet Abraham did not hesitate.

- How does Buber (p. 129) solve this “problem of hearing”?
- What about Sa'adia Gaon and Gersonides (the Ralbag) (p. 130)?
- How does Maimonides in the *Guide* turn Kant's question on its head?

According to *Guide* 2.45, there are different levels of prophecy.

- What level prophecy was the command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice?
- What level prophecy was the command to *not* offer Isaac as a sacrifice?
- What does this disparity in prophetic “levels” suggest about the center of gravity in the story?
- For Maimonides – and for you – did the Akedah have to actually occur, or could it have been just a dream?

Joseph Ibn Kaspi notices (as have many others) that different names of God are used in the Akedah story.

- Where is each name deployed?
- For Ibn Kaspi, what is the significance of each name?
- How does his view compare then to that of Maimonides?

Chapter 8: Rejecting Child Sacrifice

The Laws of Hammurabi, as well as other ancient legal texts, sometimes rule that a child should be punished for the crimes of a father.

- What is the logic inherent in this sort of punishment?
- What is the biblical reaction to such thinking – explicit in Exodus 21:28-31 (p. 146)?

[B]iblical law... treats children as full people in this law. An ox that gores a person, child or adult, is to be put to death. Why does the biblical law part ways with its Mesopotamian counterparts? The issue seems to be precisely the status of the child.

Returning to the Akedah, the argument in this chapter is that the conceptual debate between Hammurabi and Exodus is also the dynamic within the first and second parts of the story.

- Is it compelling that the Torah rejects the idea of child sacrifice for the same reason it rejects this type of punishment?

Conclusion: The Demands of God and People

There are two major claims summarized in this brief chapter:

1. The heart of ethics is the recognition that the other person is no less significant than I am. This is the point of the Golden Rule, so widespread and so difficult to abide by.
2. Religious life therefore cannot be fulfilled through violence to another.

Building on Levinas and moving to contemporary life, the conclusions argue for a way of thinking about the religious teaching of the Akedah that does not involve sanctioning violence to another in the name of one's own religious life.

- How does the suggestion that the *mal'akh* "angel" is actually the face of Isaac change the dynamic (if not the message) of the story?
- Why is it so hard to look at a beggar's face, and why is it so important to do so according to the midrash discussed on pp. 150-151?

A midrash in Vayyiqra Rabbah, for example, ponders the call of the beggar on the street, Zekhi bi, literally, "Give me charity." Rabbi Haggai says, however, that it sounds like Sekhi bi, "Look at me!" He explains, "Look at me! Look at what I was, and look at what I am now." That act of looking— simply observing that this is a person before me— is central to the practice of charity, as it decenters our sense of the world. It is for just that reason that it is so natural to avert one's eyes from a beggar on the subway or the street. Looking at the beggar's face means grappling with his or her personhood, and this decentering is disconcerting.

- How can we live with the Akedah while repudiating religious violence?