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BETWEEN ULTIMATE SACRIFICE AND YEARNING FOR DEATH:

MIDRASH AND PSYCHOANALYSIS ON THE BINDING OF ISAAC¹

Abstract. The biblical narrative of the Binding of Isaac conveys conflicting messages. On the one hand, it demands a readiness to sacrifice one's beloved at God's command. On the other hand, the narrative's conclusion cancels the sacrifice of the son and ordains his replacement with an animal, a ram. This article argues that the ancient rabbis of the *Midrash*, in the first centuries of the Common Era, perceived this ambiguity as an inherent tension between the religious demand for the believer's willingness to sacrifice his dearest, and even life itself, and the danger of a perverted overenthusiasm to sacrifice and be sacrificed. This article further suggests that classical psychoanalytic interpretations of the biblical story, as well as proposed interpretations from the perspectives of self psychology and Interpersonal and Relational psychoanalysis, can contribute to an understanding of this tension. Murderous and masochistic Oedipal wishes may contribute to a willingness to engage in child sacrifice and martyrdom, and deeply rooted desires to express and actualize the nuclear self and to attain a close relationship with idealized entities are described as competing and struggling forces in this heroic and complicated narrative. Contemporary ramifications of this interpretation are discussed.

Keywords: *Midrash*, Bible, Binding of Isaac, self psychology, interpersonal-relational, Oedipus

THE NARRATIVE OF THE BINDING OF ISAAC in Genesis 22:1–19, known as *Akedat Yitzhak* (or simply the *Akeda*) in the Jewish tradition, is one of the most perplexing, enigmatic, and difficult stories in the entire Bible. These difficulties are rooted in a variety of textual, moral,

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philosophical, and theological problems. Kass (2003), in the introduction to his discussion of the story, expresses these feelings:

No story in Genesis is as terrible, as powerful, as mysterious, as elusive as this one. It defies easy and confident interpretations, and despite all that I shall have to say about it, it continues to baffle me. Indeed, my approach seems even to me to be too shallow, precisely because I am attempting to be reasonable about this awesome and shocking story. (p. 333)

Psychoanalytic interpretations of the narrative tend to emphasize pathological processes in Abraham and Isaac. Recent references to the story have been influenced by a horror of extremist groups that glorify a willingness to sacrifice and die in the name of God, and who view Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son as a paradigm of devotion to God and a justification for acts of terror (Chilton, 2008; Stein, 2006, 2002). In this article, I suggest an interpretation of the *Akeda* derived from midrashic interpretations of the narrative that offers an ambivalent and complicated understanding of the readiness to sacrifice one's child—or one's own life—for the sake of a value that is deemed worthy.

Midrashic literature, or *midrash* (pl. *midrashim*), is a general term referring to collections (or specific examples)² of ancient rabbinic biblical exegeses compiled during the early centuries of the Common Era. They typically offer a range of viewpoints and interpretations of biblical narratives and verses. The *Midrash* uses subtle textual and intertextual analyses combined with considerable creative imagination to convey its messages. In this regard, it is a hermeneutical tradition that bears similarities to psychoanalytic investigation (Aron, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Cushman, 2007) and, at the same time, is open to psychoanalytic interpretation.

The focus of this article will be the ambiguous or contradictory messages conveyed in the text of the *Akeda*. I will suggest that the rabbis of the *Midrash* understood the *Akeda* to contain a complicated message: On the one hand, it demands a readiness to sacrifice one's dearest; on the other hand, it contains implicit warnings about the potential perversion of this sacred demand into a murderous drive to sacrifice and be sacrificed. In this article, I will incorporate a wide range of psychoanalytic theoretical perspectives in an effort to understand this complicated

²Because the term can be used in several senses, "Midrash," often with the definite article, will refer to the midrashic corpus collectively, whereas "midrash" will refer to a specific instance of rabbinic exegesis.

message and the mental processes it reflects. My primary assertion is that viewing the same narrative from different psychoanalytic perspectives results in a complicated picture that may be best described as *holographic* (Levenson, 1976). Historical and textual analyses will be used to elucidate and demonstrate the narrative's relevance to confusing—and appalling—contemporary cultural and social phenomena.

The Ambiguity of the Biblical Narrative

A close reading of the *Akeda* exposes the reader to contradictory messages. On the one hand, God demands that Abraham slay his beloved son Isaac and praises his willingness to do so: “‘By Myself I swear,’ the Lord declares, ‘because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you . . .’” (Gen. 22:16–17). This informs the reader that the highest stage of devotion to God is expressed in the willingness to sacrifice one's beloved, like Abraham, or to be sacrificed, like Isaac.

On the other hand, the narrative conveys an opposing message as well: ultimately, God did not demand the sacrifice of Isaac and, instead, forbade Abraham from harming him. Isaac was replaced by the ram, an animal sacrifice, thereby conveying the message that child sacrifice is unacceptable to God. This notion is clearly stated and supported in many places throughout the Bible, e.g., “Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molekh, and do not profane the name of your God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 18:21). Furthermore, the command to sacrifice Isaac contradicted earlier promises by God that Isaac would be Abraham's heir: “for through Isaac your offspring shall be continued” (Gen. 21:12).

Source critics speculate that the contradictory lessons of the *Akeda* are the result of multiple authorial or editorial layers in the biblical text (Yassif, 1978; Gunkel, 1910/1997). They argue that, in an earlier version, the sacrifice of Isaac was actually carried out, and another layer was added to the story at a later date to accommodate changes in social and moral values, e.g., the banning of human sacrifice and its replacement by animal sacrifice. As evidence, they note the nomenclature used by the Bible to describe the Deity in the narrative: The order to sacrifice Isaac was issued by *Elohim* (translated as “God”; Gen. 22:1, 9), whereas the rescinding of that order was issued by “the angel of YHWH” (translated as “the Lord”; Gen. 22:11, 14, 15).

According to ancient rabbinic tradition, however, the variation of God's

names signifies different aspects or attributes of the Godhead. For example, *Elobim* represents the aspect of justice (*midat ha-din*), whereas “YHWH” represents the aspect of mercy (*midat ha-rahamin*) (Shulman, 2003). Needless to say, the ancient rabbis did not consider attributing different parts of the text, which they deemed to be the literal word of God, to disparate sources.³

Thus, the rabbis sought other ways to address the tension between the lessons of the *Akeda* and the differing names of God. Indeed, this tension is crucial for understanding the various *midrashim* on the story. The ancient rabbis, I argue, interpreted the narrative as conveying, on the one hand, the need for what is called in *Mesirut Nefesh*—willingness to give up what is most dear, including one’s own life or the life of one’s child, in God’s name. On the other hand, and herein lies the implicit message of the narrative, this deep devotion and willingness to sacrifice human life for one’s belief also carries dangers of perversion. In fact, there is a need for a clear divine command to restrain it. This idea is dramatized in the following *midrash* on the *Akeda*:

He said: “Do not raise your hand against the boy.” But where was the knife?

Three tears were shed by the ministering angels, destroying the knife.

He (Abraham) said to Him: “I will strangle him.”

He (God) said to him: “Do not raise your hand against the boy.”

He (Abraham) said to Him: “I will draw a bit of blood from him.”

He (God) said to him: “Do not do anything (*me’umab*) to him”; “Do not make a blemish (*mumab*) on him” (*Genesis Rabbah* [Vilna ed.] §56).

The angel of God has difficulty stopping Abraham from carrying out his intention to slay Isaac. Only an explicit command by the angel not to cause any wound to Isaac succeeds in finally stopping Abraham. The textual anchors of this *midrash* are the double call to Abraham—“Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: ‘Abraham! Abraham!’” (Gen. 22:11)—and the extraneous second clause in the angel’s words:

³According to Spiegel: “The ancients, of course, never permitted themselves the liberty of laying their hands on verses they did not know how to interpret, and it never entered their minds to scrape away or scratch out anything in the received text. But they were no less sensitive to difficulties and tried to remove them in their own way, by reconciling the verses as they were, either by what appeared to them to be *psbat*, literal exegesis, or by way of *drash*, imaginative, homiletical exegesis, which they loved so much” (Spiegel, 1967, p. 126).

“Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him” (Gen. 22:13). It is as if Abraham is so absorbed in his deed that he does not notice the angel’s first call, and that, even after the second call, the orders must be repeated and made extremely specific.⁴

Notwithstanding the exegetical techniques employed in its derivation, this *midrash* addresses the potential perversion of one’s willingness to sacrifice life for noble and sacred causes. The willingness to sacrifice or risk life is essential and valuable in some circumstances, but may become perverted, destructive, and dangerous when it loses its original purpose. Psychoanalytic interpretations of the behavior of Abraham and Isaac in the *Akeda* can deepen our understanding of the tensions that emerge from the biblical text and *midrashim*, and enhance our understanding of the complex mental transformations that Abraham undergoes.

The challenge of interpreting the narrative psychoanalytically is twofold: It is necessary to understand Abraham’s behavior as well as Isaac’s. Abraham accepts the commandment to sacrifice his beloved son with no hesitation and without question. He does not even debate the morality of killing an innocent boy, in contrast to his pleas on Sodom’s behalf: “Abraham came forward and said: ‘Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?’” (Gen. 18:23). Furthermore, he does not point out the contradiction of the new order to God’s promise that Isaac will be his heir “for through Isaac your offspring shall be continued” (Gen. 21:12). Finally, he does not realize that God’s wording (*ve-ha’alehu* in Gen. 22:2) did not literally demand Isaac’s slaughter, but only his being “offered up” onto the altar. According to a *midrash*, God exploits this last ambiguity to explain His apparent backtrack: “When I said to you ‘Take your son, your favored one’ I did not say ‘slaughter him,’ rather ‘offer him up’” (*Genesis Rabbah* [Vilna ed.] §56).

Isaac, described in the text as a *na’ar* (youth), seems to be an adolescent, yet he follows his father to his death. The text tells us that he questioned Abraham about the absence of a sacrificial animal, and it is clear that, despite his father’s answer that “God will see to the sheep for His

⁴Later *midrashim* recount that Isaac was actually harmed by his father before he was saved. His neck was cut and he needed time to heal. An old *midrash* from medieval Germany (Ashkenaz) reads “. . . that Isaac was secreted in Paradise for two years in order to be healed from the incision made in him by his father” (Spiegel, 1967, p. 7). Another *midrash* states: “R. Joshua says: ‘God spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the Lord”—said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses, “I can be trusted to reward Isaac son of Abraham, for he left a measure of his blood on top of the altar . . .”’” (*Mekhilta De-Rashbi* 6:2, cited in Spiegel, 1967, p. 46).

burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8), Isaac understood that he was to be the sacrifice. Nevertheless, Isaac continues the journey with his father, “And the two of them walked on together” (Gen. 22:8). The Bible, by repeating the word “together,” seems to indicate that Isaac shares the terrible knowledge of the mission with his father. This is definitively stated in the following *midrash*: “‘And the two of them walked on together’—this one to bind and that one to be bound; this one to slaughter and that one to be slaughtered” (*Genesis Rabbah* [Theodor-Albeck ed.] §56).

What motivates Isaac to go with his father toward a terrible end even though he never heard God’s voice? Why does he follow his father’s belief and conviction that he is doing God’s will? This is the second challenge for a psychological understanding of the narrative.

In what follows, I will survey some classical psychoanalytic interpretations, a suggested self psychology-based interpretation, and an Interpersonal-Relational perspective of the narrative. I will conclude that the dialectics of this narrative can be better understood in light of these psychoanalytic insights.

Classical Psychoanalytic Interpretations

Classical psychoanalytic interpretations of this narrative focused on its resemblance to the Oedipus myth, demonstrating the murderous drives operating in father-son relationships. Sugar (2002) outlined commonalities between the *Akeda* and the myth of Oedipus, both containing the themes of filicide, patricide, guilt, punishment, and expiation. Sugar speculates that Isaac may have had an incestuous relationship with his mother, which would explain the death of Sarah shortly thereafter, his absent virility for 20 years, and his blindness.

Sherman (2002) speculates that Isaac was actually sacrificed on Mount Moriah as an expression of Abraham’s murderous unconscious wishes against his son. This, he claims, was edited out by later generations in order to adapt the narrative to the social mores of later periods. This reading is supported, Sherman notes, by a long tradition that Isaac was actually slain on the altar and resurrected afterwards (Spiegel, 1967). The text contains vestiges, he argues, of the original story in Abraham’s lonely return without Isaac: “Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba” (Gen. 22:19). Furthermore, the angel’s blessing indicates that Abraham did not, after all, spare his son: “The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said,

'By Myself I swear,' the Lord declares, 'because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you . . .'" (Gen. 15–17).

A second approach within classical psychoanalytic interpretation emphasizes the differences between the Oedipus myth and the *Akeda*, in particular regarding their outcome. Erich Wellisch (1954), in *Isaac and Oedipus*, surveys a vast amount of evidence for the existence of filicide in the ancient world in which the Oedipus legend originated. He perceives two conflicts in the Oedipus story: the "Oedipal Complex," in which the son wishes to kill his father, and the "Laius Complex," relating to the father's murderous drives against his son. Wellisch claims that the *Akeda* suggests a biblical solution of peace and love between the father and son. The story depicts a gradual process of sublimation of the murderous drives in parents towards their children and a painful process of replacing child sacrifice with animal substitutes:

A fundamental effect of Abraham's change of outlook was the realization that God demanded life and not death. Abraham realized that the meaning of the command sacrifice was not to kill his son but to dedicate his son's life for lifelong service of God. He completely rejected the former dominance of his death instinct and entirely abandoned his aggressive tendencies against Isaac. His life instinct was tremendously promoted and with it a new love emerged in him for Isaac which became the crowning experience of his religion. (p. 89)

Isaac had to fight and struggle with his Oedipal wishes to kill his father before the latter kills him. He overcame this, and Abraham, seeing it, loved Isaac even more and was able to change his own attitude towards Isaac. This helped Abraham to overcome his own "Laius Complex," Wellisch asserts.

Kaplan (2002; Kaplan & Algom, 1997), following Wellisch, argues that the difference between outcomes of the tragic Oedipus myth and the optimistic *Akeda* is rooted in the profound differences between the worldview of Greek mythology and that of the Hebrew Bible. For the ancient Greeks, the gods were created within an already existing natural world. Thus, they are limited by the immutable laws of nature. The Oedipal tensions are part and parcel of nature, which cannot be changed. The optimistic and messianic hope for a moral and loving world, expressed in the Bible, is based on the belief that man and nature can change.

Likewise, Beck (1963) asserts that the *Akeda* expresses the inner struggle between Abraham's two personae: one internalized from the prevailing Semitic culture, and the other from the moral imperative to which he devoted himself. In a world where child sacrifice is necessary to appease the anger of the gods and to save your own family or country, Abraham had to demonstrate that the human mind is free to follow the moral imperative and to pit itself against deeply ingrained social norms.

Zornberg (2009) suggested that Abraham is driven by a repressed memory of a childhood trauma. Basing her ideas on midrashic tradition, Zornberg asserts that, as a child, Abraham was cast into Nimrod's fiery furnace by his father because of Abraham's belief in God and rejection of idolatry. Abraham is then compelled to relive his own traumatic experience by sacrificing his dear and long-awaited son. Thus, in the *Akeda*, God functions in the role of psychoanalyst, working to cure Abraham from his obsession. Through this near-sacrifice experience, Abraham is taught to relinquish a form of worship that originates in fear and terror—and a form in which sacrifice is an expression of union with the Deity through the annihilation of the self—towards a religion based on long-lasting work and devotion to God in real, moral life.

A third general approach reads the *Akeda* as an expression of the desire to replace the birthing power of human mothers with "rebirth" from a divine father. The invisibility of fatherhood plus male envy of the female's ability to give life are the driving forces behind child sacrifice. The act of sacrificing the son, and especially if he is finally saved by a fatherly "God," is perceived as a rebirth by a male figure, thus substantiating the patriline (Janowitz, 2006; Stein, 2002).

Stein (2006, 2010), while discussing the readiness of fundamentalists to die as martyrs, perceives the willingness to sacrifice as deriving from a homoerotic vertical desire for a cruel, dominating father. Instead of liberating one's selfhood through the symbolic "killing of the father" (Loewald, 1979), the son of the cruel father idealizes and deifies him, submitting his life to the love of an idealized father-figure and his "sacred values." In light of the aforementioned *midrashim* about Abraham's father putting his son into a fiery furnace, we may understand the behavior of Abraham and Isaac as originating in their experiences with their seemingly detached fathers.

The common denominator of all these interpretations is that they perceive the command to sacrifice and the willingness to die in obedience

as the outcome of a pathological process. Yet, these interpretations limit our understanding of the wide variety of socially and historically valued examples of the willingness to die, sacrifice, or risk the lives of children, whether directly or by sending them to the battlefield. It also limits our understanding of the powerful forces driving contemporary enemies of Western culture to be willing to sacrifice their own and their children's lives.

Our challenge, therefore, is to explain human behavior that seems to override not only the pleasure principle but also the survival instinct. In what follows, I will suggest self psychology and Interpersonal-Relational perspectives, which I believe add new dimensions to the understanding of the biblical narrative and, thus, contribute to the understanding of contemporary challenges.

A Kohutian Perspective

In his last published article, Kohut (1982) suggested the story of Odysseus and Telemachus as an alternative to Freud's Oedipal model. The Homeric narrative tells of Odysseus, who feigned madness in order to escape going to war against Troy. He was plowing with an ox and an ass yoked together, and flinging salt over his shoulders into the furrows. The other Greek kings, who suspected that he was faking madness, put Odysseus' infant son, Telemachus, in front of the advancing plough. Odysseus immediately made a semicircle with his plough to avoid injuring his son—a move that demonstrated his mental health and forced him to confess that he had only feigned madness. Kohut suggests that Odysseus' semicircle is a symbol for "normal" intergenerational relationships:

The semi-circle of Odysseus' plough . . . is a fitting symbol of that joyful awareness of the human self of being temporal, of having an unrolling destiny: a preparatory beginning, a flourishing middle, and a retrospective end; a fitting symbol of the fact that healthy man experiences, and with deepest joy, the next generation as an extension of his own self. It is the primacy of the support for the succeeding generation, therefore, which is normal and human, and not intergenerational strife and mutual wishes to kill and to destroy. (p. 403)

Although, to the best of my knowledge, Kohut did not write about the *Akeda*, we may posit that Kohut would not have accepted classical psy-

choanalytic interpretations of it, based as they are on the Oedipal model. Rather, the concept of “courage,” which Kohut intensively investigated, and his self psychology-based understanding of it (Kohut, 1985), may form the basis of what I will refer to as a Kohutian interpretation of the *Akeda*.

Kohut was interested in the psychological apparatus that characterized heroes who were ready to sacrifice their lives for their ideals. He was especially fascinated by those who went to their death resisting the Nazis during World War II.

Kohut differentiates between “rational resisters” and “martyr heroes.” Rational resisters, like Von Stauffenberg, who attempted to kill Hitler with a hidden bomb in July 1944, are driven by their ego functions and act only if they believe that they have a good chance of success. On the other hand, martyr heroes are ready to pursue their aims at all costs, even if the chances for success are low.

The Austrian peasant Franz Jaegerstatter and the young students Hans and Sophie Scholl represent this latter group. Jaegerstatter decided not to serve in the German Army, denying various compromises suggested to him, and went to the guillotine in 1943 rather than betray his Christian values. The siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl were the leaders of the White Rose anti-Nazi student movement in Munich. Both were executed on February 2, 1943. These martyr heroes went to their deaths calmly and decisively, even though they knew that they had no chance of changing the political situation.

I would like to suggest that Abraham and Isaac share characteristics with or are similar to martyr heroes. They conducted their terrible deed believing that they were carrying out their duty to the one God they served.

Although Kohut does not mention the *Akeda*, he relates to Jesus’ loyalty to his belief, even in death, as a prototype for all Western tragic heroes (Kohut, 1985). As widely recognized in Christian thought (Wellisch, 1954; Gelman, 2003; Janowitz, 2006), Isaac is perceived as a prefiguration of Jesus, and, thus, we may reasonably use Kohut’s theory of courage and martyr heroes to interpret the *Akeda*. The fact that Kohut did not address this biblical example may be related to his deep shame over his Jewish identity and to his vertical splitting and dissociation of his Jewish background (Aron, 2007b).

Kohut argues that although martyr heroes often report revelations in the form of hearing voices from God or of seeing visions that guide

them the “right way,” these revelations are not psychotic states. Rather, Kohut (1985) perceives such ideations as pseudo-delusions and pseudo-hallucinations that serve as “courage supporting mechanisms” (p. 7) or as “auxiliary means” to help the hero in the fulfillment of his or her duty, despite severe anxieties of dissolution. In Jaegerstatter’s words: “If God had not given me the . . . strength even to die for my faith . . . I too, would . . . be doing the same as . . . other Catholics (i.e. compromise with the Nazis)” (p. 9).

For the ancient rabbis of the *Midrash*, it was no less important to dismiss allegations that Abraham’s behavior was the result of emotional instability:

Why on the third day and not immediately? Rather, God said that the nations of the world may not say that Abraham offered his son out of fear, that when God revealed Himself to Abraham, the latter’s fear made him lose his mind, and he sacrificed his son, and that had he waited an hour, he would have changed his mind. Therefore, God said that he should be tormented for three days, beseeching God, so that all would know that he offered his son with a sane mind and out of love, and did not change his mind. (*Aggadat Bereishit* [Buber ed.] Ch. 31, s.v. *va-yehi abar*)

For Kohut (1985), the martyr hero’s courageous behavior is not the result of a psychotic breakdown, severe narcissistic regression, or the outcome of the instinctual gratification of masochistic death wishes in the service of the superego. Rather, it is the realization of the nuclear self’s deepest ambitions and ideals: “The nuclear self is thus that unconscious, preconscious, and conscious sector in the Id, ego and superego which contains not only the individual’s most enduring values and ideals but also his most deeply anchored goals, purposes and ambitions” (pp. 10–11). “In many of the martyr heroes, it is the set of central values and ideals, the heir of the archaic idealized object, which decisively defines the nuclear self” (p. 19).

As noted above, for Kohut (1985), the nuclear self is the center of all human initiatives and motivations. Its origin is in the early identifications and merging wishes with parental idealized figures. Kohut distinguishes between the Freudian “Guilty Man,” who is driven by his drives and is in constant conflict with social prohibitions limiting and restraining them, and his own “tragic man,” who deals with forces that are “be-

yond the pleasure principle.” Kohut asserts that in every man or woman’s life there will be periods of yearning that do not relate to the attainment of pleasure or to the satisfaction of drive wishes, but to the compelling urge to realize the deep-rooted design of his or her nuclear self (p. 38):

The nuclear self strives to fulfill itself. It moves from the time of its consolidation toward the realization of its ambitions and ideals, which are the ultimate descendents of the child’s grandiosity and exhibitionism and of his strivings to emerge with an idealized selfobject.

If an individual succeeds in realizing the aims of his nuclear self he can die without regret. He has achieved the fulfillment of the tragic hero—not the painful death of guilty man who strives for pleasure—but a death which is beyond the pleasure principle. (pp. 49–50)

Kohut (1966/1985) claims that the ability of individuals to accept human transience and one’s approaching death is not the result of denial of the fear of death. Rather, Kohut suggests the existence of an expanded and transformed form of narcissism, “cosmic narcissism,” which enables a person to attach him- or herself and merge into an existence that is greater than his or her own limited existence:

The primordial experience of the mother is “remembered” by many people in the form of the occasionally occurring vague reverberations which are known by the term “Oceanic Feeling.” The achievement—as the certainty of eventual death is fully realized—of a shift of the narcissistic cathexes, from the self to a concept of participation in a supraindividual and timeless existence, must also be regarded as genetically predetermined by the child’s primary identity with the mother. . . .

. . . The genuine shift of the cathexes toward a cosmic narcissism is the enduring, creative result of the steady fast activities of an autonomous ego, and only a few are able to attain it. (pp. 119–120)

Applying Kohut’s postulations to Abraham and Isaac, we may argue that their deeply rooted belief in their mission to bring the message of monotheism to the idolatrous world is the major force behind their readiness to sacrifice their lives and their future. Their mission enables them to attach themselves to an ideal that is “supraindividual and timeless.” Abraham’s and Isaac’s courageous three-day journey to Mount Moriah, moving to-

ward the near-sacrifice on the altar, is perceived as the ultimate expression of their nuclear self and of the mission of their lives.

Continuing this line of thought, the calm and decisive way in which Abraham and Isaac conducted their deed is the result of the feelings of accomplishment of the great ideals of their lives and the full expression of their individuality:

Thus, the ultimate state of narcissistic balance in such people blends the personality with the central values of the self. When such identification has been achieved, the martyr hero has a sense of profound inner peace and even the experience of conscious pleasure that his ideals and his total personality have now become one. The general psychological setting in which these emotions occur is one of calmness and clarity. (Kohut, 1985, p. 20)

One may argue that the Kohutian hero is ready to sacrifice his own life, whereas the *Akeda* describes Abraham's readiness to sacrifice the life of his son, raising more complicated moral dilemmas. The fact that Kohut mentions Jesus and ignores the Old Testament *Akeda* may support this argument. The interpretation suggested here views the demand of Abraham to sacrifice his son as an expression of the ultimate sacrifice that Abraham could have made to demonstrate his total devotion to the one true God. His own death in old age would have been much less significant for him, as long as his ideas and beliefs continue to flourish under Isaac's leadership. His own death is less significant than the death of his only successor and heir. Thus, his readiness to sacrifice Isaac is the act that conveys the greatest possible loyalty to God, and is the expression of the courage demanded of the believer.

Moreover, the Genesis worldview is that morality based on human reason alone runs the risk of severe distortion. This is represented in Abraham's words to Sarah as they approach Gerar, when he is worried that he will be killed and his wife taken by the Philistine king: "Surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife" (Gen. 20:11). Hence, obedience to God's command, even when it contravenes the dictates of human reason, is a central biblical directive. For Abraham and Isaac, total obedience to God's command is an essential feature of their moral world, even to the point of acting against their own judgment.

Kierkegaard (1941) wrote: "The story of Abraham contains therefore a

teleological suspension of the ethical” (Problem I). Kierkegaard calls Abraham the “Knight of Faith”⁵ to delineate that he acted out of a deeply rooted belief in God in which there is no external value or benefit to his behavior except for the expression of Abraham’s love of God. This dedication to follow God’s commandment is perceived by Kierkegaard as the deepest expression of Abraham’s individuality (Gelman, 2003).⁶

This interpretation is at odds with some of the most basic beliefs of Western culture. Specifically, submission to divine decree while giving up autonomy and moral reason seems strange and even dangerous:

Abdication of final judgment signals the loss of the barrier, of the protective device against self-loss, against “going all the way.” The subject becomes separated from his moral self, detaches from his human discernment, even as he tragically and ironically merges with “God.” . . . Abdicating one’s own “final judgment” parallels the sidestepping of the necessary internal process of developing one’s exit from mindless obedience to authority, and the sidestepping of the necessary internal process of “killing the father”; it is a giving up of the revolt against a controlling, mass-tailored Superlaw; it is, as we saw in the preceding chapter, a “regression to the father.” (Stein, 2010, p. 135)

Yet, we ought to recall that Abraham and Isaac are in a different position in their belief. From their point of view, dedication to God’s command—Abraham directly and Isaac indirectly, through Abraham—and the renunciation of personal aspirations seem to be major accomplishments.

An Interpersonal-Relational Perspective

Winnicott (1969) discusses the central role of aggression and destruction in the transition from living in a subjective world to living in an external, independent world of objects. He describes a complicated maturational

⁵It is interesting to note that Kierkegaard characterizes Abraham as a “Tragic Hero,” reminding us of Kohut’s notion of the “martyr hero” and the “tragic man.” We can reasonably assume that Kohut read Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*.

⁶I am using a simplified wording of Kierkegaard’s complex idea of the paradox between the total submission to God as the climax of individuality “. . . that it is the particular individual who, after he has been subordinated as the particular to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the particular is superior to the universal . . .” (Kierkegaard, 1941, Problem I).

process in which the baby makes a transition from relating to the object-mother as part of his internal projective processes to the “use” of the object-mother as a separate, independent person who exists in the “real world.” In Winnicott’s (1971) words:

In the sequence one can say that first there is object-relating, then in the end there is object-use; in between, however, is the most difficult thing, perhaps, in human development; or the most irksome of all the early failures that come for mending. This thing that there is in between relating and use is the subject’s placing of the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control; that is, the subject’s perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity, in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right. (p. 88)

What makes this transition possible is the child’s aggression and destruction; the baby destroys the object in his omnipotent fantasy. The survival of the object makes it “real” outside the omnipotent projections of the child. “My thesis is that the destruction plays its part in making the reality, placing the object outside the self” (p. 90). The encounter with the object-mother-analyst as existing in the external real world makes the “use” of the object possible and causes the baby to love the object. Through aggressive and destructive attacks by the baby/patient on the mother/analyst, and through their survival, the child/patient reaches the joyous realization of the objective existence of the mother/analyst in reality and not only in his imaginative inner projective world.

Taking Winnicott’s theory into the realm of religion and belief in God touches the believer’s constant inner qualms about whether the God he believes in is really there outside, or whether He is merely the product of his own internalizations and projections. Expanding on Winnicott, I believe that God’s terrible order to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son results in a qualitative change in the encounter between God and Abraham. God’s destructive demand from Abraham clarifies and substantiates his separate, autonomous existence outside the area of Abraham’s projections and introjections. God is now discovered and met as a separate entity. The angel of God’s words at the end of the narrative, “For now I know that you fear God” (Gen. 22:12), can now be understood to express the new quality of belief attained by Abraham in the wake of the *Akeda*. A similar pattern is insinuated by Eigen (1981) in his discussion of the Area of Faith in Winnicott’s theory:

It is an all out, nothing held back, movement of the self-and-other feeling past representational barriers, past psychic films and shells, a floating freely in a joyous shock of difference. At this moment one is enlivened and quickened through the sense of difference. One is sustained sheerly through the unfolding sense of self-other presencing, a presencing no longer taken for granted but appreciated as coming through. This may be something akin to Job's and God's wrath turning into joyous appreciation of one another's mystery, a new found trust. (p. 415)

Eigen's understanding of the story of Job, which begins with an aggressive encounter and ends with a real and joyful meeting between Job and God, is similar to my suggested understanding of the *Akeda*. In Job's story, the aggression was directed from God towards Job and his family, but not from Job towards God. Eigen seems to contend that God's aggression toward Job is the basis for his realization of God's external presence. It enables Job's meeting with God as a separate but real entity in a way that was not acknowledged before, and not merely as the product of his inner projections.

Likewise, I propose that through the *Akeda*, Abraham undergoes a maturational process in which his belief is substantiated in a way that did not exist before. Without the order to sacrifice, Abraham could not be confident in his belief in God as a separate, autonomous entity. The terrible and aggressive order clarifies and substantiates God's presence as real and as other. A *midrash* describing Abraham as unsatisfied with his belief in God without sacrificing is an articulation of the believer's constant inner qualms about whether the God he believes in is really there outside, or whether He is only the product of his internalizations and projections:

"After these things"—after his second thoughts. Who had misgivings? Abraham, who said to himself: "I have rejoiced and made all others rejoice, yet I did not set aside a single bull or ram for God." God said to him: "I know that even if you were commanded to offer your only son to Me, you would not refuse!" (*Genesis Rabbah* [Vilna ed.] §55)

Abraham's misgivings express his tormented doubts regarding his belief. He is driven by an inner need to sacrifice. This need is now understood as the necessity of finding a way out of his own "web-spinning." Abraham's willingness to follow God's terrible order is now understood as the result of his inner wish to substantiate his faith in God through sacrifice.

Unfortunately, this maturational process is not the full picture. Abra-

ham's willingness to sacrifice his son developed into a powerful drive to sacrifice his heir and into a cultural symbol of the willingness to kill and be killed in the name of God. In the next section, I will review some ramifications of this powerful symbol and discuss the Interpersonal-Intersubjective perspective further.

Happiness in Sacrificing and in Being Sacrificed

The near-sacrifice of Isaac recounted in the Bible, developed, in the history of Judaism and Christianity, in significant and, sometimes, perverted ways. Abraham, who was ready to sacrifice, and Isaac, who was ready to be sacrificed, but who were ultimately stopped by Divine fiat, became prototypes for martyrdom. This new martyrdom was different in that, beyond the sense of being devoted to God's orders and courageous enough to follow them to the end, it was characterized by a readiness to die and even a "lusting for death" (Janowitz, 2006).⁷ Men and women are described going to their deaths joyfully and with a sense of profound accomplishment. The story of the woman who encourages her seven sons to die rather than eat pork and then follows them to her own death (II Maccabees 7:1–42) is the first known instance of this genre, and dates from the end of the second century B.C.E.

The notion of martyrdom as the ultimate expression of devotion to God developed, in Jewish and Christian circles, during this period and later on. Dying for the belief in monotheism while announcing *Christianus sum* (if Christian) or *Shema Israel* (if Jewish) was widespread in the second century C.E. Boyarin (2000) stresses that this new martyrdom was characterized by the belief that death while declaring belief in one God (*Nomen Christianum*, if Christian; *Yibud Hashem*, if Jewish) is the perfect and full expression of the ideal monotheistic faith. The act of martyrdom is further perceived as an act of love and an erotic merging with the divine (pp. 11–12).

The great Rabbi Akiba of the second-century C.E. is described in the Babylonian Talmud as telling his students, prior to his execution by the Romans in Caesarea, about his longstanding eagerness to die for the sake of God:

⁷Janowitz (2006) describes this notion amongst early Christians, citing Ignatius of Antioch (Rom. 7:2).

When they brought Rabbi Akiba out to be executed, it was time to recite the *Shema*. They scraped his flesh with iron combs as he accepted the yoke of heaven. His students said to him: “Rabbi, to this degree?” He responded: “My whole life, I was pained about this verse—‘with your whole life—even if it costs you your life.’ I wondered when I would get the opportunity to fulfill it. Now I have the opportunity, shouldn’t I fulfill it?” He prolonged the word “echad” (“One”), and his soul departed at “One.” A heavenly voice then issued forth and said “Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiba, for your soul departed upon saying ‘One.’” (*b. Berakhot* 61b)

The notion of joyful martyrdom became especially prominent in European Jewish communities in the wake of the Crusades and the mass killings of Jews in the 11th century. Jews went to their deaths refusing to convert to Christianity, and even slaughtered their children so they would not be forcibly converted (Spiegel, 1967; Elizur, 1997). These Jews are similarly described as going to their terrible ends with joy:

On the eve of the Sabbath, at dusk, they offered themselves as a sacrifice to God, in lieu of the daily afternoon offering . . . and as the despoiler rejoices in his plunder, and as the joy of the harvest, so they were rejoicing and happy to perform the service of our God and to sanctify His great and holy Name. They all came, rejoicing and jubilant, before the High and Exalted God. Regarding those like them, it is written (Psalms 19:6): “Like a groom coming forth from the chamber, rejoicing like a hero to run his course.” So, too, they were happy to run and enter into the innermost chambers of paradise. . . . (The Death of the “Pious Ones of Xanten” in 4856 [1096], described by R. Solomon b. Samson [Haberman, *The Book of Decrees in France and Germany*, p. 49], cited in Elizur, 1997, p. 24)

It is important to note, in this story, the comparison between death for the name of God to marriage and the sexual notion in the phrase of “entering the innermost chambers,” which literally refers to an inner room inside another room.

Likewise, in a chronicle written by Rabbi Eliezer b. Natan, also included in the description of the “Pious Ones of Xanten”: “As a person rejoices upon finding treasure, so, too, they were rejoicing and longing to serve our God and to sanctify His name, and they also sanctified Him through bindings (*akedot*)” (cited in Elizur, 1997, p. 78). Thus, the author

clearly articulates the perception that these European Jewish martyrs were the successors of Abraham and Isaac.

We may conclude that, for more than a millennium, a tradition developed that saw martyrdom in the name of God and the readiness to actually sacrifice children, even to do so joyfully, as the ultimate act of the believer in God. Currently, this lust for death is seen in the terrible fervor of suicide terrorists, who sacrifice their lives to fight those whom they perceive to be the enemies of their faith.

The midrashic interpretation of the *Akeda's* ambiguous message accepts and praises Abraham and Isaac for their willingness to sacrifice and be sacrificed for God's sake, but, at the same time, acknowledges the risks entailed by this readiness. The *midrash* highlights the potential for devotion to God to become perverted, blended, and mixed up with internal aggressive and sexualized drives, as has been painfully demonstrated throughout history.

In light of the Interpersonal-Intersubjective perspective, the mental development of Abraham during the *Akeda* acquires a richer perspective. It is not only a maturational process in which the belief in God is deepened, but also an attainment of a new awareness and understanding of the forces acting and driving his soul. Abraham is enriched and his sense of himself is extended. His awareness of his aggressive and destructive aspects acting in conjunction with his belief in God and devotion to his ideals are now *experienced*, rather than being merely *known* intellectually. In this view of the narrative, God acts the part of a good analyst: "The therapist does not explain content; he expands awareness of patterning" (Levenson, 1976, p. 17). A cure, therefore, would be that situation in which the patient develops a much enlarged and enriched sense of self, of who he is in his absolute unique identity (Levenson, 1980, p. 6).

To further elaborate on the Relational-Intersubjective perspective, it is worth noting that Abraham's discovery of his own complexity, of the different and dissociated selves composing his holographic psyche (Levenson, 1976), is accomplished through the encounter with the different aspects of the Deity. The changes in the names of God from "Elohim," representing the aspect of justice, to "YHWH," representing the aspect of mercy, signify the different aspects of God that Abraham encounters in the developing drama of the story. From the Relational-Intersubjective perspective, the change in Abraham's faith and his expanded awareness of his dissociated, aggressive, and destructive self-

states develop in conjunction with his encounter of the complexity of God's manifestations.

As Elohim, God orders Abraham to "offer his son up" (*ve-ba'alehu*). Abraham, in his devotion, takes this as an order to slay Isaac, and Isaac accepts his fate. Abraham continues to be so absorbed in his deed that he is unable to hear the angel's calls to stop; he even tries to persist in harming Isaac despite these calls. His own aspect of mercy is dissociated, we may argue. Only the encounter with the other aspect of God, YHWH, the aspect of mercy, enables him to undergo change. According to the *midrash*, only then does Abraham achieve awareness of his terrible mistake and content himself with the sacrifice of the ram. Abraham's change—his newfound awareness of the power of his devotion to God and the potential perversion of that power—hinges on the changes in how God manifests himself. This is similar to the process that Bromberg describes as necessary for change to occur during psychoanalysis (Bromberg, 2008, 2009):

The necessary conditions are now present to permit a process of interpersonal comparison and interpersonal negotiation between the respective self-states of analyst and patient that were dissociatively engaged with each another in ways that shaped the enactment. Through this interpersonal negotiation between self-states, a similar process of *intrapsychic* negotiation is facilitated in the patient, whereby self-states that formerly had not been able to coexist, much less communicate, become increasingly able to participate as aspects of a coherent sense of "me" that is now available to the experience of internal conflict. (Bromberg, 2008, p. 134)

Discussion

The contribution of the present article to the vast literature on the *Akeda* lies in its focus on the psychoanalytic understanding of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son and on Isaac's readiness to die, as expressed in the midrashic literature. My main assertion is that the ancient Jewish rabbis articulated an ambivalent position in which, on the one hand, martyrdom and a readiness to sacrifice one's child is praised and glorified, but, on the other hand, it is perceived as potentially dangerous and likely to be distorted towards an unnecessary drive to kill or die. I have tried to demonstrate that the *midrashim*, through careful analysis of the narrative

text, elucidated this complicated message of the biblical story. I have further argued that psychoanalytic interpretations of the narrative may add to and deepen our understanding of this double-edged message and contribute to our understanding of contemporary extremist ideologies that urge their adherents to die and to kill for the sake of the cause.

Traditionally, psychoanalysis perceived martyrdom and the willingness to sacrifice children as an expression of psychopathological processes, e.g., aggressive drives of fathers towards their sons expressing Oedipal rivalry or regressive sexualized drives toward a deified father figure. Within this line of thinking, the *Akeda* was interpreted by others as expressing the Bible's struggle for the renunciation of the practice of child sacrifice. In my view, these interpretations ignore the complicated situation in which cultures must fight murderous evil to protect society or fight suppression in order to defend human freedom, human rights, and a moral way of life. In these cases, there is a need for courageous people who are ready to put their lives on the line for the sake of great ideals. There is also the need for courageous and devoted fathers who are ready to send their own flesh and posterity to fight—and sometimes to sacrifice their lives—for these ideals. As Hertz (1958) stated, the *Akeda* is the symbol for the need for “unconquerable courage and endurance” to achieve great goals: “But in all human history, there is not a single noble cause, movement or achievement that did not call for sacrifice, nay the sacrifice of life itself” (p. 201).

I suggested a Kohutian explanation for the narrative, which perceived Abraham and Isaac as martyr heroes, relating their deeds to the deep wish to actualize the goals of their nuclear selves. In Kohut's (1966/1985) words, there is a “shift of the narcissistic cathexes from the self to a concept of participation in a *supraindividual* and timeless existence” (p. 119). If we make the effort to understand Abraham and Isaac empathically, from their point of view, we can see that, for them, the moment of the *Akeda* was the moment in which their profound faith in a divinely ordained morality is put to the test, and their lifelong devotion to God is expressed in the boldest way.

Winnicott (1956/1975) conceived the ability to die as an *achievement*, related to satisfactory parenting in the early phases of life:

A good enough environmental provision in the earliest phase enables the infant to begin to exist, to have experience, to build a personal ego, to ride instincts, and to meet with all the difficulties inherent in life. All this feels

real to the infant who becomes able to have a self that can eventually even afford to sacrifice spontaneity, even to die. (p. 303)

Rodman (2003) even heard from Winnicott that soldiers were afraid to die in Vietnam because they lived a false self-life, implying that living a life with a true self enables one to die with no fear (p. 230).

I have further suggested that from an Interpersonal-Relational perspective, God's order to sacrifice Isaac may become a crucial developmental turning point. God's presence as an external autonomous entity, and not merely the product of projective processes, is substantiated through the *Akeda*, thus, enabling a new dimension in man's encounter with God.

For these theorists, the ability to trust God with total confidence, to the degree that one is willing to forfeit life itself, is perceived as a sign of healthy development, of a consolidated self in a relationship with a divine entity. Likewise, for a traditional rabbi, or for a Christian scholar like Kierkegaard reading the *Akeda*, the willingness to follow heavenly commands, even to the point of sacrificing one's beloved son, is perceived as an actualization of the deepest selfhood.

Following my reading of the *midrash*, I argued that the aforementioned devotion and readiness for sacrifice may become perverted into an eagerness to die for the sake of God even when unnecessary when combined with the notion of sexual merger.

Ghent (1990) describes a process in which submission and dominance originating in the deep wish to be discovered and treated genuinely by a dominant parental figure is perverted into masochistic and sadistic behaviors. Likewise, we encounter here a process in which a deep devotion to God, a manifestation of the nuclear self in search of its full and genuine expression through submission to God's orders, aspiring for a close genuine relationship with God, becomes perverted into a lust to sacrifice and to be sacrificed. In extreme cases, as Stein (2010) has demonstrated in her book on the 9/11 terrorists, this lust, unconsciously involving Oedipal murderous wishes together with sexualized ecstatic merger with deified parental figures, drives men to the terrible slaughter of innocent people.

Viewing extremists as merely acting out psychopathological processes may cause us to underestimate the devotion, decisiveness, and persistence involved in these men's actions. At the same time, a lack of awareness of the necessity for a culture to be willing to sacrifice life in order to

defend its moral values and freedoms may undermine Western culture's ability to defend itself and its values.

The *Akeda*, according to my understanding of the *midrashim*, addresses this central dilemma of human cultural existence. The ambivalence described in the *Akeda*, between the command to sacrifice and the prohibition of this sacrifice, expresses this dilemma. Abraham's difficulty in stopping himself upon hearing God's call expresses the complexity and the inner psychological tensions involved in the *Akeda*. The ancient rabbis found, in the narrative text, subtle allusions to the Bible's message of restraint vis-à-vis the willingness to sacrifice and to be sacrificed: "While he was slaughtering, the angel of God called out from heaven and said: 'Abraham! Abraham!' Why twice? Because he was quickly going to slaughter him" (*Midrash Tanbuma* [Warsaw ed.] *Vayera* §23). The *midrash* cited at the beginning of this article describes the difficulty Abraham faced when trying to stop himself from sacrificing, even as the angel of God calls out to him. His willingness to strangle Isaac or to harm him is a powerful image of the danger inherent in courage and devotion to even the greatest ideals.

The 19th-century Hasidic leader Rabbi Baruch of Kossov interpreted the *Akeda* in a similar vein:

I think that this was not the main trial, that he initially agreed to slaughter Isaac. Rather, the main trial was that he later agreed not to slaughter him, and he remained inflamed with his love of God. This is the intent of what God said to him . . ." and since you did not slaughter him, at my command, and you remained tormented by the fire of your love, for that—I will greatly multiply your seed." (Kossover, 2004, p. 28)

For Rabbi Baruch, the most difficult thing to do is to restrain the love and devotion and to limit the intense drive to sacrifice in the name of God. Sometimes, he claims, it is even more difficult than the sacrifice itself.

Finally, I contended that Abraham and, in a certain way, the reader of the *Akeda* and its *midrashim* are enriched by the experience. The ability to hold together multiple complexities of human personality—the readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice while remaining aware of its potential perversion and the danger of combining it with pathological aggressive and destructive sexualized drives—is a difficult but enriching task. The image of the hologram, suggested by Levenson (1976) to illustrate the

complex human psyche, may express the challenge Abraham had to cope with, and that humanity in our time faces as well.

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