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The Sacrifice of Isaac: How to Make This Biblical Narrative Meaningful to Middle – School Students

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Master of Arts in Religious Education Degree

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Contents

Introduction

The story of the Akedah, Abraham's attempt to carry out God's instruction to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, presents a difficult challenge for liberal Jewish educators. Critics question the story's relevance to modern life, claim it is violent and ask whether children can even understand it, much less relate to God through it. But deep below the surface, the story contains many valuable lessons.

The Akedah story is read each year on Rosh Hashanah, reflecting its central importance to us as Jews. The New Year is a time of happiness, but also a time of introspection when we think about the year that has passed and that which lies ahead. This creates a tremendous educational opportunity. While learning about God's test of Abraham's faith, we can also think about the tests that we must face and how those tests make us think about our own faith in God.

To be sure, given the complexity and disturbing nature of the story, this is no simple task. But as an educator, I believe that I have to be able to teach any subject, even one as provocative as this. While the study of sacrificial procedures isn't part of the liberal Jewish curriculum, it is interesting to note that students in Orthodox Yeshivot begin their studies with Sefer Vayikra, which includes the sacrificial procedures in the Temple. Indeed, they learn early on that the word for sacrifice (Lahakriv) means to "bring us closer to God."

I believe that I, too, can use this story to bring our students closer to God. In fact, I have seen it done. I recently taught the story to a second-grade class. Several parents objected, worried that their children would be frightened by the story. But the children quickly grasped the story and understood its message. They realized that God doesn't want us to die, and that human sacrifice is wrong.

For more advanced students, the lessons of the Akedah can be applied to current

events. As Jews, we are bombarded with news about the Middle East. All too often, we hear reports of violence. Many of us feel the media portrays Israel unfairly. Others struggle for a Jewish response to the bloodshed. Again, the Akedah presents with a learning opportunity to analyze the news from Israel in a Jewish context.

The theme of sacrifice is prominent in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinian children, for instance, are sent to the front lines in clashes with Israeli troops. They say they are ready to die in the struggle for Jerusalem. Many are tacitly encouraged by their parents and political leaders, knowing that these youths, some as young as 10 or 11 years old, may not return alive. Israelis are also no strangers to sacrifice. Since the founding of the state, countless Israelis have given their lives, or the best years of their lives, serving in the army and protecting the nation.

The Akedah makes me rethink my opinions about these matters. It teaches us about the value of life, and that we can improve this broken world by through worship, good deeds and honoring the mitzvot. God does not need sacrifices to recognize our faith. The true message of serving God is Gemilut Hasidim, acts of loving kindness. I believe that the story of the Akedah teaches us how to distinguish between good and evil and that to do well is the Divine command. By comprehending the concept of the Akedah, our students will perform good deeds that will lead to the repairing of this world.

In order to teach the Akedah of Isaac and its meaning to middle - school students, I suggest a research about sacrifices which occurred in Biblical and ancient time. I believe that the students will be able to connect to the concept of the Akedah, the abolition of the sacrifices, through the current events in the Middle East. As assistance to a teacher, the necessary information about young people in the Middle East, who in one form or another, became victims of violence, is provided in this thesis. In addition, in this paper the teacher will find material hto teach Jewish ethics and faith to God.

Textual Research

God's test of Abraham in the Akedah is a provocative story not only for modern Jews, Christians and Muslims. Even people in ancient times, including the Greeks and the Israelites, were intrigued by the story, in which Isaac is bound, then released before he disappears and Abraham returns home alone. So what happened to Isaac?

The practice of human sacrifice is best seen in the context of the times in Genesis: Ch. 22. During this time, roughly 5,000 years ago, human sacrifice was a well-known custom among Israel's neighbors. With this in mind, the command from God likely seemed legitimate to Abraham. In the days of Abraham, sacrificing the first child was customary, with the goal of this practice lying in the belief that by offering a victim to God, a person could be reassured that God would protect his future children.

> "...There is nothing extraordinary to Abraham's conduct, and his readiness to offer up Isaac is no way superior to the heroic acts and self –sacrifice among many noble pagans, who, put to similar tests – and some even more demanding than these – endured them readily in times of crisis."[1]

There were examples of fathers who had sacrificed sons or daughters whom they loved for the good of their nation, to appease the gods, or in times of wars, droughts, flood or pestilence, to make atonement for their countries.[2]

Abraham might have protested God's command similarly as he protested the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Abraham did not protest; he followed the call of God. The text sets forth the main theme by saying that God puts Abraham to the test, but it does not state precisely what He is testing him for. In his commentary, Plaut raises the following questions:

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1 Spiegel, p.9

2 Philo, *De Abrahamo*, p.191

Was this order made "to test Abraham's faith that God will not go back on His promise, that somehow His designs can be trusted? Or is it to test Abraham's unquestioning obedience, his faithfulness rather then his faith, his total submission to a mysterious divine will? Most likely both, for faith and faithfulness are dual aspects of biblical man's relation to God. Together they may be said to represent the quality of *emunah* (adherence without faltering, obedience with complete trust), which is as authentic a reflection of God's qualities as is humanly possible. For even God is obedient, not to man, to be sure His own law and promise. Hence it is possible for the Bible to call God *El Emunah* (a faithful God in Deuteronomy 32:4). And in this sense we can speak of Abraham as *Ish Emunah*, a faithful man." [3]

The core of Abraham's devotion to God is conveyed through his readiness to follow God's command even when God gives a contradictory message. On one hand, God promises Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation,"[4] on the other hand, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his child.

Abraham is not the only character in Biblical history who demonstrates his devotion to the Lord by willingness to sacrifice what is dear to him. Hannah also shows such devotion in Maccabean times ("She was in her spirit and courage equal to Abraham")[5]. Shalom Spiegel cites her story as an example of Jewish heroism:

> "In Jewish literature, of all the stories told either by Jason or his epitomizer, the favorite has become that of The Woman and Her Seven Sons, who refused to bow down to the idol, and every one of them died for the Sanctification of the Name. Legend exalted and embroidered the details of their heroism and their skill at retorting to their enemies and tempters. Both the mother and her sons were endowed with the grace and strength of an unblemished faith. And thus, in the course of time, they were transformed into a noble paradigm of loving acceptance of suffering for the sake of the

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[3] Plaut, p.150

[4] Genesis 12: 2 JPS Tanakh translation

[5] 4 Maccabees: 14:20

[6] Spiegel, p.13

Unification of the Name."[6]

In other cases in the Tanakh, the practice of sacrificing children is seen in a negative light. The king of Moab, for instance, is disgraced when he sacrifices his first-born (II Kings: 3:27) by burning him to death. The prophets inveighed against the act. (Micah 6:7).

Other stories seem to refer to the practice only in passing. For example, Jephthah's daughter may have been sacrificed (Judges 11:29 – 40), raising questions of whether this custom prevailed in ancient Israel.

The story of Abraham not only represents the abolition of sacrifice in a particular instance. It also serves as a key message of the three major monotheistic religions.

But human sacrifice isn't limited to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. It also appears throughout Hellenistic narratives. In his book, Spiegel recounts the tale of Leos, who sacrificed his three daughters in order to end a famine, and Aristodemus, who offered his own daughter for sacrifice to halt a plague. According to one version, the daughters of Leos volunteered to be sacrificed, and in time, the girls became an example of love for the fatherland. In the story of Aristodemus, the goddess Artemis takes pity on his daughter, substitutes a hind for sacrifice, and takes the girl to the clouds to become a priestess in her sanctuary.[7]

The Greeks were acquainted with miracles similar to that of the Akedah. In their legends, human sacrifices are replaced with animal sacrifices. Thus, in the tale of Phrixus, a human sacrifice is averted at the last moment because "Zeus, King of Heaven, loathes

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[7] Spiegel, pp.10-14

[8] Robert Graves, Raphael Patai, p. 176

human sacrifices."[8] God sent a ram that delivered Phrixus and carried him out of the place of his sacrifice. And after he was rescued, Phrixus took the ram and sacrificed it as a thanksgiving offering to his god who had delivered him.

So how is Abraham's God, the God of the Israelites, different from Greek gods? While the Greek gods may substitute animal sacrifices for human sacrifices, Abraham's God goes a step further by showing compassion. As Moses said in a phrase that we recite each Yom Kippur, "The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of fathers upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."[9] (Exodus 34:6-8)

Plaut questions whether the God in the Akedah is truly compassionate. "How can the compassionate God of the Bible be portrayed as asking for the sacrifice of a child?" he asks. One possible answer, he suggests, is that the test came when human sacrifice was an acceptable practice. Although this might be considered an extreme test, God might have asked for the dearest and almost impossible thing in order to demonstrate that a man could do anything for the God's sake.[10]

A very interesting approach is presented in the book: Who Wrote the Bible:

> "The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is traced to E [The redactor is known as the Elohist or E]. It refers to the deity as Elohim in vv. 1,3,8 and 9. But just as Abraham's hand is raised with the knife to sacrifice Isaac, the text says that the angel of YAHVEH stops him (v.11). The verses in which Isaac is spared refer to the deity as YAHVEH (vv.11-14). These verses are followed by a report that the angel speaks a second time and says, ' ... because you did not withhold your son from me ...' Thus the four verses

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[9]Tanakh, JPS Translation

[10] Plaut, p. 150

which report that Isaac was not sacrificed involve both a contradiction and a change of the name of the deity. As extraordinary as it may seem, it has been suggested that in the original version of this story Isaac was actually sacrificed, and that intervening four verses were added subsequently, when the notion of human sacrifice was rejected (perhaps by the person who combined J and E). Of course, the words 'you did not withhold your son' might mean only that Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his son. But still it must be noted that the text concludes (v.19): And Abraham returned to his servants.' Isaac is not mentioned. Moreover, Isaac never again appears as a character in E. Interestingly, a later midrashic tradition developed this notion, that Isaac actually had been sacrificed."[11]

Despite this school of thought, it appears very unlikely that Isaac was actually sacrificed. Rabbinical literature is full of references to the idea of divine protection for the three Patriarchs.

"Abraham rose and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: Master of the universe, it is not by the might of my hands that I did all these things, but by the might of Thy right hand, for Thou art a *shield* unto me in this world and in the world to come, as it is said (Ps. 3:4), 'But Thou, O Lord, art a *shield* about me', to wit, in this world; 'my glory and the lifter up of my head' (ibid.), in the world to come. Whereupon the ones on high responded with 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, shield of Abraham."[12]

According to another tradition, Abraham recited this benediction by himself.

The "Might" benediction explains the Akedah of Isaac. This benediction is related to the Resurrection of Isaac. In the Midrash: "Sefer ha – Eshkol," the Rabbis cite: "Lay not thy upon the lad," and when Isaac hears that the angels have prevented his death, he recites the prayer: "Blessed be He who quickens the dead."

Other thinkers have explored the theme of resurrection. The Midrash "Lekah Tob," edited by Buber, looks at the statement in Genesis 31:42: " The God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac." In this interpretation, Isaac appears as witness to his own death and his own resurrection. "For Isaac was in the grip of fear as he lay bound on top of the altar,

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11 Friedman, p.257

12 Spiegel, p. 29

and his soul flew out of him, and the Holy One, blessed be He, restored it to him by means of the dewdrops for Resurrection of the dead."[13] This Midrash implies that from his experience others would learn, that in this way the dead would come to life again in the future. The verse from the Amidah, "You give life to the dead; great is your saving power," supports this idea.

The death of Isaac and his resurrection resemble the story of Jesus, who as Christians claim, died and then was resurrected. Haggadah masters developed this theme and affirm that "the blood of Isaac" brought the salvation to the people of Israel. Rabbi Yose ben Zimra said:

> " When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, Offer him up as a burnt offering before Me," Abraham began weeping, and he pulled at the hair of his head and beard. And when Isaac beheld his father Abraham, he said to him: "Father, do not be distressed. Come now and carry out the will of your Father in heaven: May it be His will that a quarter of my blood serve as an atonement for Israel."[14]

One can suggest that Abraham offered up two sacrifices. He began with the sacrifice of the son and ended up with the sacrifice of the ram. One can assume that in the narrative of the ram, which Abraham sacrificed as a burnt offering in place of his son, the transition from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice is a significant development. It is a religious and moral achievement, forever associated with the name of Abraham, the father of monotheistic faith.

If the ram had not been provided as a substitute for Abraham's son, Isaac would never have had offspring, nor could the covenant and the promise have been fulfilled. "For

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13 Spiegel, p. 32

14 Spiegel, p.49

15 Genesis 21:12

it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. "[15] However, since Isaac was redeemed, it is as though all Israel had been redeemed.[16] Both the Akedah and the Christian theme of resurrection are similar in more than one aspect: Both stories take place in the month of Nisan, both symbolize the paschal sacrifices, possibly even as reminders of the archaic sacrifices of the first-born. Indeed, the Midrashim that explore this theme appear to be clear responses to Christianity. The Christian faith was growing at the time of these Midrashim, and many Jews were attracted to these teachings and the idea of resurrection. Seeking to keep Jews inside the faith, the rabbis taught that the Jews had their own story of resurrection through these Midrashim.

Another possible explanation for Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son is that Abraham simply misunderstood God's intentions. Scholars have suggested that there may have been confusion between the Hebrew words, *ni-sah* (test) and *ne-ssah* (miracle). In most interpretations, the text of Genesis refers to God's test of Abraham at Moriah: "Did I tell to slaughter him? Did I not rather tell you to bring him up? You brought him up on the altar, now take him down again!"[17] (But if we substitute the word *ne-ssah* for *ni-sah* in the

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[16] J. Taanit 2:4, 65d; Yerushalmi Fragments, p.176

[17] Genesis Rabbah 56:8

[18] Spiegel, p.121

[19] Spiegel, p.122-123

Hebrew text, a Midrashic author says we can conclude that a miracle occurred at Moriah. This interpretation presents Abraham as a man of faith and obedience. However, Abraham's understanding of God's nature is deficient, showing the human limitation when it comes to comprehending God's intentions. Like Friedman, the author of Who Wrote the Bible, Spiegel explores the possibility that the Akedah narrative is actually an edited compilation of two stories written by different authors. As an example, he notes the various references to God, and explanations by the sages about the different contexts in which these references are used:

> " Wherever in scripture *Lord* (YHWH) is used, the reference is to the Mercy Attribute, as it is said (Exodus: 34:6), 'The Lord (YHWH)! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious,' wherever *God* (Elohim) is used, the reference is to the Justice Attribute, as it is said (Exodus 22:8), 'The case of both parties shall come before God (Elohim).' This is what those two outstanding men, R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish, taught: the one in the connection with the Akedah – Adonai – Yireh, Lord, take note (Genesis 22:14) – and the other one in connection with the shofar – sounding on Rosh ha-Shanah – The Lord, amidst the sound of the shofar (Ps. 47:6)."[18]

Spiegel also presents the findings of Astruc, one of the founding fathers of the Documentary Hypothesis, which asserts that the editor of the book of Genesis used two primary documents and a number of fragmentary secondary ones. According to this hypothesis, these various sources explain the inconsistencies in the text, which led the 17th-century pioneers of critical study of the Bible to conclude that the books of the Torah had not been composed by Moses. In the Akedah narrative, Astruc claimed to discover two sources: Document A (Genesis 22:1 – 10) and Document B (22:11 –19). The first always refers to *God*, the other refers to the *Lord*. According to this interpretation, the Akedah narrative contains the work of three authors, the author of the document of *God*, the author of the document of *Lord*, and the editor.[19]

CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY

The Akedah is often minimized or ignored in Jewish education programs. Many educators fear that students won't be able to relate to the story, given its apparent lack of relevance to modern life. After all, we do not sacrifice children in modern society, even for the sake of God. As an educator, I want my students to see that there are a number of valuable lessons in this story, both about Jewish beliefs and about how we live our lives today.

First, it is important that students realize that a central lesson of the Akedah is the abolition of human sacrifice. Abraham not only receives a message from God to spare his son's life. As the founder of monotheism, he transforms the message of the Divine and becomes a role model for generations to come. Indeed, the theme of the prophetic protest against human sacrifices appears throughout the Bible.

> "Thus, in Jeremiah 19:5 the comment is made:" which I commanded not": this refers to the sacrifice of the son of Mesha, the king of Moab (II Kings 3:27); 'nor spake it': this refers to the daughter of Jephthah (Judg.11: 31);'neither came to my mind': this refers to the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham (Ta'anit 4a)."[20]

Moses clearly expresses this command in Leviticus 18:21: "Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Moloch." Deuteronomy spells out the law that forbids "passing [one's] son or daughter through fire to Moloch." "Moloch is the name given to a deity worshipped by some of Israel's ancient neighbors. According to 2 Kings 23:10, King Josiah destroyed a cult site in the environs of Jerusalem where children had been

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[20] Encyclopedia Judaica

[21] Encyclopedia Judaica

sacrificed to Moloch during the earlier reign of Manasseh, king of Judah."[21]

Underscoring the centrality of the Akedah, we read it on Rosh Hashanah as a declaration of faithfulness to God. The narrative teaches us to "steel ourselves against the trials that may come our own way in the year ahead, and to remember that we, too, are part of the covenant struck between God and Abraham."[22]

The Akedah also provides us with a lesson of compassion and ethics. It starts with the words, "God put Abraham to the test."[23] This is a test that most readers would prefer Abraham fail; obviously, we don't want to see the sacrifice carried out. But the text recognizes this at the moment of truth, just as Abraham is ready to slay his child, sending an important message to the reader. "Judaism is an ethical religion and would never in fact demand a theological suspension of the ethical. Abraham is, therefore, ordered to stay his hand. The original command to sacrifice Isaac is a warning against too complete an identification of religion with naturalistic ethics."[24] Judaism does not teach that people are either naturally good or bad. Rather it teaches that people struggle between righteous and evil inclinations. From a young age children struggle with impulses of selfishness, cruelty and anger. Goodness must be taught. Moral rulers matter because they are greater than human invention. They are Divine legacy. The sense of objective right and wrong is bequeathed to us by Judaism's insistence on the existence of one God

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[22]Lisa Grant, Parashat Va'yera – Visions of God, unpublished sermon.

23 Tanakh, The JPS translation

24 Encyclopedia Judaica

passionately concerned about what we do. Human beings did not invent the laws, and human beings cannot repeal them. But it is our obligation to understand them, elaborate them and live by them. The story of the Akedah illustrates that Judaism is a progressive religion, an important theme to stress as we try to apply the lessons of the Akedah to the modern world.

Upon first glance, the Akedah may not seem applicable to modern times. Few societies, if any, still practice human sacrifice overtly. But with a little thought, we can find situations where children's lives are sacrificed for some other cause. The class might want to discuss forced child labor in some Third World countries, or the child warriors -- sometimes under 10 years old -- who are drafted into ragtag armies in Africa and Asia. Finally, we can look at something very real and very meaningful to us: the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Some of our students have friends or relatives in Israel. A few have even visited. And news from the Middle East reaches us virtually every day. The pictures are filled with children engaged in violence, Palestinian youths and teens squaring off on the battlefield against Israeli soldiers who aren't much older. This world is far different from the one that American children know. In the United States, children enjoy a special status in society. Children are legally protected from parental violence. Teachers must keep their distance, and minors' identities are protected by the law if they are involved in a crime. In short, children come first.

Children also come first in the Middle East. They are the first to die. The majority of victims in the latest Arab-Israeli fighting have been Palestinian youngsters. The Palestinian leadership has encouraged the youths to participate in protests, saying they are supporting the struggle against Israeli occupation. (The Israelis claim that Palestinian

youths are being exploited by political leaders to garner world sympathy).

Our students may wonder why Palestinian parents don't keep their children away from the fighting. After all, children aren't shot in their homes, schools or mosques, only in street clashes with Israeli troops. Palestinian parents say that they are victims of their environment, similar to American parents in tough neighborhoods who have trouble keeping their children away from drugs or gangs. The children who fight are imitating their elders, rejecting poverty and Israeli military occupation. They seek heroism, even martyrdom. They see heavy-handed Israeli military patrols near their homes, and watch their parents undergo humiliating spot searches and interrogations. "If you had the American kids exposed to the same things as Palestinian kids, believe me, they would be throwing stones," says Maha Shamas, a U.S.-educated Palestinian lawyer.

Palestinian leaders say neither the children nor their parents are responsible for the children's deaths. They blame the soldiers who fire the fatal bullets. "You cannot shoot our children and get away with it, " Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi said in a recent interview.[25]

Even so, to die in the name of the Palestinian cause is a source of pride for many. Palestinian media, not to mention Yasser Arafat himself, hail those who die in the struggle for independence, and parents tacitly encourage their children to go into battle. "I can't control them," a Palestinian mother of six said in a newspaper interview. But if the holy cause of Palestine demands it, she said, she would be "ready to sacrifice my six children."[26] Iman, a 34-year-old mother who loster her only son in fighting, admits that she is proud that he became a martyr. "If I had ten children, I would be proud to send them all to fight."[27]

With attitudes like these among their parents, it is no surprise that children are ready to fight. "If I die, I die for the sake of God. I will go to paradise, " said Anan Khamur, a 10-year-old who lives in a Palestinian refugee camp. "I will be very happy there. My mother will be happy for me."[28]

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[25] The Atlanta Journal Constitution

[26] HoustonChronicles.com

[27] US News &World Report

[28] Washington and The Guardian, Manchester (UK)

According to the Oxford student's dictionary, a martyr is a "person who is put to death or caused to suffer greatly for his religious beliefs or for the sake of a great cause or principle." Activists in Palestinian terror groups encourage young people to sacrifice their lives in the name of God. Thus, a seven-year-old is quoted as saying: "We will sacrifice our blood and souls for al-Aqsa. I am ready to die for al–Aqsa."[29]

The information comes from the Western press: New York Times, The Atlanta Journal Constitution, HoustonChronicle.com, US News & World Report; Washington and The Guardian; Manchester (UK).

From these media reports, one might conclude that Islam, or at the least certain Islamic leaders, believe that sacrificing human lives is not only permissible, but strongly encouraged by the Muslim religion. As disturbing as this may seem, we can also see instances of children being sacrificed by the Israeli side as well. Israeli youngsters sacrifice some of the best years of their lives serving in the IDF. Some sacrifice their lives altogether. Military service is seen as far more than an assignment. It is a noble mission, defending a country, a homeland, and a Holy Land to guarantee the very existence of Israel.

> "Our soldiers prevail not by the strength of their weapons, but by their sense of mission; by their consciousness of the justness of their costs, by a deep love for their country, and by their understanding of the heavy task laid upon them: to ensure the existence of our people in their homeland and to affirm, even at the cost of their lives, the right of the Jewish people to live their lives in their own state, free, independent and in peace."[30]

Israeli parents express different feelings than their Palestinian counterparts as they send their children off to battle. In his article, "My Daughter, The Soldier" Ellis Shuman writes about his concerns as his daughter prepares to join the IDF:

> "On Tuesday, I will drive my eighteen-year-old daughter to the Tzrifin army base. There, at 9 o'clock in the morning, my daughter will go through the base's gates as a civilian. When next she leaves the base, she will be a soldier. My daughter, already a woman, is about to put on her uniform. Not an easy thing for a father to see ... [A]s a father who is seeing his eldest child enter the army, I am a bit nervous. Israel, after 50 years of statehood, is still surrounded be enemies, who would not hesitate to target anyone in uniform, and civilians as well, for that matter. My daughter, the first of my

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[29] The Atlanta Journal Constitution

[30] Yitzchak Rabin, Chief of the Staff 1964-68

three children who will serve their country, is an adult in every sense of the word. But, as a parent, I still worry. As a parent, it is difficult to let go. **Take care, my daughter, my soldier."**[31]

Looking at the situation in Israel, the lessons of the Akedah come to mind. Israeli parents do not want to sacrifice their children, but they realize that the Army is required for the sake of the country. Just as Abraham placed his faith in God, Israelis place their faith in their country. This helps provide an opportunity to teach a lesson of peace, to banish the image of glorified violent military operations, to teach the children the value of peace and the waste of war.

This thesis will focus on three valuable lessons that emerge from the Akedah: Jewish ethics, sacrifices which in one form or another we are obliged to make and faith in God.

[31] (Ellis Shuman, Israeli Culture magazine)

The Curriculum for the Akedah of Isaac.

The curriculum: The Akedah of Isaac consists of three lessons: Ethics, Sacrifices and the Faith in God. Based upon the textual research, media information about the Middle East events, suggested activities and a personal teaching style, an experienced in Hebrew and Judaica teacher can design his/her lesson plan.

Before teaching the story of the Akedah, I would like teachers to attempt to answer the following questions:

What does the story of the Akedah mean to you and your students?

What idea underlies this Biblical narrative?

What underlying issue/conflict/ dilemma is involved in the story of the Akedah?

What kinds of meanings of the Akedah do you think will connect to your students?

What is the moral of the story?

Goals:

- God wants human beings to live, not die
- God does not require sacrifices as proof of faith
- God does not require animal sacrifices either, only the deeds of loving – kindness and Tzedakah.
- God tests us to help us learn our strengths

Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with the story of the Akedah by reading and translating it and by learning the key-expressions of the story
- Students will master the concept of the Akedah: Human sacrifices in one

form or another should be abolished.

- Students will create an analogy between the Biblical narrative and the events in the Middle East.
- The students will consider personal connections to the story of the Akedah.
- Students will become aware that God tests us.
- Students will internalize the story of the Akedah

Assessment:

Based upon Biblical narrative, teacher's explanation of the material, classroom activities and discussions, and perceptive students' responses the following will be assessed:

- ✓ Students will avoid common misconception, such as the sacrifices do not take place in our days.
- ✓ Students will make connections with the story of the Akedah, the events in the Middle East and their personal lives.
- ✓ Students will walk in the shoes of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youth
- ✓ Students will recognize their prejudice about the events which occur in the Middle East
- ✓ Students will become deeply aware of the boundaries of their own and others' understanding.
- ✓ Students will start internalizing the story of the Akedah

Suggested activities for lesson 1: Jewish Ethics.

Estimated time: 1 hour.

- Discuss with students the things which they need to give up in order to attend Hebrew school. Ask them if they feel that they sacrifice their time for the sake of Judaism?

- Explain to them that the relationship between God and the Jews were established by means of covenant. The covenant is a contract between two parties. We know God's commitment to us: we will inherit the land and become a great nation. We are obliged to serve God and observe his Mitzvoth as the Torah prescribes. It is not merely a simple, reciprocal interchange; if we serve God then God will be close to us. The idea of covenant reflects a partnership. God makes us His people, not just the people who are close to Him, but also the people who will unite with Him to help Him to help Him achieve His purpose on earth. As a consequence, in order to remain Jews, we give up many things which our secular world offers us; and by giving up we often sacrifice our time or materialistic values.

- Ask students if they have felt that they have sacrificed something for the sake of their parents of friends. Ask them if they are willing to give life for the people who are dear to them? Ask them if they think that their parents are wiling to give life for them?

- Ask students to read the story of the Akedah in Hebrew and translate it with the help of the JPS translation.

- Discuss the phrase: **"Go to the land of Moriah..."** The site of Moriah is unknown, but later biblical reckoning (2 Chronicles 3:1) places it atop the Temple mount in Jerusalem. The name was related in folk etymology to the Hebrew word for "vision."

- Discuss the phrase: **"Abraham put a saddle on his donkey."** The Rabbis asked why Abraham chose to saddle his donkey himself instead of asking Isaac or one of the servants to do it for him? They answered that when God commands a thing be done, we do not "call in the servants, " we take responsibility for doing it ourselves.

- Discuss the phrase: **"Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a ram."** You may wish to point out the connection between the ram of this story and the *shofar,* the ram's horn which we blow on sacred occasions.

- Explain to the students that the Prophets and the Rabbis teach us that God does not need human or animal sacrifice; emphasize the importance of *gemilut chasadim.*

- Ask the students to compare the sacrifice in their lives with the sacrifice in the Akedah.

Lesson 2: Sacrifices.

Estimated time 2 hours.

Part A: Textual Study

- Discuss the phrase:" God said, **"Take your son - your favorite son Isaac..."** Earlier versions of the Bible translated the adjective as "only" causing many commentators to argue. After all, Isaac was not Abraham's only son. His first child was Ishmael, the child of Hagar. The modern study of ancient languages has revealed that the Hebrew usage does not mean "only son," but "favorite" son. Ask the students what they think about when they read these lines. What do they expect is going to happen in the story.

- Read the poem: "Heritage" by Hayim Gouri. Discuss the feelings of both characters in the poem Abraham and Isaac. Remember: the sacrifice only than considered a sacrifice when it comes out of love.

The ram came last of all. And Abraham
did not know that it came to answer the
boy's question first of his strength*
when his day was on the wane.

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

The boy, released from his bonds, saw his father's back.
Isaac, as the story goes, was not

sacrificed. He lived for many years, saw

what pleasure had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

But he bequeathed that hour to his

Offspring. They are born with a knife in their hearts.

* [Isaac:] ' Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?" (Genesis 22:7).

- Discuss with the students if they feel as victims when their parents emphasize their belonging to the Jewish tribe. Ask them why they should follow the covenant with God, although they covenant was signed by Abraham. Explain to them that Kol Yisrael Arevin Ze le'ze.
- Discuss with students the events which occur in the Middle East. Ask them how much these events are relevant to them as Jews.

Part B: Relevance of the Akedah to the current events in the Middle East

As an additional help to teachers, I included a response curriculum that was designed by the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland:

Crisis in the Middle East.

Here are some activities which they recommend:

1. Print and distribute the quotes from the Koran:

Stand out firmly for justice, as witness to Allah,

Even though it be against yourselves,

Or your parents, or your kin.

(Koran 4:135)

Compare it to the quote from the Torah and Pirkei Avot:

"Justice, justice shall you pursue"

(Deuteronomy 16:20)

Other's people's dignity should be as precious to you as your own.

How is this to be understood?

This teaches us that a person should treat others with the same dignity as s/he his or her own dignity.

(Pirkei Avot 2:15)

Ask students to describe the actions that would logically flow from these quotes. What would you say to one of the teen rioters if you met face-to-face?

2. As a teacher, offer students a chance to talk about what they see and hear in the news. Remember, however, that your role is as educator, not as social worker or psychologist; if

the discussion heads into areas outside of your expertise, especially when dealing with teen emotions, please seek outside help.

3. Offer historical examples for teens to study of youth involvement in other conflicts. These may be from Jewish history (e.g. Hannah Senesh) or outside it (Joan of Arc). Where possible, locate primary sources for students to read and discuss. Compare and contrast the historical context and the personal motivation of the historical youth, with those of the Palestinians and the Israelis fighting today.

4. Study Jewish texts relating to peace. Check past Jewish Education Center of Cleveland response Curricula available on-line. See especially: Battle over Kosovo, Colorado School Shooting, and 1999- Summer of Hate, Summer of Unity.

5. Seeds of Peace is an organization that brings Israeli and Arab youths to Maine to participate in summer camp that plants "seeds of peace." Find out more about Seeds of Peace from their website [http://www.seedsofpeace.org]; note that one of the "graduates" of Seeds was killed in the skirmishes; information is on the Seeds website. What else can students do to plant their own Seeds of Peace? [This leads itself to the bulletin board, visually showing the seeds being planted.]

- Divide the students into two teams: One of them is IDF soldiers, the other one is Palestinian Youth. Engage both teams in a meaningful dialogue with each other. Use the materials provided above. Encourage students to express their empathy to both sides.

Lesson 3: **Faith in God**

Estimated time: 1 Hour

- Ask students if they believe in God. Ask them to prove God's existence.

- Ask students if they have felt that God has tested them? How do they know that it was a test? Do they think they have passed it?

- Discuss the phrase: **"You have passed a terrible test."** Based on the Biblical narrative, the test is evidently one, which Abraham must pass. Isaac is a minor character here, however this test can be for Isaac in order to demonstrate the length to which his father was willing to go for the One God, or even as a preliminary test of faith of Isaac.

- Discuss the phrase: **"From God's height/ There is true sight."** Discuss the nature of God's intentions and the difficulty which we sometimes do not understand.

- Discuss the phrase: **"All the nations will bless themselves by your children."** Abraham is not only the Jewish patriarch; he is also the establisher of the monotheism. Discuss the progressivism of his decision to substitute human sacrifices with the animal ones.

- Ask students how they feel about their personal partnership with God. What do they do as God's partners with God?

CONCLUSION

The Akedah is one of the most important stories in the Bible. It also can be one of the most difficult to teach. But instead of shying away from the story, we should embrace the educational opportunities it presents.

The story provides us valuable lessons on many levels. On the most basic level, its is a key event both in Jewish history and more generally, in the history of monotheism. On a deeper level, it teaches us important lessons about making sacrifices, confronting tests of faith, Judaism's high value for human life and God's love for the Jewish people. On yet another level, we can use the story as a way to look at modern events, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This papers presents a range of discussion topics and other exercises to help students think about these things from a range of viewpoints. When the unit is over, it is hoped that they will have an understanding not only of the Akedah story, but an appreciation for Judaism's love of life and God's message of Gemilut Hasadim.

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