

## **Abraham: A Really Bad Dad?**

**by Donne Hayden**

Today is Father's Day, and I always think of Abraham on Father's Day. Of course, Abraham is the "Father" of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the father of Isaac, whose son Jacob is renamed "Israel" after he wrestles all night with God. My own father was very strict (though he was not religious), and as a child, I was frightened of him; perhaps that is why the story of Abraham and "the binding of Isaac" haunts me.

First some background: In Genesis, the first book in the Bible, we encounter Abraham, the founding "father" of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For most of their lives Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless. Finally, when she was well past child-bearing age, at Sarah's suggestion, Abraham conceived a son by his wife's maidservant, Hagar, a practice not uncommon at the time if a wife proved to be barren (an early version of surrogate parenting). So Abraham was 86 when his first son, Ishmael, son of Hagar, was born. Thirteen years later, when Abraham was 99, his 90-year-old wife Sarah bore their "legitimate" son, Isaac. After a while, Sarah grew jealous of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, and she banished them to the desert. God, however, stepped in to protect Hagar and the boy so that they survived, and, according to all three traditions, the followers of Islam descended from Ishmael, while the Israelites descended from Isaac.

In Genesis, we find the riveting story of Abraham and his son, Isaac—one of the most horrible and frightening stories in a book filled with them. It goes like this:

*Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"*

*“Here I am,” he replied.*

*Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”*

*Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.*

*On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.*

*He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”*

*Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,*

*Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”*

*“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.*

*“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”*

*Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.*

*When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.*

*Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

*But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”*

*“Here I am,” he replied.*

*“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”*

*Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.*

*So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”*

*The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”*

Genesis 22:1-18

Interestingly enough, Islam claims that the beloved son Father Abraham offered as a sacrifice was *Ishmael* not Isaac, and that this incident happened before Isaac was even born. They have a good point: the verse does say “Take your son, your only son whom you love.” Judaism counters with the argument that Isaac was Abraham’s only *legitimate* son.

We have to wonder why the two faiths want so badly to claim such a story and such a father. This is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. In it, God makes a cruel and unreasonable demand of an old man, who blindly obeys, willing even to sacrifice his most beloved child. We can barely stand to listen to such a story. It

certainly doesn't win such a God many admirers, and it doesn't speak well of fathers. Of course, the pay-off comes when God rewards Abraham for his faithful obedience by promising to bless his descendants forever (and this is why both Islam and Judaism want the offered child to be their respective ancestor).

But what if the story is not meant to convey a literal truth, a factual event? What if it is an allegory about developments and changes in a religion? What if it makes a point about spiritual growth and transcendence rather than showing us a really bad, sad old dad?

Consider the possibility that the story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac recounts a point in the history of the Hebrew people when they gave up the widespread practice of child sacrifice, switching to the *slightly* more humane custom of animal sacrifice. In Hebrew, the "God" who orders Abraham to sacrifice his son is referred to as "*Elohim*," the word traditionally used for "God," but which literally translates as the plural: "gods." The word used by the angel representing the God who *stops* the sacrifice is "*Yahweh*." Later in Exodus, Yahweh is also the God who leads the Israelites out of bondage, saying "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians." (Exodus 6:7)

Does this story mark, not only the ending of child sacrifice among the Israelites, but the beginning of monotheism among them? Is this the place where *Yahweh* claims the Israelites as his people and they gladly give up all those other *elohim* to follow him? The story of Abraham and Isaac might make a compelling argument to most parents that a change of gods was in order.

So the incident with Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah may also represent the point at which the Israelites became monotheistic, choosing to follow one among many gods around at the time. They chose the one who also chose them, i.e., *Yahweh*. Let's think about the story with this in mind:

One of the belligerent, demanding gods ordered a faithful old man to sacrifice his son. Because the old man trusts that a god who gave him the child would not ask its death unnecessarily, he prepares to do so without question. At the last moment, however, another god who is watching all this sends down a messenger to stop the fiasco. "Stop," the messenger says, "You've proven your faithfulness by not refusing to sacrifice your beloved son. And because of this, **Yahweh** will bless you and your descendents. Oh, and by the way, here is a convenient ram you can sacrifice to placate that other god."

I've been reading a fascinating book which offers another way of interpreting the story of Abraham and Isaac. It is called *The Way: Using the Wisdom of Kabbalah for Spiritual Transformation and Fulfillment*, by Michael Berg. The Kabbalah is the ancient teaching of Hebrew mystics, who read the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) as an elaborate code for spiritual transformation. For instance, to *kabbalists*, "'Egypt' is a code word for the slavery of self-serving desire and for the materialism that is an expression of that desire" (186). The ten plagues sent by God against Egypt are "ten surges of Light that help destroy the Darkness and negativity of the desire to receive for ourselves alone" (186). In leading the Israelites out of "bondage," then, Yahweh freed them from enslavement to selfish desires and material objects and led them to the "promised land," surely a code for the place where humans live peacefully, sharing everything equally, etc.

According to Michael Berg, a kabbalistic interpretation focuses on the spiritual dimension, seeing it as an allegory of the transformation of Abraham, who represents humanity, and of Isaac who will become the “father” of Israel (literally and then figuratively—Isaac has two sons, Jacob and Esau; Jacob, who wrestles with God, is eventually called “Israel” which means, “he wrestles with God,” an interesting concept if you think about the history of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel). Berg says that

*. . . the whole narrative of Abraham can be understood as the story of one man’s on-the-job training in understanding and trusting the divine presence. It was an education that culminated in a very difficult final exam.*

As recounted in the Bible, this took place when the Creator called upon Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. . . .

. . .

*Kabbalah’s teachings regarding this episode are very illuminating. Abraham is a person whose soul overflowed with the spiritual energy of mercy and kindness, which in Hebrew is called chesed. . . . Isaac, however, was an embodiment of gevurah, which is difficult to translate but includes the concepts of might and judgment. Ka’balah teaches that the true purpose of this episode was to temper the soul of Isaac with the energy of kindness—to literally bind this person who embodies the retributive aspect of justice, just as we must restrict this inclination in ourselves in all our dealings with the world. But perhaps there was a need also to temper Abraham’s naturally gentle spirit with the reciprocal form of energy. In any case, the real meaning . . . has less to do with human sacrifice than with the completion of two great souls...*

Perhaps this is too esoteric and hidden. The story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac elicits such a strong emotional response because it forces us to consider the

unthinkable. Perhaps Abraham is such a disturbing father figure because he represents many of us who fear we will be asked to sacrifice what we hold most dear. We may believe (or fear?) that nothing could ever make us respond obediently as he did, but then we realize, perhaps, how many good people through the centuries have participated in the sacrifice of their children. Indeed, many still do. I come from such people—*good* people, who think they are doing the right thing, answering a higher call—a call from some God, or some leader, who requires the deaths of sons and daughters. With heavy hearts but blind obedience, like Abraham, they sacrifice their sons and daughters, sending them off to face death in far-off wars. The wrenching lyrics in Leonard Cohen’s song, “The Story of Isaac,” written in the 1960s, still speak to parents willing to sacrifice their sons or daughters on the altars of war. “You who build these altars now,/ to sacrifice these children,” Cohen sings, “you must not do it anymore. / A scheme is not a vision / and you never have been tempted / by a demon or a god.”

### **“The Story of Isaac”**

#### **Music and Lyrics by Leonard Cohen**

*The door it opened slowly,  
my father he came in, I was nine years old.  
And he stood so tall above me,  
his blue eyes they were shining  
and his voice was very cold.*

*He said, I've had a vision  
and you know I'm strong and holy,  
I must do what I've been told.  
So he started up the mountain,  
I was running, he was walking,  
and his axe was made of gold.*

*Well, the trees they got much smaller,  
the lake a lady's mirror,  
we stopped to drink some wine.  
Then he threw the bottle over.  
Broke a minute later  
and he put his hand on mine.*

*Thought I saw an eagle  
but it might have been a vulture,  
I never could decide.  
Then my father built an altar,  
he looked once behind his shoulder,  
he knew I would not hide.*

*You who build these altars now  
to sacrifice these children,  
you must not do it anymore.  
A scheme is not a vision*

*and you never have been tempted  
by a demon or a god.*

*You who stand above them now,  
your hatchets blunt and bloody,  
you were not there before,  
when I lay upon a mountain  
and my father's hand was trembling  
with the beauty of the word.*

*And if you call me brother now,  
forgive me if I inquire,  
Just according to whose plan?  
When it all comes down to dust  
I will kill you if I must,  
I will help you if I can.  
When it all comes down to dust  
I will help you if I must,  
I will kill you if I can.  
And mercy on our uniform,  
man of peace or man of war,  
the peacock spreads his fan.*