

Foreword

From the house, so silent now, are driven
All the gods who reign'd supreme of yore;
One Invisible now rules in heaven,
On the cross a Saviour they adore.
Victims slay they here,
Neither lamb nor steer,
But the altars reek with human gore.

—Goethe, 1797

In some case man can be sure the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law [...] he must consider it an illusion.

—Kant, 1798

[...] When Isaac saw Abraham's countenance again it was changed, his eyes were wild, his appearance a fright to behold. [...] Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: "God in heaven have mercy on me [...]; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!"

—Johannes de Silentio, 1843

The submission of the individual to society, to the people, to humanity, to the Idea, is merely a continuation of human sacrifice, of the immolation of the lamb to pacify God.

—A. Herzen, 1850

A Personal Note:

In all my years at the *yeshiva* I have never heard of *aqedah*.
Except in the weekly portion reading.

[...]

Fact or metaphor:

The pious know that the *aqedah* is a fact. One more fact.

Secularists believe that it is a great, mythical metaphor.

If it is a metaphor, it must refer to them.

For they and metaphors are one and the same.

Thus:

The pious—a fact,

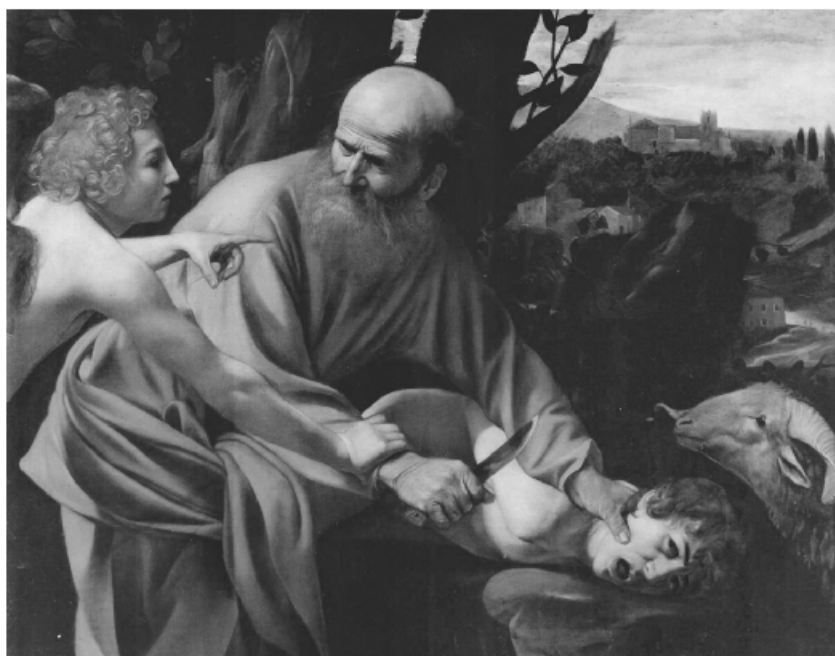
Secularists—a metaphor,

Now you go figure it out.

—A. Baruch, 2002

One of the highlights of the acclaimed art exhibit “Rembrandt and Caravaggio” held at the van Gogh Museum in 2005–2006 was the striking divergence between the ways the two masters imagined the scene of Genesis 22, the Sacrifice of Isaac. This difference revolves, as any spectator could see, around the question of violence.¹ Whereas in Caravaggio’s 1603 painting (Figure 1) the image of Isaac shows “only the physiology of fear and pain,”² Rembrandt considerably softened and humanized the scene in his 1655 etching (Figure 2), famously adorning several recent studies of Genesis 22 and its contexts.³

Interestingly, scholars have attributed the softer tone of Rembrandt’s later version to the influence of Josephus’s rendition of the story in his *Jewish Antiquities*. Indeed, this text is one of the early (first century CE)



1. Michelangelo Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* [Sacrificio d’Isaaco], 1603. Oil on canvas. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Source: The York Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH.



2. Rembrandt, *Abraham's Sacrifice*, 1655. Etching and dry point. Source: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH.

articulations of Judeo-Christian traditions that had insisted on the benign, harmonious cooperation between father and son.⁴ This tradition was put under strain, however, in Caravaggio's painting, and as our epigraphs show, this strain grew exponentially throughout subsequent centuries in the textual tradition as well. Even Johannes de Silentio, that

is, Kierkegaard—in one of his less-remembered passages—imagines the patriarch as resorting to scare tactics to ensure Isaac’s trust in God. . . .⁵

Within the last half-century, Israel has witnessed a similar bifurcation in its haunted preoccupation with its “primal scene” of sacrifice, Genesis 22. Here both the visual and the textual traditions were affected, experiencing a momentous reversal, though in the opposite direction: from a “Rembrandt”-type to a “Caravaggio”-type reading of Isaac’s near-sacrifice. No necessary influence by these artists is intended here. Israelis have been more in tune with traditional Jewish models, which tend towards the textual. Yet the diverging visual images immortalized by Caravaggio and Rembrandt may serve as a heuristic tool, as they represent two potential appreciations of human sacrifice, whether dictated by the divine or by any of its secular substitutes: the nation, the state, or other ideological and social organizations.

Obviously, both approaches have inhabited the Jewish tradition too, but in uneven measures. This unevenness is the result of a literal reading of the end point of the scriptural episode: the halting of the knife in mid-air. From this ending the universal prohibition of human sacrifice had been deduced, although contemporary scholars are still divided over this conclusion.⁶ The Hebraic tradition nevertheless insisted on a near-sacrifice, an *aqedah*, namely, “binding” rather than “sacrifice.”⁷

Despite this lexical/semantic difference, however, Jewish textual history has known not only bound Isaacs, but sacrificed ones as well. The latter often (though not exclusively) go willingly to be sacrificed, enacting the rabbinic (post-biblical) rendition of the story, present already in Josephus and his contemporaries, wherein both father and son are imagined as “rushing,” sometimes even “joyously,” “one to slaughter, the other to be slaughtered.”⁸

Still, never before had the two opposing readings of the *aqedah*, *willing* self-immolation versus *imposed* sacrifice, been in such contention as they are in contemporary Israel, where they have been resurrected with vengeance by (mostly secular!) authors, artists, other intellectuals, and politicians. In this contest, the *aqedah* signifies broadly diverse, sometimes diametrically opposing *psycho-political* attitudes that range from stoic heroism and ideological martyrdom to passive victimhood or its inverse: fanatic (often aggressive) resistance.⁹

Since 9/11, moreover, the global fascination with sacrificial metaphors has spread like wildfire, extending from self-declared religious movements to secular cultures. Awareness of the danger involved in this resurgence of “the sacred” within the so-called modern, secular West, has called attention to the symbolic valence of the Sacrifice of Isaac. Thus, what has until recently been a specifically Israeli emblem of inter-generational aggression is now in evidence in American popular culture, from Henry Bean’s 2001 underground film *The Believer* to the 2006 comic book *Testament: Akedah* by Douglas Rushkoff and Liam Sharp.¹⁰ Add to this the turn to polytheistic blood sacrifice in European communities, and the gory specter of human sacrifice returning as a ritual practice, not just an emblem, scarily looms on the horizon.¹¹

In view of this contemporary climate, my analytic and comparative history of attitudes toward national sacrifice in Hebrew culture over the last century seems to be timely. By zeroing in on just one acute manifestation of this ethical, psychological, and political issue, and by extending my probe back over two millennia to include biblical and classical sacrificial narratives (Iphigenia et al.), I hope to contribute to the on-going conversation about the afterlife of foundational Western sacrificial models, be they voluntary or violent.

My point of departure is the pervasive revival of traditional sacrificial discourses “in Tel Aviv,” namely in *secular* Israel.¹² I use this adjective with caution, fully cognizant of its problematic nature, as recent studies of modern nationalisms have made amply clear. Within the particular context of my topic moreover, “secular” is meant first of all to distinguish between the long tradition of rabbinic and mystical commentaries that have interpreted the Binding of Isaac as part of a divinely ordained Jewish scripture,¹³ and its various rewritings in modern twentieth-century Hebrew discourse that consciously at least had perceived itself free of these traditional constraints. That in practice this freedom has only partially materialized will become clear throughout this study. My findings, however, confirm Talal Asad’s argument that despite the religious provenance of “all forms of political life” (Clifford Geertz), and even though “theological and political concepts share common structures” (Carl Schmitt), “it is not enough to point to these structural

analogies,¹³ because the ostensibly same concepts operate differently in secular discourses “according to the historical formations in which they occur.”¹⁴

Asad’s point was inadvertently anticipated by the late Israeli man of letters Adam Baruch. Using his religious upbringing as an Archimedean vantage point, Baruch flippantly deconstructed, if you will, the Israeli preoccupation with the Sacrifice of Isaac, suggesting that it is a peculiarly secularist obsession (see our epigraph).¹⁵ I beg to differ. The sheer number of traditional commentaries on the Hebrew Bible titled *Aqedat Yitzhak* belies his statement. It is certainly more accurate to say, as Baruch himself subsequently suggests with poignant irony, that this core narrative has a *different function* in a world where God is only a metaphor. More importantly, the pious-versus-secular opposition he relies on seems to be losing ground in Israel, as a growing number of observant, if not pious, Israelis have been entering the *contemporary* political, in a sense, “secular,” wrestling with this troubling Jewish legacy.¹⁶

Indeed, one of the intriguing findings of this study is that although the Israeli internal contest over the meaning of Isaac’s near-sacrifice is in the end politically driven, the political division runs not along the pious-secularist divide, but rather *within* both camps. Unlike the emblematic contest over the meaning of the Eucharist in post-Revolution secular France, for example, where, as Ivan Strenski has shown, the national struggle unfolded mainly between Catholics and Protestants,¹⁷ the modern Hebrew-Israeli somewhat analogous process began within the secular camp. Only recently—in the wake of the 1967 War—did it start to spill over into a divided religious camp as well.

The reasons for this difference will become clear as we go along. For now let me only point out that in some sense, the Hebrew-Israeli story may be said to have taken off—symbolically—from the scene of victimization that is to my mind the undeclared trauma at the heart of Strenski’s study, the *Dreyfus Affair*. Driven mostly by East European analogous “affairs”—the infamous Russian pogroms of the late 1880s and their later reincarnations—Jewish nationalism was intent on transforming future “Isaacs” from sacrificial victims (à la Dreyfus and myriads of East European Jews) to heroic self-immolating sacrifices on the altar of the *matria* (*moledet*, the motherland). . . . The unforeseen com-

plications engendered by this effort constitute the thrust of the story I tell in the following pages.

My exploration of the ups and down of a century-long odyssey of modern Hebrew “Isaacs” is refracted through the multi-faceted scholarship on human sacrifice, victimization, violence, martyrdom, and other ‘noble deaths.’¹⁸ This wide-ranging literature emanates from biblical and historical studies, cultural and linguistic approaches to anthropology and religion, and psychology and gender studies. In this global conversation, the voice of modern Hebrew culture is hardly present. Though much ink has been spilled over this topic (mainly in Hebrew), no study has so far attempted a synoptic genealogy that would outline the modern evolution of, and resistance to, the core sacrificial tropes of Hebrew culture throughout the twentieth century.¹⁹

The present study attempts to fill in this gap. It aims at identifying the particular qualities that enabled the Hebraic primal scene of sacrifice to become a suitable trope for expressing both the glory and the agony of collective and personal trauma. To paraphrase Asad, my query aspires to outline a “historical grammar” of the old-modern Hebrew sacrificial trope rather than treating it “as a sign of an essential phenomenon.”²⁰ An intrinsic aspect of the grammar is the (mostly absent) analogous story of Ishmael’s banishment qua sacrifice (Genesis 21), and the unavoidable contemporary moral and political implications of this absence. Another essential aspect is the analysis of gender. By studying the stories of male near-sacrifice alongside the presumed enacted sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Jud. 11–12) and its own classical Greek analogues, and by paying special attention to women’s rewriting of both, this study helps answer some intriguing psycho-cultural questions: How should we interpret the *gender* difference between the Hebraic archetypal sacrificial story and its many Greek variants, where the sacrificial victim is mostly a virgin daughter? And how could Israelis have turned around a biblical scene traditionally read as a trope of obedience (à la feminine resignation of the Greek virgin sacrifices) into a trope of violence, synonymous with the oedipal conflict? Moreover, why have some of them insisted on rewriting Abraham’s test, the one ostensibly signaling the repression or control of aggressive family dynamics, as the Hebraic psychological equivalent

of those Greek myths that give free rein to precisely these forces? Finally, what literary and linguistic qualities enabled the Hebraic “primal scene” of sacrifice to serve two masters, to stand for glory and agony, elation and trauma?²¹

I should point out, however, that although my sources are not exactly “entangled and confused parchments,” as Foucault has famously redefined Nietzsche’s “genealogy,” they are certainly “documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.” To further paraphrase Foucault, these documents do not “keep their meanings,” nor do their “desires point in a single direction.”²² Culled from both promising and “the most unpromising places” (*ibid.*), my wide-ranging cultural sources draw a complex picture of the vicissitudes of ancient Hebrew sacrificial narratives throughout the last century. They include a variety of genres—fiction, drama, poetry, memoir, art, historical and scholarly discourse—and they provide multiple, sometimes contradictory answers to such historico-cultural questions as: What exactly is meant by the modern Hebrew collocation *motiv* [motif] *ha'aqedah*? What is the function of this motif in the emotional and ethical economy of the national Jewish psyche and politics? How and why and when had the story of Isaac’s Binding shed its religious-ritualistic connotation and turned into a secular metaphor, now used to signify national, military self-sacrifice and especially heroic death in battle? Why have some Israelis shifted from reading it as a scene of inter-generational consensus to rewriting it as the emblem of the forcefully *imposed* surrender of one’s life? In other words, how has “Isaac” lost his Christological self-sacrificial image, and morphed from a self-appointed *martyr* into a self-perceived *victim*? And under what circumstances was he (or she) compelled to become an enraged Oedipus, one who rebelliously denies the urgency or need for sacrifice, one who casts his father in the role of a fanatic sacrificer, sometimes imagined as Laius, Oedipus’s father, who tried to get rid of his son for fear for his own life? To put yet another spin on my query, when and why has Abraham’s knife stopped hovering in midair for the Israeli mind?

Reading against the grain²³ of the prevailing consensus about both the emergence of the “Zionist *aqedah*” and the timing of its several transformations, my study offers new answers to these questions. My revised

time table uncovers pockets of resistance to the concept of national sacrifice as early as the First World War, and full-blown oedipal challenges to historical martyrdom as early as 1942. In tracing this strain to its almost forgotten precursors during the formative years of the State, I unravel a dialectical intellectual history that extends and deepens previous assessments of the tensions and discontinuities animating Jewish and Israeli culture—between the sacred and the secular, the individual and the collective, modern self-determination and faith, peace and war. Moreover, my findings also show that the Israeli sacrificial discourse is not a “biblical motif”—as Israelis have habitually called it. Rather, it has always been part and parcel of the post-biblical *martyrological* legacy, which itself has had a lifelong tense relationship with Christian martyrology.

My study of twentieth-century Hebrew sacrificial discourses therefore takes us back to ancient sources, from the early Apocrypha (Jewish and Christian alike) and rabbinic midrash, to the medieval *Sefer Yosippon* and the post-Crusade Hebrew chronicles and liturgy.²⁴ Most surprisingly, it traces the birth of the “Isaac” as a military hero to a neologism, hardly remembered today, that was actually invented in Palestine/Eretz Israel (The Land of Israel) under the impact of Russian Orthodox martyr tropes.

Other sources of inspiration and resistance uncovered here include such antithetical nineteenth-century thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard and Alexander Herzen, not to mention twentieth-century luminaries from Durkheim, Freud, and Buber, to Scholem, Sartre, and Faulkner. In addition, I show that historical research of medieval Jewish martyrdom has affected the periodic conflagration of interest in sacrificial narratives throughout the twentieth century, climaxing in the recent ideological wars in Israel and the critical psycho-political battle that began in the 1970s and is still going strong.

Through this unearthing of the mechanisms and strategies operating in the contest over so-called secular national sacrifice of one particular time and place, this study ultimately problematizes recent evaluations of sacrificial violence enacted on self and others in the name of any gods, be they religious or secular (Girard, Derrida), while contributing to our overall understanding of what the consequences of secularization as

such might be. It will therefore be painfully relevant to any “people of the book,” and even more so to the secular cultures they have spawned. It should be ultimately of interest to anyone troubled by the dangerous contemporary politicization of religious symbols and by the forbidding realization that secular rewritings of scriptural topoi might have contributed to this process.