

Preface and Acknowledgments

New images urgently needed to be made. Images for a godless world. Until the language of irreligion caught up with the holy stuff [...], these sainted echoes would never fade, would retain their problematic power, even over her.

—Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*

The root of the heroine's frustration in this passage is familiar enough to Rushdie's readers: the persistence of the sacred within the language of the secular. Here, however, it is in a love poem by Baudelaire, of all things, that traces of the sacred are detected—"some sort of altar," "congealing blood," and other religious symbols. Moreover, both the iconography and the response it elicits are not incidental—they foretell a narrative of love brutally thwarted by violence, presumably sacred.

The present study grew out of a similar frustration. Growing up in Israel and specializing in Hebrew culture, past and present, I have long been aware of the uneasy coexistence between the sacred and the secular. In Baudelaire's sacral imagery I in fact recognized one of the arch Jewish symbols, if not *the* arch symbol of this coexistence—the trope of sacrifice, of "making sacred." Yet, while the *pre-modern* manifestations of this mythic symbol have been amply studied, scant attention has been given to its afterlife in modern times. Jewish nationalism is an ideal test case for such an inquiry.

This book is the fruit of my long odyssey of love and heartache in the footsteps of the twentieth-century descendents of the Bible's archetypal potential and real sacrificial victims: Isaac, Ishmael, Jephthah's daughter, Jesus. Through the exploration of their cultural production—in belles lettres, art, historical studies, and political debates—I cautiously lay bare their passionate negotiations between the millennia-long intercultural and ecumenical tradition they inherited and their own harsh political and psychological realities. To make better sense of these negotiations I place them in conversation with writings, from antiquity to the present, about human sacrifice, violence and victimage, martyrdom and other “noble deaths.” The result is an account of the attitudes toward sacrifice/victim (both *qorban* in Hebrew!) during the first Zionist century. My narrative draws a complex picture, revealing that just like the secular at large, Jewish nationalism was unable to invent a new, un-sacred language. Apparently, it is precisely the endurance of “noble death,” both martyric and military, within national narratives that has rendered them both “theological” and, alas, violent.

This unhappy confluence, more obvious than ever in our post-9/11 global reality, was not as transparent however at the threshold of the 20th century. My story therefore begins at that point in time when a desperate search for new meaning and new hope for a people traumatized by pogroms and wars perforce collided with the realization that defending this nascent new life means sacrificing individual lives. To my amazement, I discovered that the fierce inner turmoil and public debate caused by this requisite was ironically reconciled by importing to Hebrew, perhaps unknowingly, martyric connotations of Orthodox Christianity.

How I came to this surprising conclusion is a curious story unravelled in the following pages. Here suffice it to add a personal note. Several years ago, while at a conference in Moscow, I was privileged to listen to a brief report, in Russian, of my then research in process. I was soon startled to recognize in the stream of (nostalgically familiar but barely decipherable) language a word I remembered well from childhood: *zhertva*. Imagine my surprise when I learned that this Russian word means both sacrifice and victim—just like the Hebrew *qorban*! Long forgotten, it now resurfaced with full force, reorienting my reflections about sacrifices, victims, and intercultural connections.

Prominent in this new thinking was the recognition that human *ambivalence* over the need for self-/sacrifice has deep roots. This understanding proved crucial for my new take on Israel's haunting love affair with its primal scene of sacrifice, Genesis 22. An emblem of long standing for Jewish fate in exilic persecutions, this story, appropriately named in Hebrew the "Binding" (*aqedah*) rather than the "Sacrifice" of Isaac, has been interpreted for millennia as advancing a divine *prohibition* of human sacrifice. It was the long-lasting presence of this interpretative tradition in the face of a history that *has often contradicted* it that spurred my curiosity. Inter alia, it inspired the following questions: How has Isaac, the passive *survivor* of a *near-sacrifice*, come to stand for the necessity for *active* military self-sacrifice, for a warrior's *glorious death* in battle? And more recently—how was he transformed into the agonizing *victim* of violence and homicide? How, to change a metaphor, has Abraham's sacrificial knife stopped hovering in mid air?

Glory and Agony is my attempt to provide some answers to these and other complex questions. My journey has taken me to far-off places, some out of my nominal field of specialization. It compelled me to confront painful historical periods that my Israeli education had suppressed, and to face "marginal" textual sources that I was trained to shun and reject. And in making me realize that the project I have undertaken is perhaps interminable, it also has taught me humility.

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