

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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The Binding of Isaac

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“Take your son, your only son, the one you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” Thus begins one of the most famous episodes in the Torah, but also one of the most morally problematic.

The conventional reading of this passage is that Abraham was being asked to show that his love for God was supreme. He would show this by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting.

Why did God need to “test” Abraham, given that He knows the human heart better than we know it ourselves? Maimonides answers that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for Him. Rather the test was meant to establish for all time how far the fear and love of God must go.¹

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On this principle there was little argument. The story is about the awe and love of God. Kierkegaard wrote a book about it, *Fear and Trembling*,² and made the point that ethics is universal. It consists of general rules. But the love of God is particular. It is an I-Thou personal relationship. What Abraham underwent during the trial was, says Kierkegaard, a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” that is, a willingness to let the I-Thou love of God overrule the universal principles that bind humans to one another.

¹ Guide for the Perplexed 3: 24.

² Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling, and the Sickness Unto Death*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954.

Rav Soloveitchik explained the episode in terms of his own well-known characterisation of the religious life as a dialectic between victory and defeat, majesty and humility, man-the-creative-master and man-the-obedient-servant.³ There are times when “God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.” We must experience defeat as well as victory. Thus the binding of Isaac was not a once-only episode but rather a paradigm for the religious life as a whole. Wherever we have passionate desire – eating, drinking, physical relationship – there the Torah places limits on the satisfaction of desire. Precisely because we pride ourselves on the power of reason, the Torah includes *chukkim*, statutes, that are impenetrable to reason.

These are the conventional readings and they represent the mainstream of tradition. However, since there are “seventy faces to the Torah,” I want to argue for a different interpretation. The reason I do so is that one test of the validity of an interpretation is whether it coheres with the rest of the Torah, Tanakh and Judaism as a whole. There are four problems with the conventional reading:

1. We know from Tanakh and independent evidence that the willingness to offer up your child as a sacrifice was not rare in the ancient world. It was commonplace. Tanakh mentions that Mesha king of Moab did so. So did Jephthah, the least admirable leader in the book of Judges. Two of Tanakh’s most wicked kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, introduced the practice into Judah, for which they were condemned. There is archeological evidence – the bones of thousands of young children – that child sacrifice was widespread in Carthage and other Phoenician sites. It was a pagan practice.
2. Child sacrifice is regarded with horror throughout Tanakh. Micah asks rhetorically, “Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” and replies, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” How could Abraham serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do is what his descendants were commanded not to do?
3. Specifically, Abraham was chosen to be a role model as a father. God says of him, “For I have chosen him *so that he will instruct his children* and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.” How could he serve as a model father if he was willing to sacrifice his child? To the contrary, he should have said to God: “If you want me to prove to You how much I love You, then take me as a sacrifice, not my child.”
4. As Jews – indeed as humans – we must reject Kierkegaard’s principle of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” This is an idea that gives *carte blanche* to a religious fanatic to commit crimes in the name of God. It is the logic of the Inquisition and the suicide bomber. It is not the logic of Judaism rightly understood.⁴ God does not ask us to be unethical. We may not always understand ethics from God’s perspective but we believe that “He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just” (Deut. 32: 4).

To understand the binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family as described by Fustel de Coulanges in

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” *Tradition* 17:2, Spring, 1978, pp. 25–37.

⁴ This is a large subject in its own right, that I hope to be able to address elsewhere.

The Ancient City (1864)⁵ and recently restated by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*.⁶

Before the emergence of the first cities and civilizations, the fundamental social and religious unit was the family. As Coulanges puts it, in ancient times there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. Each family had its own gods, among them the spirits of dead ancestors, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices. The authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right. This idea persisted even beyond the biblical era in the Roman law principle of *patria potestas*.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. As anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, one of the most striking features of the Torah is that it includes no sacrifices to dead ancestors.⁷ Seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in the early narratives succession does *not* pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The principle to which the entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed is the idea that *a child is the property of the father*. First, Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives. In this respect the Isaac story is parallel to that of the birth of Samuel to Hannah, like Sarah also unable naturally to conceive. That is why, when he is born Hannah says, "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now *I give him to the Lord*. For his whole life he will be *given over to the Lord*." This passage is the key to understanding the message from heaven telling Abraham to stop: "Now I know that you fear God, *because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son*" (the statement appears twice, in Gen. 22: 12 and 16). The test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice his son but whether he would *give him over* to God.

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The same principle recurs in the book of Exodus. First, Moses' survival is semi-miraculous since he was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male Israelite child should be killed. Secondly, during the tenth plague, when every firstborn Egyptian child died, the Israelite firstborn were miraculously saved. "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites *belongs to Me*, whether human or animal." The firstborn were originally designated to serve God as priests, but lost this role after the sin of the golden calf. Nonetheless, a memory of this original role still persists in the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, redemption of a firstborn son.

What God was doing when he asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. He wanted Abraham to *renounce ownership* of his son. He wanted to establish as a non-negotiable principle of Jewish law that *children are not the property of their parents*.

⁵ Fustel De Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956.

⁶ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*. London: Penguin, 2014.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

That is why three of the four matriarchs found themselves unable to conceive other than by a miracle. The Torah wants us to know that the children they bore were the children of God rather than the natural outcome of a biological process. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be called the children of God. A related idea is conveyed by the fact that God chose as his spokesperson Moses who was “not a man of words.” He was a stammerer. Moses became God’s spokesman because people knew that the words he spoke were not his own but those placed in his mouth by God.

The clearest evidence for this interpretation is given at the birth of the very first human child. When she first gives birth, Eve says: “With the help of the Lord I have acquired [*kaniti*] a man.” That child, whose name comes from the verb “to acquire,” was Cain who became the first murderer. If you seek to own your children, your children may rebel into violence.

If the analysis of Fustel de Colanges and Larry Siedentop is correct, it follows that something fundamental was at stake. *As long as parents believed they owned their children, the concept of the individual could not yet be born.* The fundamental unit was the family. The Torah represents the birth of the individual as the central figure in the moral life. Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship. As soon as they reach the age of maturity (traditionally, twelve for girls, thirteen for boys) children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom.⁸

Sigmund Freud famously had something to say about this too. He held that a fundamental driver of human identity⁹ is the Oedipus Complex, the conflict between fathers and sons as exemplified in Aeschylus’ tragedy. *By creating moral space between fathers and sons, Judaism offers a non-tragic resolution to this tension.* If Freud had taken his psychology from the Torah rather than from Greek myth, he might have arrived at a more hopeful view of the human condition.

Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: “Offer him up as a burnt offering”? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death. In Judaism, as the laws of purity and the rite of the Red Heifer show, death is not sacred. Death defiles.

The Torah is revolutionary not only in relation to society but also in relation to the family. To be sure, the Torah’s revolution was not fully completed in the course of the biblical age. Slavery had not yet been abolished. The rights of women had not yet been fully actualised. But the birth of the individual – the integrity of each of us as a moral agent in our own right – was one of the great moral revolutions in history.

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⁸ It is perhaps no accident that the figure who most famously taught the idea of “the child’s right to respect” was Janusz Korczak, creator of the famous orphanage in Warsaw, who perished together with the orphans in Treblinka. See Tomek Bogacki, *The Champion of Children: The Story of Janusz Korczak* (2009).

⁹ He argued, in *Totem and Taboo*, that the Oedipus complex was central to religion also.