

What's in a Name? Nomenclature, Death and Meaning in the Abraham Saga

Va-Yera: Genesis 18:1-22:24

The Bible's language emphasizes the relationship between names and identity. In the locus classicus of Biblical naming, Genesis 2:19, it is stated: "And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name." Man, Adam, is then later on given a helpmate, Eve, and he names her too: "The man named his wife Eve [Heb., Hava, from the root HYH, to live], because she was mother of all the living." (Genesis 3:20) In these two passages, there is a dynamic relation between the Name and being in general.

Opposed to this Biblical conception of naming, Greek philosophers saw an essential separation between name and thing. The single Hebrew term for word, name and thing, as pointed out in the seminal article "'Word' and Literature in Ancient Israel" by the late Isaac Rabinowitz, is *dabar*. Rabinowitz characterizes the diction utilized in the Bible as the ascribing of an almost-material power to names and words in the Bible:

Like ourselves, the ancient Israelites believed that words could be used to convey information, express and communicate feelings and attitudes, persuade, delight. Unlike ourselves, they thought that words could be quite palpable substances, power-instruments, courses of action.

The Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus* presents the Greek philosophical position in the following manner:

But this at least is worth pointing out, that the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected with it the name of the noblest of all arts, the art of discerning the future, and they called it the manic art.

In this passage we see the emergence of a Western sensibility that sees in the onomastic art a substrate of madness, of irrationality. Names are, according to Plato, the only instruments we have to conduct our discussions and dialogues, but they are notoriously unstable entities. Earlier in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates notes:

Now most people are unaware that they are ignorant of the essential nature of their subject, whatever that may be. Believing that they know it, they do not begin by agreeing about the use of terms, with the natural result that as they proceed they fall into self-contradictions and misunderstandings.

Here we see what would become the foundational principle of all Western thinking about language and names: Because words are different than things, the speaker must take especial care to statically define her terms prior to any discursive argumentation. Rather

than seeing words as dynamic bearers of meaning, Plato and the Western philosophical tradition see words as unreliable markers of madness and irrationality.

Hence, the idea that an individual name, or the change of a name, might have philosophical significance is a concept that is uniquely Hebraic.

In the development of the saga of Abram begun in perashat Lekh Lekha, we see that Abram has been sent away from his familial home and was forced to (re-)discover his identity by hearkening to the commands of YHVH. It is in YHVH that Abram finds his filiation, rather than the community of his father Terah. This transformation is brought about by the modified sense of home that Abram is provided. Abram is promised a permanent home, but that home is not a territory per se; it is the will of YHVH that has sanctified the Land of Canaan and has made possessing that Land contingent on the fulfillment of the terms of the Covenant that has been struck with Abram.

It is at the end of perashat Lekh Lekha that we have the establishment of yet another Covenant, the Covenant of the Flesh. This Covenant, unlike the first one, will carve a physical marking on the body (more specifically, the phallus) of Abram. But before this carving and incising can take place, the text turns its focus on the act of (re)-naming:

Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, “As for me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 17:3-17:5)

First, let us understand Abram’s original name. The name is split into two: *Ab*, father and *Ram*, exalted. The name Abram thus means “The Exalted Father.” The new name Abraham is provided with an etymology by the text itself: *Ab*, father and *Hamon*, many, which in this case means many nations. In this etymology the letter “R” is left unaccounted for. Linguists have reconstructed the name as follows: *Abir*, mighty (a term also used for God Himself, *Abir Ya’aqob*, cf. Genesis 49:24) and *Ham*, many, again meaning many nations. The name Abraham thus means “The Leader of Many.”

The change in the meaning of his name reflects the shift in Abraham’s own being and identity: Having originally been charged with the responsibility of promoting God’s vision for the world, Abraham now is empowered with the promise of being the progenitor of many nations, of a new civilization. There is a dialectical interrelationship between the two names; Abram signifies the first transformation of a pagan child into the exalted father of a new religious movement, while Abraham seeks to add to that characterization by realizing the vision of God’s omnipotence in the world through the very concrete sense of Abraham’s presence as the head of a new human family.

What is left out of these etymologies is the actual letter that serves to transform the name, “H.” The Sages in the Midrashic compilation *Pesiqta Rabbati* understand the name change as alluding to God’s manifestation, here signified by the use of the latter “H,” in

the process of childbirth which is linked to the plight of the childless Hannah in 1 Samuel:

In his star Abraham saw it is written that he would have no children, as is said, “Seeing I go hence childless” (Genesis 15:2). But the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Thou didst indeed read the stars correctly, for as thou livest, Abram, as Abram, is not destined to beget children. What then do I mean to do for thee? I will change thy name and thou will beget, as is said, “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham.” (Genesis 17:5)

The allusion in this Midrash is to the element of God (causing the miracle of the birth) that is now present in Abraham due to the presence of the letter “H” in the new name.

With this name change in mind, we enter into the new world of Abraham, a world manifested by the birth of his son Isaac (Heb., Yishaq), named for the “laughter” (Heb., sehoq) that his mother-to-be Sarah laughs when told that she will be delivering a child to Abraham at a ripe old age. Having lost her menses, Sarah approaches the idea that she will have a son as nonsensical. The subsequent life of Isaac, ironically, will henceforth be marked by his mother’s laughter.

Perashat Va-Yera is filled with images of family life as befits the transition from the emergence of God’s role in Abraham’s life to the intense concern for filiation and progeny. Here Abraham is presented as the head of a substantial homestead, a man who spies guests coming to his tents and hurries, in typical Bedouin fashion, to have his wife prepare a meal for them. This sense of largesse, preserved in our Syrian-Jewish culture by the Arabic term *suffeh*, displays the renewed sense of self in Abraham and the development of the conceptuality of his name. Abraham is truly the father of many nations as he displays the care and concern for others – in a unilateral sense – that is emblematic of great leaders.

In an inverted mirror image of the episode involving the messengers at Mamre, we see the representatives of God leave the tents of Abraham and go down to Sodom to visit Lot. Here, rather than deliver a promise of new life and renewal, the messengers deliver a promise of death. God tells Abraham, the new leader of the world, that He may be forced to “take out” the community of Sodom:

The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached me; if not, I will take note. (Genesis 18:20-18:22)

After lengthy pleading by Abraham, the newly installed protector of humanity, God carries out His plan to destroy Sodom.

It should be remembered that Abraham’s nephew Lot continues to live in Sodom. Abraham has already gotten involved in the affairs of Sodom during the wars of the Kings in the previous perasha. Compromising his neutrality for the sake of his nephew,

Abraham seeks to save Sodom from imminent destruction in the fighting. After his success he is offered a reward by the king of Sodom that he steadfastly refuses. (Genesis 15:21-15:24)

It is then natural for Abraham to intervene on behalf of Sodom, even though his arguments are ultimately unpersuasive to God. Interestingly, in what will foreshadow his silence during the Binding of Isaac, Abraham limits the argument to the principle that Sodom should only be saved on behalf of ten righteous men. Abraham's understanding is that there is to be no second chance; if there are not ten righteous men to be found in Sodom then he will acquiesce to God's judgment in the matter.

So the messengers who have just come to bless Abraham are now sent out to warn Lot of the impending destruction in Sodom. True to form, the men of Sodom, who have yet to appear in the narrative, typify the malevolence that God has already alluded to in His harsh assessment of the town: Lot welcomes the messengers as his uncle has done, but the men of Sodom stand by and act out the iniquity that is in their hearts:

They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old – all the people to the last man – gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate [Heb., nede’ah, the term used for conjugal relations, cf. Genesis 4:1] with them.” (Genesis 19:4-19:5)

Lot begins to fear the men and offers them his two virgin daughters as a sop. The implication here is that the men of Sodom wish to rape the strangers.

Sex has a crucial role in the Mamre and Sodom narratives: Procreative sex will miraculously make Sarah pregnant – even after the end of her menses and the seeming onset of menopause – while non-procreative sex, in this context homosexual rape, characterizes the culture of the Sodomites – lawless, miscreant and sadistic. The wholesome environment at Mamre is contrasted with the Hell that is Sodom. After Lot takes his family out of Sodom (on the path to their freedom Lot's wife turns to look back at the devastation and is transformed by God into a pillar of salt) he, like Noah, gets drunk and then unknowingly cohabits with his two virgin daughters.

Sex is also crucial to the narrative of Abraham's sojourn in Philistine Gerar. Upon arriving in Gerar, Abraham lets it be known that the woman – his wife Sarah - who has come with him is his sister. As is wont among Bedouin chieftans, Abimelech the king of Gerar has the woman Sarah brought to him to become his concubine. God then appears in a dream and warns Abimelech to return Sarah to Abraham who is presented as a prophet of God.

Abimelech chastises Abraham for his prevarications. Abraham has lied about Sarah because of his fears. He tells Abimelech, “I thought there is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.” (Genesis 21:11) And while there is truth in this statement, Abraham has not taken the fact of his name seriously, as he did in

the case of the Sodomites. He fears Abimelech, correctly, but lacks the courage to face up to him, as a true leader of men should.

Sex serves to cause Abimelech to abduct Sarah, and he is henceforth punished by YHVH by having the wombs of all his wives and concubines shut closed. It is only the prayers of Abraham that will open them again. The theme of procreation and its negation thus rears its head into the narrative yet again.

Ironically, after YHVH opens the wombs of Abimelech's harem, it is Sarah who gives birth. After *l'affaire d'Abimelech* Sarah gives birth to Isaac. And immediately, Sarah turns vindictive against her maidservant Hagar, the maidservant who tormented Sarah mentally after the birth of Ishmael, the seeming-heir to Abraham's estate. Immediately on the heels of the telling of Isaac's birth we read:

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing [Heb., *mesaheq*, from the root SHQ, cf. Genesis 21:6]. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed." (Genesis 21:9-21:13)

The matter of Ishmael is one that is frustrating: Both God and Abraham seek his welfare, but he is left out in the cold by Sarah's command. The text refuses to resolve the issue of Ishmael's rights against Sarah. He is passed-over in favor of Isaac (and this pattern will repeat itself with Isaac's children Jacob and Esau) even though he too is seen as the father of a great nation.

But the text does not leave it at this. As we will soon enter into the tribulations of the Binding of Isaac at Moriah, so too do we follow Hagar and Ishmael into the desolate landscapes of Philistia. As mother and son are left to die in the harsh, arid terrain of Be'er-Sheba, ironically the site of the triumph of Abraham, Ishmael cries for water:

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well [Hebrew, *be'er*] of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. (Genesis 21:17-21:19)

Indeed, the wishes of Sarah, that Ishmael be prevented from receiving the blessings of the Covenant, are thwarted by God's machinations. Rather than dying in the wilderness, Ishmael moves down to Egypt and begins his own civilization. And, as we have said in regard to the Covenant of the Pieces, the promise, though not equitably distributed to

both sons, is clearly understood to include Ishmael, just as the later blessing of Isaac to Jacob is meant to include Esau. The text here is saturated with pathos for the boy and his sad mother who are cruelly thrown away by Sarah.

Abraham and Abimelech make a pact at the very site, Be'er Sheba (ironically, we are told the origin of the name **after** we are told the name itself), where Hagar wanders with her son. This pact and this land become a crucial part of Abraham's new home, as we are told "Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time." (Genesis 21:34)

But before Abraham feels comfortable in this home, he is set upon by God, here signified by the name Elohim, to deliver over his progeny Isaac, his only means, as YHVH has previously told him, to fulfill his role as **Abraham**, the father of many nations. With Isaac gone, the Divine promise would seem to be inoperative.

In a brilliantly constructed narrative (Genesis 22:1-22:19), taut and filled with deep silences and contradictions, Elohim asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. Yet again, the text in question utilizes the two names of God that we have previously examined, YHVH and Elohim, and fashioned a text that serves to take one of the most crucial elements of pagan belief and place it within a recontextualized dramatic milieu.

As is now well known, the phenomenon of child sacrifice was common in pagan antiquity. The Bible is clearly not immune from knowledge of this ritual. In their comprehensive *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development* the scholars William Oesterley and Theodore Robinson state:

On the site of ancient Gezer, in southern Palestine near the Philistine border, a burial cave belonging to the early Israelite period (Patriarchal period) was examined; in one part of the cave was a paved platform on which was laid a large jar of coarse brick, red porous ware; stones were built up round it to keep it in position. This jar "contained a few bones, sufficient to show that the body of an infant, at birth or immediately after, had been deposited in it. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we have here the remains of a victim of an infant sacrifice. On no other hypothesis can the special treatment of this individual infant – one of many of the same age whose remains were found in the cave – be accounted for."

Oesterley and Robinson then draw up a listing of references to child sacrifice in the Bible – the most prominent being the admonitions of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35) and the horrifying tale, rarely mentioned in religious circles, of Yiftah ha-Gil'adi in the book of Judges:

And Jephthah made the following vow to the Lord [Heb., YHVH]: "If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering." Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites and attacked them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands. He utterly routed them – from Aro'er as far as Minnith, twenty towns – all the way to Abel-Cheramim. So

the Ammonites submitted to the Israelites. When Jephthah arrived at his home in Mizpah, there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with timbrel and dance! She was an only child; he had no other son or daughter. On seeing her he rent his clothes and said, “Alas, daughter! You have brought me low; you have become my troubler! For I have uttered a vow [Heb., *pasitah pi el YHVH*, I opened my mouth to YHVH] to the Lord and I cannot retract.” “Father,” she said, “you have uttered a vow to the Lord, do to me as you have vowed, seeing that the Lord has vindicated you against your enemies the Ammonites.” (Judges 11:30-11:36)

Horribly, Jephthah, at his daughter’s own behest (she remains nameless throughout the narrative and has come to be known in Jewish folklore as Jephthah’s Daughter), kills his child (11:39) after sending her off for two months with her companions to “cry over her maidenhood.” [Heb., *va-tebk ‘al betule’ha ‘al he-harim*]

While many of the places in the Bible cited by Oesterley and Robinson reflect the revulsion at the pagan ritual, the author of Judges seems to accept the practice. The Judges text, however, bears striking similarities and divergences with the Genesis text. Jephthah, like Abraham, is indebted to God and must fulfill his obligations for God’s great mercies. But Abraham - unlike Jephthah, but similar to Job - is tested by God in order to see what he will do when commanded to sacrifice his son.

The narrative of the Binding of Isaac [Heb., *Aqedat Yishaq*] is a completely independent unit of the text and has no conceptual or thematic relation to what has preceded it. The text is woven out of the fabric of loyalty, devotion and belief. In Judges there is a clear thematic relation between the sacrifice and the tale of Jephthah’s victory over the Ammonites: Jephthah comes to God in thanks for God’s help in the victory over the Ammonites. Here in Genesis Abraham is pulled out of his home (in the middle of the night, so to speak) and told to take his beloved son Isaac and sacrifice him.

The first thing that is so striking about this brilliantly written episode is that it parallels linguistically the call of YHVH at the beginning of perashat Lekh Lekha. The Hebrew text of the Binding reads as follows:

Va-yomer, qah na ‘et binkha ‘et yehide’kha ‘asher ‘ahabta ‘et Yitshaq; ve-lekh lekha ‘el eres ha-moriyah ve-ha’alehu sham le-‘olah, ‘al ahad he-harim asher ‘omar ‘elekha.

And he said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” (Genesis 22:2)

Here is the first verse of perashat Lekh Lekha:

Va-yomer YHVH ‘el abram; lekh lekha me-arse’kha u-mi-moladte’kha u-mi-bet abikha, ‘el ha-ares asher ar’eka.

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)

One can see in the language used that there is a similarity in how the two Lekh Lekha passages are grammatically constructed. In addition, there is one Hebrew term used verbatim; *Lekh Lekha* and a second term, *Asher Omar Elekha*, which serves to parallel the earlier term, *Asher Ar’eka*. In this respect, the two verses are conceptually linked by their syntax and use of terminology.

In a startling reversal of the victory of YHVH exemplified by the rise of Abram in perashat Lekh Lekha, in the Binding of Isaac we have, as we saw in the tale of the Benei Elohim back in Genesis 6, a re-emergence of the El-god as the main protagonist. As in the text of the Benei Elohim who will promulgate anarchy on the earth, we have here the command given by Elohim for Abraham to kill his son in the manner of the pagans. The term Elohim, yet again, is utilized to signify the pagan element in a primal battle between the forces of YHVH and those of El.

Abraham is presented in the text as being utterly inert and silent; he accepts the task at hand without question. In his magisterial study *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, Andre Neher understands that God here is turning back on His own sense of Justice:

Finally, in chapter 22, the chapter of the sacrifice of Isaac, it was, conversely, the silence of God which suddenly surrounded Abraham like a cloud of fog. For three days, while Abraham and Isaac went up toward Mount Moriah, the two men waited in vain for a word from that God who hitherto had spoken so much to them and now, in His turn, having cornered them into a test, abandoned them to their fate and wrapped Himself in alibi.

Interestingly, Neher neglects to notice the different **names** that are used to signify God in the Akedah passages. At the beginning of perashat Lekh Lekha, the name used for God is YHVH. In the Akedah-text the name used is Elohim. There is a massive dislocation within the two texts, between the promise given by God in Lekh Lekha that Abraham, through Isaac, will become a great nation (proscribed by the words of Genesis 15:5 and fulfilled by the words of Genesis 21:12), and the imminent death of Isaac, the fulfillment of the earlier promise, on Mount Moriah proscribed by Elohim.

The Sages were not oblivious to the paradoxes inherent in this narrative. In an overwhelming and quite deep (and lengthy) Midrash on the Akedah we read the following:

“And he placed him on the altar” (Genesis 22:9). Abraham’s eyes were directed at Isaac’s, and Isaac’s at the heaven of heavens. Tears were flowing from Abraham’s eyes, until his entire body was all but afloat in them. He took the knife in order to cut Isaac’s throat deeply enough so that a quarter of a log of blood would issue from him. At that instant Satan appeared and shoved Abraham’s arm aside, so that the

knife fell out of his hand. When he reached out to pick it up, his mouth fell wide open with weeping as a great cry of anguish erupted from him. Then, his eyes blinking frantically, he looked up to the Presence and pleaded in a rising voice, “I lift mine eyes to the mountains; whence will my help come?” [Heb., ‘esa ‘enai ‘al he-harim, me-‘ayin yabo ‘ezri] (Psalms 121:1) At that, the Holy One appeared above the angels and flung open the firmament. The ministering angels stood in rows upon rows, crying and weeping, as they said to one another, “Behold, one who is unique is about to slaughter, and one also unique is about to be slaughtered. Master of the universe, the oath ‘Thus shall be thy seed’ (Genesis 15:5) – what is to become of it?” The Holy One said to the angel Michael, “Why are you standing still? Do not let Abraham go on!” Then the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham,” (Genesis 22:11) twice, as one who cries out in distress, “What dreadful thing are you about to do?”

When Abraham turned his face toward the angel, the angel said again, “What are you about to do? ‘Do not lay thy hand upon the lad!’” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham asked, “Who are you?” Michael replied, “I am an angel.” Abraham: “When the Holy One told me to offer my son, He himself spoke to me; so too, if He now wishes something else, He Himself should speak to me.”

At once the Holy One flung open the firmament, as well as the thick cloud covering it, and said, “By Myself I swear” (Genesis 22:16). Abraham replied, “You have sworn, and I too swear that I will not go down from this altar until I say all that I need to say.” God: “Say it.” Abraham: “Did you not say to me, ‘Count the stars...so shall thy seed be’ (Genesis 15:5)?” The Holy One: “Yes.” Abraham: “Out of whom?” God: “Out of Isaac.” Abraham: “When you commanded me to sacrifice Isaac, I should have replied: Yesterday you told me, ‘In Isaac shall thy seed be called’ (Genesis 21:12); now You say to me, ‘Offer him there for a burnt offering’ (Genesis 22:2). Nevertheless, I restrained my impulse and did not reply as I should have done. Even now I say to you, When Isaac’s children shall sin and find themselves in distress, be You mindful on their behalf of the Binding of Isaac; let it be reckoned in Your presence as though his ash were in fact heaped upon the altar – be then filled with compassion for his children, forgive them and redeem them from their distress.” The Holy One replied, “You had your say, and now I will have Mine. Isaac’s descendants will sin in My very presence, and I will have to judge them on New Year’s Day. However, should they implore Me to seek out some merit on their behalf, and to remember on their behalf the binding of Isaac, let them blow in My presence the horn of this creature.” Abraham: “The horn of what creature?” God: “Turn around.” At once, “Abraham lifted his eyes, and looked, and behold a ram” (Genesis 22:13)

It is hard to know just where to begin my commentary on one of the most extraordinary narratives in the rabbinic canon. Perhaps at the start we would do well to note that it is Satan (!) who is responsible for removing the knife from Abraham’s hand. Abraham is quite ready to commit the act of infanticide and take Isaac’s life in direct violation of the

Jewish Law. It is therefore extraordinary that it is Satan, paradoxically, who is the one that prevents Abraham from executing this act.

We see in the Midrash that Abraham is crying profusely, hinting that there is a great miscarriage of justice here. Abraham tries to pick up the knife that Satan has thrown down, but in contrast to the Genesis text, loses his composure and wails out in pain. Quoting the first verse of Psalm 121, Abraham begins the process of confronting God with the paradoxical aspects of His command. To wit, as we have already pointed out, YHWH has assigned Isaac as the fulfillment of the promise encapsulated in the Covenant(s). How then, if Isaac is to be killed, should he be the materialization of these promises?

Folded into this dramatization are the ministering angels [Heb., *mal'akhei ha-sharet*] who line up, Busby Berkeley-style, to beseech God to stop the madness. These angels provide a link to the angel in the Genesis text (21:11) who serves to halt the killing. The Midrash reads the Biblical passages quite carefully and in a profoundly sensitive manner shores up the ambiguity inherent in the appearance of the angel in verse 11. The angel, according to this Midrash (here the angel Michael, as we have seen above), steps out of the line of angels who have already stood, row upon row, to beg God to keep His promise to Abraham and the Jewish people.

As if this was not enough, Michael then permits Abraham to approach God directly to have his say.

Abraham does not let God off the hook. He too beseeches God and reminds Him of the promise. Abraham goes back to Genesis 15:5, the site of the Covenant of the Pieces (not the Covenant of the Flesh!), and, like the proven advocate that he is, Abraham makes a logical argument against the killing of his son.

God, astonishingly, admits Abraham's point!

But here God turns the tables on Abraham (or is it that Abraham turns the tables on God?). The matter is presented with a tremendous amount of ambiguity. It seems at the surface that God does not admit His reason for demanding that Isaac be killed. Yet God does later say, "Do not let Abraham go on!" meaning that the sacrifice should not be completed. According to this Midrash it seems that Abraham and Michael have been able to rationally convince God to cancel the killing.

Abraham then attempts to extract terms of compensation from God. Seeing that the sacrifice has already been aborted, Abraham seeks to "use" the sacrifice (*sic*) in order to protect the Children of Isaac in future days. Here God balks, but soon submits to the demand. God says that He will still have to judge the Children of Isaac, but will allow them to propitiate Him with the Shofar, the Ram's Horn still used on the High Holy Days in Judaism, serving to remind God of the Akedah.

The Midrash brings us right back to the Genesis narrative of the Akedah itself. As we have read it, the Akedah-text begins with the command of Elohim, the representative of

pagan antiquity, as we have already seen in the Sons of Elohim tale. YHVH, appearing at the end of the Akedah-text, is thus placed into opposition with the figure of Elohim. As the Midrash seems to hint the command of Elohim can only be rescinded by Elohim Himself!

This issue is handled in the Midrash by having God come out to talk to Abraham. But in the Midrash, as in the Bible, God does not rescind the command! In fact, in the Midrash as in the Biblical text, the command to kill Isaac is rescinded by the angel. God in the Midrash, however, verbally approves of the angel's rescinding of the command. In the Bible God is silent. No formal indication is given by the Biblical author that the name of God has been changed in the course of the text.

In the Bible the command to kill Isaac is rescinded by the angel of YHVH, not Elohim. The Biblical text, at the very point where Isaac is spared, utilizes the other term for God, moving out of the Elohim nomenclature and back into the YHVH nomenclature.

To remain consistent with the point we made in our previous essays, the Bible attempts to illustrate the realities of the pagan past (the Jephthah text in Judges is, alas, less successful than the Akedah-text in this regard) in counter-distinction to the new realities of the YHVH-istic revival as exemplified by the Patriarch Abraham.

In the case of the Akedah, there is the mention of one of the most important elements of the pagan remnant (according to the prophet Jeremiah, still practiced in Israel and Judea at the time of the First Dispersion), but that mention is set within the framework of the YHVH-istic revolution that is initiated by Abraham and his progeny.

Therefore, the memory of the pagan past is subsumed, as I have insisted, within the triumphant march of YHVH. The Akedah is emblematic of this conception. Elohim requests a human sacrifice and YHVH rescinds it. This is what a literal reading of the Akedah-text yields.

Scholars who wish to lop off the YHVH element from the text are utterly off base regarding the literary intent of the narrative. The text's YHVH-istic component cannot be removed from the core facts of the pagan substrate; the two elements, contra the dual source Documentary Hypothesis, form a dialectical cluster that is reflected in the Midrashic revisions, which, as we have shown, do a more than adequate job at parsing the literal inconsistencies of the text.

As Maimonides has consistently argued, the purpose of the Biblical texts was to wean the Israelites away from their pagan inheritance. In this regard the Akedah fits the bill perfectly.

In addition, we are taught by the Jewish Sages that the formative dialectic inherent in the Biblical texts is expanded and fulfilled in the Midrash by rhetorically connecting the Biblical foundations to the evolutionary development of Jewish Law, Halakhah (in our

case it is the law of Shofar and its origins in the Binding of Isaac), and recontextualizing the Biblical texts on the basis of the later conceptuality of the rabbinic ethos.

The Binding of Isaac thus rounds off a series of character studies (thematically linked to the sense of names and naming that we mentioned earlier) in the Abraham saga that portrays human beings in the midst of trying circumstances. The Akedah teaches the discipline of God-worship while it emphatically undercuts the more vile elements of ancient Near Eastern paganism. The heart-rending story of Ishmael and the nightmarish story of Sodom and Gomorrah enrich this Hebrew humanism and seek to articulate the story of a world, a new world that emerged in the midst of pagan antiquity, which found a home, as Maimonides and Benamozegh have both shown, in both Christianity and Islam.

This Hebrew humanism does not seek to kill children, nor harm the innocent. This Hebrew humanism is a sensitive advocate for the brilliance and splendor of mankind in its dramatic relationship with the Almighty. It is in the very stories found in perashat Va-Yera that we see such a brilliant presentation of the grand struggle of humanity to hear the voice of God and follow His most perfect will.

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