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AND SARAH DIED

It is possible to see in the sacrificial *leitmotif* of *akedat Yitshak* a pure aberration in the deepest relationship a person should have with God. On the other hand, it is possible to see the sacrificial predicament as the paradigm for one's life with God. Which is it?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, once wrote of Abraham and the *akeda*:

“Offer your sacrifice!” That is the main command given to the person of religion. . . . The Holy One, Blessed be He, says to Abraham, “Take your son, your only one, Isaac, etc.” In other words, I demand of you the supreme sacrifice. . . . Don't fool yourself that after you heed my voice I will give you another son in place of Isaac. . . . Likewise, don't think you will be able to forget Isaac and to get him out of your mind. You will think about him every day. I want your son whom you loved and whom you will love for ever. . . . In your sleep you will cry out to Isaac, and when you wake up you will find your tent empty and abandoned. Your life will turn into a long chain of suffering of your soul. All of this notwithstanding, I demand this sacrifice.”¹

For Rav Soloveitchik, the main demand made of the person of religion is: “Offer your sacrifice!” The sacrificial act is to color the life of the religious person forever, never to be lived past, never to be overcome. According to Rav Soloveitchik, then, the *akeda leitmotif* is a *paradigm* for the religious life. And Abraham, in responding to the sacrificial call, exemplifies the ideal religious personality. Abraham becomes Sacrificial Man.

But what about Sarah? What about Mother Sarah? Of her we read: “. . . And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba . . . and Abraham came to mourn Sarah and to weep for her” (*Genesis* 23:2). The *Midrash* comments: “From where did [Abraham] come? From Mt. Moriah, for Sarah died from that pain.”² Sarah died from her pain over the *akeda*, from Abraham's obedience to what for Rav Soloveitchik is the supreme religious imperative.

But doesn't Sarah know what the supreme religious imperative is? If she knows it, is she too weak to fulfill it? The following *midrash* suggests the latter:

Abraham said, "What am I to do? if I reveal [my intention] to Sarah, *women's minds are light upon them* in small matters, how much more so in a large matter such as this! But if I don't reveal [anything] to her and steal him away, then when she doesn't see him, she will kill herself!" What did he do? He said to Sarah, "Prepare for me food and drink so that we may eat and drink and be happy." . . . While they were eating, he said to her, "You know, when I was three years old, I recognized my Creator, and this lad has grown up and has not been educated. There is one place a bit far from us where lads are instructed. I will take him and have him taught there." She replied, "Go in peace."³

In this *midrash*, Sarah must be protected from the most central of all religious imperatives lest she succumb to her weakness. And when she eventually learns of the *akeda*, she dies from her lightmindedness. Whether ignorant or weak, does Mother Sarah live in estrangement from the supreme religious sacrificial paradigm? What then of Sarah?

Unless, perhaps, the imperative to sacrifice does not stand alone—unless there exists an additional, quite different, central religious imperative. Unless we say that Abraham represents one religious ideal and Sarah another. Unless, somehow, in faith to both Sarah and Abraham, we are to live an exquisite balance between two opposing religious commands.

I

Look at the following pair of *midrashim*:

(1) When Abraham returned from Mt. Moriah, Satan was angry when he saw that he had failed to realize his desire to stop Abraham's sacrifice. What did he do? He went and said to Sarah, "Oh Sarah! Have you not heard what has happened?" She said to him, "No." So he told her, "Your old husband took the lad, Isaac, and brought him for a burnt-offering, and the lad was crying and wailing that he could not be saved." Immediately she began to cry and wail. She cried three cries corresponding to three blasts [on the *shofar*], and three wails corresponding to three ululations [of the *shofar*]. And her soul took flight and she died.⁴

(2) When Isaac returned to be with his mother, she said to him, “Where have you been, my son?” He replied, “My father took me up mountains and down valleys, and took me up one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the offering-place, and took the knife to slaughter me, and an angel called out to him [to stop].” And she said, “Woe unto my son! Were it not for the angel you would have already been slaughtered?” To which he answered, “Yes.” At that moment she screamed six times corresponding to six blasts [on the *shofar*].⁵

There are important differences between these two *midrashim*, the first a late *midrash*, the second from an earlier period: in (1), Satan confronts Sarah, in (2) it is Isaac himself. In (1), Isaac is portrayed as himself crying and wailing. In (2), this is not found. In (1), Sarah hears of no more than the immediate danger threatening her son. She does not hear of his having survived the ordeal. In (2), her son stands before her, healthy and whole. She has been told that the angel saved Isaac’s life. In (1), Sarah is recorded as having died, but not in (2).

Despite these differences, these *midrashim* have been commonly understood to share a common theme: Sarah’s wailing is the source of the sounds made on the *shofar* on *Rosh haShana*. But if so, it is hard to imagine that Sarah’s reaction to the *akeda* is a sign of her weakness or her abrogation of *the* supreme religious command. Is it thinkable that such estrangement from the paramount religious ideal should shape the sounds of the holy mitzvah of blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh haShana*? A holy mitzvah that so much reminds us of the *akeda*, which grieves Sarah to the point of death?

This difficulty is voiced by R. David Luria (1798-1855) in his commentary to the second *midrash*. He assumes that since it is Isaac who is here telling the story (and not Satan), he must have taken care to include the fact that it was *God’s* bidding that Abraham take Isaac for the sacrifice. (We should doubt whether Satan would have included this fact in his account of the same story.) And Luria finds it difficult to imagine that knowing this, Sarah should react with pain and sorrow. If this were so, how could Sarah’s wails be the basis of the sounds of the *shofar*? Luria himself offers what he considers a “weak” (“*dahuk*”) answer: that maybe Sarah’s love for her son simply overcame her piety—out of light-mindedness.⁶

We suggest a different way out of the difficulty: in the second *midrash*, at least, there breaks through to the surface of the rabbinic consciousness a different understanding of why Sarah cried and why she

died. If we appreciate fully that Sarah's cries are part of the *Rosh ha-Shana* service, we should say that Sarah did not die in weakness. She did not die in "light-mindedness." Her cry, rather, was an affirmation of a religious imperative which Abraham did not share. For Sarah and Abraham are two different kinds of religious personalities.

II: FATHER ABRAHAM

Jewish tradition identifies Abraham with the attribute of *hesed*, after the verse in *Mikha* (7:20): "Give truth to Jacob, *hesed* to Abraham." "*Hesed*" is usually translated into English as "kindness," and the *hesed* of Abraham was popularly identified with his acts of kindness.

But translating *hesed* as "kindness" expresses only an external expression of *hesed*. *Hesed* in its essence is a denial of self-interest and of self. It is the attribute of self-denial, of self-purgation, and ultimately of self-negation. It is the giving up of what Aldous Huxley calls "selfness."⁷ It is as the attribute of self-effacement that *hesed* indicates a sacrificial mode of existence and a sacrificial relation to God. For *hesed*, to come close to God means to engage in self-sacrifice. To be a religious man of *hesed* means to know God as *the One who demands sacrifice*. To be a Man of *hesed* means to be Sacrificial Man.

For that reason, paradoxically, *hesed*, as an attribute of self-sacrifice, can bring one to agree to sacrifice one's own son, as long as that sacrifice is perceived of as a sacrifice of one's own self. And this is precisely how a late *midrash* sees the *akeda*. For there is a *midrash* which has God saying to Abraham after the *akeda*: "It is as though you had sacrificed yourself before Me."⁸

Abraham is the one who endures ten trials, ten acts of self-sacrifice, on his way to God. He knows God as the One for Whose sake he must abandon family and home, and for Whose sake he must be cast into a burning oven.⁹ All of these trials are acts of *hesed*, self-sacrifice. And now Abraham faces the supreme act of *hesed*, the *akeda*, in which all of his dreams and hopes for the future are to "go up in smoke," rising heavenward in the burnt offering of Isaac. Abraham's *self*-sacrifice demands the death of his own son.

Abraham, the Man of *hesed*, is Sacrificial Man, who *defines* his relationship with God in terms of sacrifice. Look how Abraham is portrayed in the rabbinic literature:

1. God instructs Abraham to take Isaac and "raise him up for a burnt-offering" (*Genesis* 22:2). But the term for "raise up," "*ve-ha'ale-*

hu,” need not be taken to signify a demand to sacrifice Isaac. It may simply mean to “raise” Isaac up onto the altar in a symbolic gesture of sacrifice. Indeed, at least one late *midrash* asserts that God never intended that Abraham sacrifice Isaac: “‘And raise him for a burnt-offering,’ for [the purpose of] being raised up, and not for a sacrifice.”¹⁰ Thus God never changes His mind about the sacrifice of Isaac, even though it never takes place. Abraham, however, understood the word of God differently, in accordance with his own sacrificial consciousness. For Sacrificial Man, as portrayed by this *midrash* and others, the possibility of acting non-sacrificially instead of sacrificially is a *temptation*, the context of ambiguity a *trial*, the absence of sacrifice . . . a missed opportunity.

2. When Abraham raised his arm to slaughter Isaac, he did so hurriedly. So the angel had to call to him twice, “Abraham! Abraham!” to stop him.¹¹ The angel called out, “Lay not your hand upon the boy (*Genesis 22:12*).” To which, according to a *midrash*, Abraham replied:

“Who are you?” He replied to him, “An angel.” [Abraham] answered, “When He told me, ‘Take your son,’ the Holy One, Blessed be He, Himself, spoke to me. And now if He so desires, let Him tell me!” Immediately, “And an angel of God called to Abraham a second time.”¹²

And yet another *midrash*:

The angel said: “Do not bring the knife down on the boy!” [Abraham] said, “All right, so I will strangle him.” So the [angel] said, “Do nothing to him.” So Abraham replied, “I’ll take a drop of blood from him,” to which the angel answered, “Don’t do anything [*me’uma*] to him”, meaning, “Do not make a wound [*mum*].”¹³

And the following *midrash* emphasizes the sacrificial portrayal of Abraham even more starkly:

Abraham said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: “For naught You told me, ‘Take your son.’” . . . And Abraham said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: “Can I possibly descend from here without a sacrifice?”¹⁴

Abraham without a sacrifice is Abraham lost.

3. A talmudic passage has Abraham question the ambiguity of another aspect of the Divine command:

[God said to Abraham: "Take] your son," [to which Abraham replied], "I have two sons." [So God continued:] "Your only one." [To this Abraham replied], "This one [Isaac] is the only one to his mother, and this one [Ishmael] is the only one to this mother." [To this God replied:] "Which you love." [Abraham then responded:] "I love both of them." [So finally God said:] "Isaac."¹⁵

The eagerness to portray Abraham in a maximal mode of sacrificial consciousness is striking in the following comment on this *midrash* written in the name of Isaac (Itzile) of Volozhin (d. 1849) on a variant of the preceding passage:

Abraham wanted very much to offer both of his sons for sacrifices. That is why it is written, "Take your son," in the singular, and Abraham replied, "Both of them are the only one to each of their mothers." God then said, "Which you love." To which Abraham replied, "Both of them I love." Until [God] told him "Isaac" explicitly.¹⁶

Isaac of Volozhin sees Abraham's sacrificial intent as needing God's restraint, for Abraham wants God to agree to the sacrifice of both Isaac and Ishmael.¹⁷ Abraham's response to God is that since he has two sons, he will sacrifice them both. And since he loves them both, he is prepared to offer them both as burnt-offerings. God is forced to tell him that it is only Isaac he is to offer at the *akeda*.

This commentary would not be possible were it not for the tradition of sacrificial religiosity to which Isaac of Volozhin was heir. It well illustrates, by extension, the rabbinic propensity to portray Abraham with an especially ardent sacrificial consciousness in relation to God.

From these, and other *midrashim*, we see Abraham as the father of an entire spiritual orientation:

Abraham is father of the teaching of annihilation of self as the way of entering into intimate relation with God or union with God. Abraham inspires the religious ideal of self-deprivation embodied in the words, "*Kadesh atsmekha be-mutar lakh*." Abraham is father to the Medieval Christian mystics who entered upon the "Dark Night of the Soul," of sensory and spiritual deprivation for the purpose of communion with God.¹⁸ And Abraham is father to the Islamic poet who writes, "The lover [of God] is busy annihilating himself."¹⁹ And he is father of a dominant strand of Hinduism which teaches "complete renunciation" of "worldliness,"²⁰ and of the Buddhist ideal of "emptiness" of the self.²¹

In one form or another, Sacrificial Man has tended to be the dominant religious ideal of Western, and of much of Eastern, religious consciousness. Sacrificial Man transcends himself through self-negation or self-annihilation, seeking a higher good: communion with God.

III: MOTHER SARAH

If Abraham is *hesed*, Sarah is *din*. Generally, "*din*" is translated into English as "law" or "judgment." But *din* is really the principle of multiplicity, as opposed to *hesed*, which is the principle of uniformity and oneness.²² But sheer separation and multiplicity *per se* are not yet the essence of *din*. In its essence, *din* is a principle of the *appropriate validation* of each particular, limited reality within the realm of existence. *Din* demands that appropriate value be apportioned and conferred upon each self-enclosed existent. In *din* the particular is not erased or blurred by an all-embracing, over-arching goal of transcendence in which all recedes in the face of God's presence. Rather, for *din* the integrity of each particular is to be preserved by granting it its due.

This is how *din* produces separation and multiplicity: not as a principle of decomposition *per se*, but because of focus upon each and every particular. And so it is that *din* is "law" and "judgment." For law and judgment demand the appropriate response in regard to the particular. And the same *din* which proclaims, "Let the sinner die!" may also proclaim: "Let the innocent live!"

Sarah's attribute of *din* moves Sarah to demand that Ishmael be sent away, because Isaac's self-integrity is being threatened. Isaac is to become a great nation. And so is Ishmael. Indeed, Abraham does have two sons, each a single son. "Listen to Sarah," God must tell Abraham, "you have two sons who are to live out their destinies." And so Abraham sends Ishmael away with camels and riches.

The person who lives life in accordance with the attribute of *din* acknowledges the full power and meaning of each being, each moment, and each place and task. Existence in *din* means living life as a series of times, places, and tasks, each with its own self-integrity and its own meaning. It is *din* that composed our prayer of thanksgiving for "Your wonders and goodness at every moment."

Sarah as *din* is mother to an entire spiritual orientation: Whereas Father Abraham's God calls him to the "endless" canopy of stars above and to the "sand" along the edges of the seas, Mother Sarah sees eternity in a single grain of sand. Mother Sarah is progenitor of all spirits who

feel closest to God in single concrete moments of sheer miracle and wonder: when a child is born, or when there is love, or when one has fulfilled even God's smallest commandment. Sarah experiences the closeness of the Divine in the very breath she breathes, knowing the presence of God when opening her eyes in the early morning hours and whispering, half to herself, "I give thanks before thee, my living Majesty, for having returned my soul to me, in compassion. Great is Your faithfulness." She rejoices at the return of her soul, daily, with all of its blemishes and all of its defects. She does not pray for self-negation. She lives in celebration, not annihilation.

Sarah is mother of the spiritual consciousness embodied in the proclamation, "In all your ways, know Him (Proverbs 3:7)."

And it is precisely because Sarah has the capacity to value the present and the particular, that she is judged by Abraham as "light-minded," in danger of ignoring what for him is the larger picture, and of capitulating to the emotional coloring of the present. Abraham, the Sacrificial Man of *hesed*, not himself blessed with the power of *din*, is suspicious of this power, perhaps does not quite understand it, and so expects the worst from Sarah.

And in turn, Sarah has reason to be suspicious of Abraham. For Abraham's attribute of *hesed* invites its own dangers, its own vulnerabilities, and its own dismal failures. For *hesed* invites the danger of "heavy-mindedness." "Heavy-mindedness" would be *hesed* degenerated into sole preoccupation with the transcendent, *hesed* in danger of failing to grant full value to what stands before God in all of its specificity. "Heavy-mindedness" is in grave danger of turning its back on the world in the name of extinction of self or mystical withdrawal. "Heavy-mindedness" is in grave danger of losing its humanity.

Heavy-mindedness believes, in accordance with the plain meaning of a *mishna*, that one who interrupts his study of Torah to comment on the beauty of a tree deserves death. *Din* believes, along with a hasidic interpretation of that *mishna*, that a person who thinks that praising the beauty of a tree while studying Torah constitutes an *interruption*, is "deserving of death."²³

Isaac, too, is *din*: Isaac does not share Abraham's sacrificial personality. Isaac only *acquiesces* in the sacrifice. He does not participate in it as Sacrificial Man. It is only when challenged by Ishmael's taunts—that Ishmael endured circumcision at an age when he could have resisted, but Isaac did not—that Isaac declares: "If the Holy One, Blessed Be He, were to tell my father, 'Sacrifice your son!' *I would not resist.*"²⁴

In Abraham and Sarah, therefore, we confront two quite different

spiritual modes of existence, *hesed* and *din*, each expressive of holiness and sanctity, each vulnerable to excesses and failures of its own. They are two spiritual orientations, sometimes one of them commanding the soul to the exclusion of the other, but ideally held together, somehow, in exquisite tension and balance in our life before God, as, for example, when we blow the *shofar* on *Rosh haShana*.

IV: THE RAM'S HORN

A *midrash* relates that God says: "When I judge them, they shall make sure to take the *shofar* and to blow the *shofar* before Me. And I will recall for their sake the binding of Isaac, and will acquit them in judgment."²⁵

This *midrash* prescribes the recipe for receiving forgiveness on *Rosh haShana*. The Children of Israel are to do *two* things: *take* the *shofar*, and *blow* the *shofar*. Now, the reference to the *taking* of the *shofar* seems entirely superfluous. After all, the mitsvah consists solely of the production of the sounds. The very *taking* of the *shofar* in hand has no more significance than, say, buying or making one. Why, then, does the *midrash* speak of two acts we are to do: one the very *taking* of the *shofar*, and only the second the blowing of the *shofar*?

The explicit reference by the *midrash* to the *taking* of the *shofar* suggests that there are two distinct aspects ("*dinim*") to the recipe for forgiveness on *Rosh haShana*. One aspect is the very act of taking the *shofar* in hand, of grasping the object in one's hand. The second aspect of the recipe for forgiveness is the actual blowing of the *shofar* which ensues. The very *taking* of the *shofar* corresponds to the act of Abraham at the *akeda*, when he *took* his son and went with great devotion to the sacrifice, to kill his son, his only son, Isaac. And it corresponds to Abraham's sacrifice of the ram, satisfying his sacrificial devotion to God. Abraham, in the end, only *took* his son. He never sacrificed him. But the *sound* of the *shofar* belongs to Mother Sarah, who wailed and died upon hearing what had transpired.

The ram's horn, the horn of Abraham's ram, represents the sacrificial perseverance of Abraham, a perseverance undefeated in spirit: "Master of the Universe," Abraham once said, "Look upon the blood of this ram as though it were the blood of Isaac my son, and its innards as though they were the innards of Isaac."²⁶ In *taking* the ram's horn, therefore, we present before God the sacrificial merits of Father Abraham, and the sacrificial merits of his innocent children, commemorating

their readiness throughout the ages to sacrifice themselves and all that is dear to them for the Holy Name of God. In taking the *shofar*, we children of Abraham arouse *hesed*, the sacrificial consciousness, in the face of God's judgment, God's *din*, in the Days of Judgment.

In *sounding* the ram's horn, however, we children of Sarah are engaged in a very different spiritual enterprise. For we are bringing before the Heavenly Throne a different religious consciousness, one which does not participate in the sacrificial and self-negational. We children of Sarah turn to God pleading that He rescind His demands for sacrifice that have accompanied us through our long and sorrowful history. And we do so with the wails and cries of our Mother Sarah. We confront God's judgment (*din*) within the attribute of *din* itself. We ask God to recognize the validity of Sarah's agony and to spare her children.

The *shofar* thus incorporates a twin spiritual consciousness, one of *hesed* and one of *din*, two religious ideals, one embodied in the sacrificial life of Father Abraham, Sacrificial Man, and the other embodied in the life of Mother Sarah, who died from her pain over the binding of Isaac.

Mother Sarah has bequeathed to us the power to wail and cry through the very same ram's horn which we brandish as a reminder of Abraham's sacrificial devotion. She gave to us her death, to be recalled again and again in sorrow, together with the celebration of the sacrificial consciousness of our Father Abraham.²⁷

NOTES

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in Pinhas Hakohen Peli, ed., "*BeSod ha-Yahid ve-haYahad*," (Jerusalem, Orot Press), pp. 427-428.
2. *Genesis Rabba*, Chapter 58, section 5. Hereafter, chapter and section numbers will be cited by chapter number, followed by a colon, followed by section number. Citations for *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) will give the weekly portion followed by section number.
3. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *Bereshit* 22. My emphasis.
4. *Pirkei deRabi Eliezer*, p. 72b.
5. *Leviticus Rabba* 20:2. Traditional commentators identify the six cries with the three wails and three ululations of the previous *midrash*.
6. See the commentary of David Luria to the second *midrash* in *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer*. This reply would make Sarah lightminded to a startling degree in the second *midrash*. After all, there Isaac stands before her whole and healthy telling her about what had happened!
7. I have borrowed this term from Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (Harper: New York, 1945), pp. 36 and 49.
8. *Midrash Lekah Tov*, page 50. This *midrash* is apparently a play on the word

- “*yehidkha*,” “Your only one,” since “*yehida*” is a name for the soul itself in rabbinic literature. See *Numbers Rabba* 17:2—“‘*Yehidkha*,’ that is your soul, for it is called ‘*yehida*.’”
9. See *Pesahim* 118a and *Genesis Rabba* 34:9.
 10. *Midrash Lekah Tov*, ed. S. Buber, (Jerusalem, 5720), vol. 1, p. 49.
 11. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *VaYera* 23.
 12. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *VaYera* 23. Compare *Midrash Pesikta Rabati* (Vienna, 5640), p. 171.
 13. *Genesis Rabba* 56:6.
 14. P. 204. My emphasis. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *Numbers, Shelah* 14.
 15. *Sanhedrin* 89b. The passage ends with the words, “In order that Abraham not become deranged from the command.” A variant of this passage is to be found in *Genesis Rabba* 55:7. In the latter, the passage ends with, “And why did [God] not reveal to him immediately that [He meant Isaac?], in order to make him beloved [to Abraham] and in order to give Abraham reward for each address from God.”
 16. See: *Pe Kadosh*, edited by Yaakov Kapelovitz and printed in the back of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Ha’amek Davar, Bereshit* (Jerusalem: El ha-Mekorot, 5727), p. 14.
 17. Ironically, Abraham’s wish has come true, in a way, in the fusion of the Jewish teaching that Isaac was to be sacrificed and the Islamic teaching that it was Ishmael who was to be the sacrifice.
 18. For a classic statement of this spiritual understanding, see: John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.
 19. Muhammad ‘Urfi Shirazi, quoted by Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 1975), p. 21.
 20. For an example of the Hindu conception, see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1964), pp. 641, 675, 853, and 862, and *passim*.
 21. For Buddhist texts stating the ideal of the emptying out of the self, see: Edward Conze, *et al*, *Buddhist Texts Through The Ages* (Harper: New York, 1964), pp. 90-92, 179.
 22. See *Zohar*, Part 1, page 17b.
 23. Based on a popular hasidic interpretation of the *mishna* in *Avot* (3:7): “He who is going on the road and interrupts the study [of Torah] to say, “How lovely is this tree . . . it is as though he is deserving of death.”
 24. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *VaYera*, Sec. 18.
 25. *Midrash Pesikta Rabati* (Vienna, 5640), page 166.
 26. *Genesis Rabba*, 56:9.
 27. I wish to thank the editors of *Tradition* for their helpful comments on the submitted manuscript. It should be noted that my treatment of *hesed* and *din* and their application to Abraham and Sarah, while based on the essential teachings concerning their respective attributes, departs from standard interpretations for the sake of revealing yet another face of God’s infinite teaching.