

BOOK REVIEW

Aaron Koller, *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought* (Jewish Publication Society, 2020), 264 pages.

Reviewed by
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“The average Jew, from antiquity and on,” Aaron Koller writes, “could not escape the Akedah” (xxiv). The 22-verse narrative, as evidenced and perpetuated through its pervasive embedding in the basic structures of Jewish life and thought across time and space, has always been and will always be a source of Jewish meaning. But if it is simply a fact that the Akedah will mean something to us, Koller argues, *what* it means to us, within the constraints of the text and the facticity of Jewish life and thought, is ultimately up to us. Koller’s *Unbinding Isaac* is an extraordinarily efficient and effective effort to call us to, and equip us for, a reading that is “both textually cohesive and ethically defensible” (xxxii). What emerges, Koller argues, is the “primary radical lesson” that “one’s religious experience must never come through sacrificing someone else” (xxxii).

Following an agile and satisfyingly thorough jaunt through the history of Jewish Akedah interpretation and adaptation—prominently including its invocation in mandating the preemptive slaughter of children in face of crusader mobs and in grounding the early-Zionist readiness to kill and be killed for the land—Koller turns to the point at which, in his estimation, the trajectory went off course. It was nineteenth-century nation-state liberalism, with its division between the public and private realms and monopolization of the public by the state, that explains the emphasis on radical individualism, inwardness, and subjectivity which came to characterize modern Akedah interpretation. Jews were invited into the public realm as citizens, but the purported Christianity of that public realm could not satisfy the religious needs of some Christians, like Soren Kierkegaard, and in any case certainly could not satisfy the religious needs of almost any Jew. Since public forms of satisfyingly authentic Christianity or Judaism would inevitably come into conflict with the state—to be public is to make claims on other persons, claims which can conflict with the claims of the state—the only choice left for authentic religion was to turn inward. “Let it be,” Koller summarizes, “a matter of ‘faith,’ of ‘conscience,’ rather than community or law” (52). In this way religion becomes safe from the competing pressures of public citizenship.

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Koller's principal charge is that the disengagement from others entailed by this turn inward has produced an ethically irresponsible religious posture which leads to the illicit harm of others on religious grounds. He points to the refusal of certain religious organizations to provide contraceptives to their employees as part of their employee benefits and parents' refusal, on religious grounds, to vaccinate their children before sending them to school. In a recently published and much discussed opinion column, which served as a teaser to ideas he discusses in the book, he sees this pattern in discrimination against homosexuals justified by appeal to halakha.¹ Drawing on the work of Ronit Irshai, Koller diagnoses this posture as underlain by "Akedah Theology"—a mode of thinking, derived largely from Kierkegaard, in which the Akedah, enjoying inflated gravity within the economy of Jewish thought, is interpreted as mandating that "a divine command must be obeyed even if it is immoral, not because God must really be moral, but because divine commands take precedence over morality" (xxxii). This is, Koller argues, both morally pernicious and decisively un-Jewish.

It was the modern, Protestant Kierkegaard, Koller recounts, who characterized the Akedah as exhibiting the "teleological suspension of the ethical," identifying Abraham's merit in his conscious willingness to commit the flagrantly immoral act of murder for the sake of something purportedly higher than morality. This figuring of Abraham is not, Kierkegaard stresses, to be confused with that of the "tragic hero," who, like Agamemnon or Jephthah sacrifices his child for the sake of military victory. The tragic hero can justify their sacrifice to others, and to their victim, in terms understandable and acceptable to all—it is what all agree simply must be done for the sake of the nation, and so all individuals have a duty to the collective to do what must be done without regard to personal cost. Understanding "the ethical" as comprising those duties applying to generic members of society as such, Kierkegaard thus sees the tragic hero's sacrifice as confirming rather than suspending the ethical. By contrast, when Abraham raises the knife over his son it is in the service of a cause only he can possibly understand: Even if God really did speak to Abraham demanding this sacrifice, it remains that God spoke to Abraham *and no one else*, and so any justification God's demand might offer was available to Abraham alone. To obey what he took to be God's command, therefore, was to elevate a fundamentally private, personal commitment over any and all claims of society. For an individual to submit themselves with equanimity to an act of violence in

¹ Aaron J. Koller, "On Halakha and LGBT," *The Yeshiva University Observer* (September 10, 2019).

service of a cause no one else can understand or accept is for Kierkegaard the glory, because the dreadfulness, of faith.

Koller identifies parallels to Kierkegaard's reading in the Hatam Sofer and Malbim. He cites Malbim, for instance, writing that "This was the core principle in this test, that he did God's command that went *against his intellect* and *against the right and the just and the good ways of God*, and still did not second-guess God" (60, emphasis in original).² This, Malbim says, is why Abraham left his servants behind before seeking to commit the act—he was "ashamed" for them to see him commit an act he could not justify, and moreover he "did not want them to learn to do likewise." Like Kierkegaard, Koller says, Malbim's response to the liberal state's monopolization of the public sphere was to render religion in categorically private terms, with the Akedah's Abraham as principle exemplar. "To be a Jew in Europe, without a *kehillah*, had to be a function of personal faith" (63). And the achievement of personal faith, it is thought, entails an act violently expressing the rupture between individual and society.

Malbim did not read Kierkegaard, but Yeshayahu Leibowitz and R. Joseph Soloveitchik, two towering figures of twentieth-century Jewish thought, certainly did, and Koller sets himself to exhibit and diagnose the reverberations of Kierkegaard's reading in their respective writings. Leibowitz, who enthusiastically employs the Akedah in championing a categorical divorce between all morality and human interests on the one hand and authentic religion on the other, largely drops out of Koller's picture—Leibowitz is simply an "ultimately unsatisfying thinker" (72). Soloveitchik thus becomes Koller's primary antagonist. Loneliness, submission, and sacrifice are for Soloveitchik "not just the meaning of rare but exemplary acts, such as the Akedah" but, more radically, "the meaning and content of *religious life in general*" (76, emphasis in original). This is the "paradoxical heroism," in Soloveitchik's phrase, of the bridegroom who "gallantly, like a chivalrous knight" obediently refrains at the last moment, in deference to halakha, from consummating his marriage with his suddenly menstruating bride. And it is, on Soloveitchik's view, the basis of the everyday experience of statutory prayer: "Man surrenders himself to God. He approaches the awesome God and the approach expresses itself in the sacrifice and Akedah of oneself" (80).³ Faith, for Soloveitchik, means the daily, self-sacrificial submission of the lonely individual to the divine will.

² See Malbim to Genesis 22.

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Thoughts on Prayer" [Hebrew] in *Ha-Darom* 47 (1978), 94–95 (translation is Koller's); see also Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 38–54.

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In addition to pointing out that the emphasis on solitary, inner self-submission relies on a distinctively Christian, rather than Jewish understanding of religion, Koller presses the pointed charge that Soloveitchik's reading "elides what is perhaps the most important fact that we must keep in mind about the actual Akedah: the sacrificer was not the sacrificed. Abraham did not 'take the knife to slaughter [his own] existence'.... It was the sacrifice of *another*" (82). Transforming the Akedah narrative into a supposed exemplification of *self*-sacrifice in submission to divine command, Koller argues, renders us liable to follow the Akedah's example in the sense of seeking religious fulfillment through the sacrifice of others. And indeed, "this elision in Soloveitchik's thought has had damaging consequences on subsequent Jewish thought" (82). Koller's task is to undo the alleged damage.

There are those, Koller says, like David Hartman who, in explicit opposition to Soloveitchik, recommend simply suppressing the Akedah's currency in Jewish thought and emphasizing in its stead the ethically fruitful story of Abraham's protest against God's destruction of Sodom (102). Koller judges this unsatisfying, however: What we need, he says, is not to reject but to rethink the Akedah.

The first move is to point out the "profound anachronism in the notion that the commandment to sacrifice Isaac would have been perceived as grossly unethical" (114). Drawing on a wealth of evidence, Koller shows that child sacrifice made religious sense in the societies in which Abraham found himself, and in fact continued to make good sense even "by the logic of biblical religion" (125). If worshipers want to demonstrate as unambiguously as possible their true devotion to God, and God desires confirmation that His worshipers are indeed truly, unambiguously devoted, then offering so precious a possession as a child is an appealing method. It is no contradiction, Koller points out, "for a person to want something but to *not* want it even more" (139). And so indeed, he says, even as God strictly prohibits and condemns child sacrifice, "there is a part of the biblical God that does desire that worshipers offer their children in sacrifice" (125).⁴

It is thus a deep error, Koller argues, to read the Akedah as concerning Abraham's submission to a suspension of the ethical—Abraham would not have judged the command to sacrifice Isaac wrong, and so his submission

⁴ Rav Kook similarly argues that the impetus to child sacrifice proceeds from "the recognition hidden in the depths of the human heart that the Divine is more precious than all else, and all that is valued and beloved is as nothing compared to it" (*Iggerot ha-Ra'aya*, vol. II, p. 43).

to the sacrifice would not have involved submission to the doing of a wrong. For Koller, then, what this part of the Akedah narrative straightforwardly teaches is that God indeed desires that we sacrifice “our children, our only ones, whom we love”—our most precious possession—and that our forefather Abraham was indeed sufficiently devoted to God to do so.

When the angel says to Abraham on the mountaintop “Do not stretch your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him,” what has changed, Koller argues, is thus not God’s will but Abraham’s *understanding* of God’s will. Koller suggests that it is not accidental that in detailing the various gradations in accuracy and fullness of prophetic perception, Maimonides says that the eleventh and highest level is that in which the prophet “sees an angel speaking to him, like Abraham at the time of the Akedah” (133, citing *Guide* II:45). The seventh level, by contrast, is that in which the prophet “sees in a prophetic dream,” which Koller argues would seem to fit God’s initial command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (134). The two contrasting commands are thus seen to represent a progressive development in Abraham’s degree of perception. “To put this bluntly,” Koller concludes, “the first prophecy was flawed. It was not *false*, but it was incomplete. The later prophecy was *more* true; it reflected a fuller and therefore more accurate understanding of God’s will” (134). Abraham was right to perceive that God desired Isaac’s sacrifice, but he was more right to see that God in fact does not want a child killed in God’s name.

Inspired by Levinas, Koller explains that what the shift from the seventh to the eleventh level of prophecy here offers is the truth that children are not, as they must be if they are to be suitable sacrifices, their parents’ possessions. They are, rather, autonomous individuals, and “If the child is granted status as an autonomous individual... child sacrifice is simply murder” (147). God truly desires our most precious possession, and there is, apparently, a level on which our children fit that description. What we are to see through the Akedah narrative’s second half, however, is the deeper truth that children are persons unto themselves, and so “children, like all other human beings, cannot be mere adjuncts in someone else’s religious experience.” It is in coming to see Isaac not as a thing but as *Isaac*—in hearing and heeding Isaac’s voice as essential—that this revelation is achieved. Koller concludes: “And so this is the ethical teaching of the Akedah: as much as it is enticing to do so, one person’s religious fulfillment cannot come through harm to another. The trial of Abraham cannot involve the murder of Isaac” (147).

It is important that what Koller calls the ethical teaching of the Akedah appears at this point as a *premise* rather than a conclusion: It is precisely because we already know that one person’s religious fulfillment cannot

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come through harm to another that the revelation that children qualify as autonomous persons yields the syllogistic result that we ought not to sacrifice them.⁵ Even at the seventh level of prophecy, after all, Abraham (in Koller's reading) surely would not have believed it was God's will that he slaughter Eshkol or Mamre upon a mount—it was only the specific application of the principle to children that was in question. This placement in the logical machinery does not betray any weakness in the principle. Just the opposite: it is indeed so strong that it can be simply taken for granted. The self-evidence of the principle, however, is bought at the expense of its mere formality. As the syllogism Koller ascribes to Abraham makes clear, it always requires for its application the further substantive judgment that the persons in question *are persons*. And this, as the need for the syllogism in the first place makes clear, can be less than clear. As Americans know well, a commitment to the equal treatment of all persons, no matter how apparently sincere, does not in itself guarantee that we will treat all persons equally, because it does not in itself guarantee that we will indeed see all persons as persons. Koller's principle, vital and indeed certain as it may be, requires supplementation if it is to offer the moral guidance Koller hopes it will offer.

It can likewise be unclear in a given case whether a practice causing harm to other persons is indeed done merely on the basis of idiosyncratic, personal religious fulfillment and so is indeed in violation of the principle—this will, in fact, generally be denied. People claim, rather, that they are doing what, as an objective matter, *ought to be done*. For his part, Koller argues that this claim will always be subject to the rejoinder that while the believer may believe their practice to be objectively correct, *that* belief, insofar as it is indeed distinctively religious as opposed to scientific or rational, is merely subjective. “My faith cannot be proved,” he says (153). “*Halakhah* may be objective, but the acceptance of this claim is subjective” (95). But this argument presupposes a modern, liberal, and distinctively Protestant-Christian understanding of religious obligation as exclusively a matter of inward, subjective faith. This is Kierkegaard's view.

Catholics arguing against regulations requiring that they provide contraceptives to their employees, by contrast, do not argue that their religious fulfillment ought to be allowed to come through harm to another. What they argue, rather, is that this is not merely a matter of their idiosyncratic personal religious fulfillment but a matter of interpersonally,

⁵ As Koller summarizes the argument, “The murder of one person by another, against the victim's will, as an act of devotion, cannot be tolerated. Once children are seen as individuals, the same conclusion holds” (147).

objectively valid right and wrong. They believe it is *true* that contraceptives are immoral, and as such they believe that everyone can be brought to see that truth through universally valid argumentation. Precisely because morality and religion are not separate for them, as Koller says is likewise the authentic biblical and Jewish view (109), their religious claims can be moral claims as well. These claims may be wrong and the arguments in support of them unsound, but showing that requires engagement with their claims and arguments. Furthermore, they precisely do not claim the prerogative to deny contraception to others on the grounds that we ought to safeguard the “fundamentally personal nature of faith” and the “incommunicability of religious devotion” (xxxiii). The claim, rather, is that Catholics form a *community* of faith, and that as a community they ought to be allowed the space to operate their own institutions in accordance with their own values. To deny this claim is not to deny a set of individuals their respective opportunities at faithful religious devotion but to deny a community the fullness of its life in the public world. And since communities are fundamentally of the public world—they exist only insofar as they are public—it requires, to some degree, that this community dissolve itself. That may well be the right thing to do. But Koller has more work to do in order to show that, and that work will surely require the delicate balancing of harms and benefits, and the messy work of mutual accommodation, rather than an appeal to an all-purpose moral trump-card.

It bears noting that Jewish thought is powerfully attuned to the epistemological problem Koller raises. As Koller notes, the elevated level of prophecy Maimonides ascribes to Abraham at the Akedah is the highest among prophets *other than Moses*. The unique clarity and directness of Moses’ prophecy is already a crucial theme in the Torah (Numbers 12:6–8, Deuteronomy 34:10), as is the claim that the entirety of Israel participated in Moses’ reception of the commandments at Sinai: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after’” (Exodus 19:9). The reason this is critical, as numerous *Rishonim* argue, is that without direct communal corroboration of Moses’ prophecy, the Torah taught through Moses’ prophecy would be perpetually vulnerable to challenge, emendation, and supersession by rival prophetic claims.⁶ It is thus no accident that post-Mosaic prophets cannot, *Hazal* say, legitimately propound new law—“These are the commandments: from now on no prophet may innovate a new one” (*Shabbat* 104a). As Koller says, one person’s

⁶ See Ramban, Rabbeinu Bahya, Seforno, as well as *Ha-Ketav veba-Kabbalah* and *Ha’amek Davar*, *ad loc.*

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perception of a commandment cannot constitute a commandment for another person. Even legitimate prophets, therefore, cannot proclaim publicly valid law.

The Torah, however, is indeed claimed, on the basis of Moses' perfect prophetic perception and public corroboration of that perfect prophetic perception, to be publicly valid law. Thus, when a halakhic authority is asked, for instance, how we ought or ought not to apply the Torah's prohibition on homosexuality in the contemporary world, the proper ground of their response will not be their own personal spirituality, as Koller implies, but rather their community's form of life. Right or wrong, harmful or not, it is a question not of private edification but of public law. And, as Aristotle put it, "All law is universal, but about some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which shall be correct" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 5:10). Or, as Maimonides elaborates the idea, the law is "directed only toward the things that occur in the majority of cases and pays no attention... to the damage occurring to the unique human being because of this way of determination and because of the legal character of governance" (*Guide*, III:34). It is in the nature of law to harbor the potential for violence and injustice against some of the individual persons to which it is applied. To demand that the law be such as to never do violence against any individual, therefore, is to demand the dissolution of law. And to demand that a public community dissolve its law is to demand that the community dissolve itself as a public community.

If we cannot simply rule out the community's violence to individuals, however, we can certainly mitigate it. As Aristotle himself says, where in a given case the law issues an injustice the judge ought to employ discretionary equity in place of strictly formalistic legal application. In Koller's terms, this would mean embracing the second half of the Akedah's higher perspective in coming to see that, the valid reasons to do so notwithstanding, the individual ought not to be harmed for the sake of the collective. The point, however, is that achieving this understanding will require ongoing work to achieve—one does not simply start at the eleventh stage of prophecy. And while the question of whether to sacrifice Isaac arguably admitted of a simple, readily available solution—Abraham could simply lower the knife and substitute the ram in Isaac's place—the path to protecting individuals from the law's violence without dissolving the law altogether will often be hard to discern. Koller's point would be that, far from grounds for resignation, the Akedah ought to be our impetus to do that work of discernment.

Soloveitchik, for his part, never suggests anything like the view that we should allow others to be harmed for the sake of our own religious

fulfillment. As Koller notes (91–92), it is the explicit burden of much of Soloveitchik’s writing precisely to combat the dangers represented by Kierkegaardian subjectivism, dangers which Soloveitchik says were responsible for the Holocaust. Referring to Kierkegaard’s among others, Soloveitchik writes that “such views have brought chaos and disaster to our world, which is drowning in its blood.”⁷ Elsewhere he elaborates the charge more fully: “Subjective faith, lacking commands and laws... cannot stand fast.... The terrible Holocaust of World War II proves this. All those who speak of love stood silent and did not protest. Many of them even took part in the extermination of millions of human beings.”⁸ The concern here is not in the first place that individuals will, on the basis of subjective faith, initiate evil, but rather that the posture of subjective faith is liable to render one *indifferent* to the evils perpetrated in the society around them. The subjectivist believers *stood silent and did not protest* against their community; some went so far as to join their community in its evil works. In their self-absorption, in other words, they failed to realize themselves as morally responsible individuals over and against their community and its wicked laws.

What is needed, for Soloveitchik, is to ensure that we never fail to hear “the sighs of orphans” or “the groans of the destitute.”⁹ A merely public persona, however, will necessarily engage with others only on the plane of abstract, generic, liberal-utilitarian exchange. “The natural community fashioned by Adam the first is a work community, committed to the successful production, distribution, and consumption of goods.”¹⁰ Excluded by the logic of such a community is attention to the particularities of individual suffering. Genuine relatedness, companionship, and community, on the other hand, require acting against this utilitarian logic. We do this through the individualizing labor of personal sacrifice and submission: “Adam was overpowered and defeated—and in defeat he found his companion.”¹¹ We are able to hear the irreducibly personal voice of the other—that voice which cannot be assimilated into the generic

⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 164, n. 147.

⁸ Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek* (Ktav, 2008), 55.

⁹ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 41. It is precisely the worldview of the halakhic man which can accomplish this, and serves as a corrective to the generic “religious man,” whose glance is “fixed upon the higher realms [and] forgets all too frequently the lower realms and becomes ensnared in the sins of ethical inconsistency and hypocrisy.”

¹⁰ Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday Press, 2006), 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

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machinery of utilitarian mass society—to the extent that we are able to sacrifice our own will to conquest.

In attending to the cries of the oppressed, we are brought to translate our subjectivity into real-world responsibility. There are two stages in this process. First, “ethical subjectivity is converted into propositions, norms, values.”¹² Just as an artist translates her inner spiritual life into a concrete work of art,¹³ we must translate our inner spiritual life into determinate, binding moral judgments of right and wrong—that this or that state of affairs in the world is *wrong*, this or that state of affairs *right*. Second, the ethical person must “not only tend to mold a clear norm with his subjective duty-consciousness, but to realize this norm in concrete life.”¹⁴ That is, we must not only make judgments but engage in the open-ended work of reordering the world according to the law those judgments dictate. This, for Soloveitchik, is the work of *prophecy*: “Halakhic man takes up his stand in the midst of the concrete world, his feet planted firm the ground of reality, and he looks about and sees, listens and hears, and publicly protests against the oppression of the helpless, the defrauding of the poor, the plight of the orphan.... The actualization of the ideals of justice and righteousness is the pillar of fire which halakhic man follows.”¹⁵ In doing so, halakhic man “approaches the level of that godly man, the prophet.”¹⁶

Koller does not say much in support of his claim that Soloveitchik’s promotion of the Akedah as a guiding model for self-sacrificial submission to halakhic constraints has had damaging consequences for subsequent Jewish thought, and the proposition is hard to judge in empirical terms. It is certainly plausible, though, that such thinking could support personal halakhic practice blind to its harmful effects on others.¹⁷ It is clear in any case that halakha can entail harm to individuals, and so Soloveitchik’s valorization of halakhic submission plausibly has encouraged such harm. The argument I am making, however, is that if Soloveitchik has been read as a champion of a form of personal piety for which the suffering of others does not count, then he has been read at best incompletely. It is a basic axiom of his thought that our religious mindset must not allow so much as the possibility of failure to hear the cries of the

¹² Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind* (The Free Press, 1986), 67.

¹³ See *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70

¹⁵ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷ This phenomenon is captured already by *Hazal* in the figure of the *hasid shoteh* (“pious fool”) who, for instance, would refuse to rescue a drowning woman so as to avoid gazing upon her (*Nedarim* 21b).

oppressed, and it is his view that the posture of self-sacrificial submission is in fact vital to that end. Beyond ensuring proper score-keeping with respect to Soloveitchik's record, I have dwelt on this line of Soloveitchik's thinking toward the end of clarifying and strengthening Koller's positive project.

Halakhic man is indeed bound to a form of devotion liable to cause unjustified harm to individuals. Not every adherent of halakha is a halakhic man, and so not every adherent of halakha will succeed in hearing the voice of the oppressed, discerning what justice requires, and taking action to secure it. For Soloveitchik, as for Koller, to do this work, as we must, is to strive for greater fullness in hearing the commanding voice of God.¹⁸

A final note. Koller's stated desire to sustain both halves of the Akedah narrative notwithstanding, Koller sees the first half, in which Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, as offering no moral import—"The second revelation is the one that has normative value" (139). Koller takes for granted that in modernity, unlike the Ancient Near East, we all know that child-sacrifice is categorically unacceptable, and that nothing could tell us otherwise. The fact is, however, that we send our children off to kill and be killed in wars, some of which are more noble than others. Some of us live in Israel, knowing that some of our children will kill and be killed for the privilege; our ancestors raised their children Jewish, as do we, knowing the realities of history. We ask police officers to protect our communities with potentially lethal force, knowing that some number of these officers, and some number of the persons they are charged to protect, will be killed in that cause. We ask the state organs of justice to punish and imprison those who threaten us, knowing this will wreck the lives of some number of innocents. We participate in a capitalist market economy which enslaves, exploits, and endangers, when it does not outright kill, the vulnerable. At this writing, the United States is engaged in a public debate as to the number of persons, especially the elderly, we ought to sacrifice for the sake of the economy.

Right or wrong, all of these sacrifices are widely taken as justified on the grounds of absolute, categorically non-negotiable necessity—grounds bearing evident normative import which, while underdetermined by liberal, individualistic rationality, cannot be neatly dismissed as simply off

¹⁸ For a more thorough presentation of this interpretation of Soloveitchik, see my "Joseph Soloveitchik as Weimar Intellectual and Prophetic Ethicist," forthcoming in *Jewish Quarterly Review*.

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the table.¹⁹ These sacrifices are, as it were, the commands of the Lord. To refuse or to mitigate these sacrifices, therefore, requires a justification with still greater authority than the will of God. It requires, that is, a *higher* perception of God's will. Seeking that higher perception, Koller's work so vitally teaches us, is a mission we can and must pursue, and pursue indefinitely. Martin Buber once wrote that "Life, in that it is life, necessarily entails injustice." Just so, however, "we are given the grace of not having to do more injustice than absolutely necessary."²⁰ Where precisely this line lies is rarely clear, and so we must be ever vigilant and proactive in discerning what truly is, and is not, "absolutely necessary." To do so is to seek an ever-deeper grasp of God's will, just as our forefather Abraham did long ago upon the mount.

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¹⁹ The ongoing centrality to liberal polities of decidedly non-liberal forms of violence is argued for, with specific reference to the Akedah, in Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

²⁰ Martin Buber, *A Land for Two Peoples* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 169, 170.