

JUDAISM

Jewish Uses of the Akedah—Genesis 22:1-19

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This article comprises a rabbinic analysis of one of the most significant and traumatic episodes in the life of *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, and certainly significant for his son, *Yitzchak* (Isaac). Known in Hebrew as the *Akedat Yitzchok*, the Binding of Isaac is found in the book of Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1 through 19. This is one of the most well-known and well-discussed texts of the Hebrew Bible. The point of view of this article includes both rabbinic interpretation and scholarly analysis, but the emphasis is on rabbinic interpretation. As such, the locus of the discussion is within the synagogue and the Jewish community. While this article doesn't claim to be exhaustive, it is my intention that the discourse peels away various layers of meaning to show how the text was used by Jews through the ages.

HOW THE RABBIS STUDY THE TEXT

The expression “peeling the layers” suggests the method of Torah study of the Jewish mystics. Imagining an onion, let the outer layer represent the Peshitta or the simple meaning of the text. It is the meaning we perceive from reading the text carefully, noting issues such as spelling and word choice. Peeling away this first layer uncovers the second, called *Remez* or the allusion. This is the awareness that there is something more in the text than initially meets the eye. It often surfaces when we compare two or more texts and it points us in a new and unique direction. The third layer is the *Drash* or the layer of explanation and interpretation. Because *Drash* is driven not only by the first two layers but also by the times and needs of the Jewish people, the layer of *Drash* is the deepest,

richest layer. What's more, it is always growing as each generation confronts the text in new and different ways depending upon its particular circumstance. Finally we arrive at the deepest layer, the layer known as *Sod*—the “Foundation” or the “Secret” inner source. This is the innermost part of the “truth” where we find the secrets of creation.¹

HOW DO JEWS STUDY THE TEXT?

Dr. Norman Cohen taught these rules for Torah study.²

1. Read the text slowly, paying attention to each word, its spelling and its meaning.
2. Raise (and verbalize) every single question you have about the text. Be in dialogue with the text. Don't be afraid to raise the human questions—they are mirrors of ourselves.
3. Isolate one, specific moment in the text.
4. Look at the text and allow the characters who remain silent in the text to speak.
5. Use the larger context of the Bible to help understand the moment.

In this way, we become active readers who engage the text and the scholars who have previously engaged the text. We are able to “converse,” as it were, with the great rabbis of the past and use their illumination of the textual meaning to be our starting place. To be an active reader is to engage a text in the light of one's own time and the body of interpretation and scholarship available at the given moment. In doing so, the reader is changed by the insights gleaned and nuances that are articulated. Indeed, the reader is transformed and re-shaped by the spiritual truths discovered. But beyond this, according to Barry Holtz, the interactive reader actually transforms and reshapes the text itself without adding or subtracting a single word. He suggests that active reading “calls forth response and dialogue on the part of the reader.”³ He takes his cue from Wolfgang Iser, in Iser's influential essay, “The Reading Process:

1. The rabbis believed that the Torah was the blueprint of creation. God consulted Torah prior to the creative act. Hence, the mystics believed that if one could indeed master the Torah in all its levels one could arrive at the very secrets of *Maase B'reishit*, the Work of Creation.

2. Dr. Norman Cohen, *Provost Emeritus and Professor of Midrash, Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, New York* (lecture notes recorded Oct. 19, 1991, Temple Israel, Canton, OH).

3. Barry W. Holz, *Back To The Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 17.

A Phenomenological Approach,” which talks about the way that reader and work are intimately interconnected.⁴ Iser suggests that what we read becomes abbreviated in our memory. The memory is recalled and set against a new background or circumstance that enables the reader to establish a new relationship with the remembered text. In doing so, the text reveals new connections with reality and new points of view relevant to the reader in his/her moment in time.

Engaging the Torah in this way allows one to be in dialogue with the text. This dialogic relationship, when coupled with the theology of divine revelation, suggests meanings far deeper than surface understandings. One who reads the text in this manner seeks the revelation for their moment and their issues.

Hence, when the rabbis study a text and peel away its layers in search for the *Sod*, they are not actually looking for the once-and-for-all truth or the final meaning. Rather, they search for the insight to understand the application of the text to their particular time and particular need. The text itself is like a faceted jewel and the active reader holds it up to the light, as it were, examining how the divine light shines off it and through it.

A CAVEAT

One whose interest in this article, or other Hebrew Bible texts for that matter, is piqued will want to delve deeper in their research. There is an ever-growing body of commentary on these texts in both the scholarly/secular world and the scholarly/religious world as well. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of “Messianic Jewish” and “Fulfilled Jewish” materials on Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) subjects. This caveat is not meant to discredit these sources, but rather to reinforce the premise of this article, which is to speak about the *Jewish* uses of the text. Various groups, Jewish, Christian, or otherwise bring their own lenses to textual study. If one is seeking a particular point of view, for example, a “Jewish” point of view, then the sense one brings to the text can be critical.

I use a common-sense approach to this issue, namely, that when one advances the belief that Jesus is the *Christos*, one fulfills the definition of being a *Christian*. Thus, for the purposes of this article, a “Fulfilled Jew” (meaning a Jew who finds Jesus as fulfilling the messianic promise of the first-century Jewish community) or a “Messianic Jew” (believing Jesus’ messianic claims or the claims made about him) is functionally a Christian, even if they sometimes practice Jewish customs and ceremonies, such as making *kiddush*, blessing

4. In *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 125–47.

Torah, and wearing Jewish garb, and if they call their spiritual leaders “rabbi,” and so forth. This becomes critical because Christians often see things in Torah that Jews don’t or use texts in ways that Jews don’t. For example, Christian interpretation often sees predictions of Jesus as Messiah in Hebrew texts that Jews do not see. Consider, for example, our text of the *Akedat Yitzchak*, the *binding* of Isaac. Note well, the word *AKaD* (root of Akedah) means “to bind.” Yet many Christian interpreters will call this story “the sacrifice of Isaac.” This is done, I believe, to point to and foreshadow what Christians believe to be the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death on the cross. For Jews, “binding” is a better word because it translates the Hebrew more clearly and Isaac, in fact, apparently walks away from Mt. Moriah, God having stayed his father’s hand. Jesus, on the other hand, does not walk away from Calvary and is “sacrificed” on the cross (albeit, according to Christian theology, to be resurrected three days later and then walk away). The linking of these two stories, the first as a foreshadowing of the second as completion, may actually be called “Christian Midrash.” Here we would have an instance of a Christian “use” of the Akedah. Later in this paper we will see midrashim in the Jewish world that will speak about an accomplished sacrifice of Isaac, perhaps as a response or reaction to the Christian passion.

THE MIDRASHIC APPROACH

The interpreting of biblical texts and biblical themes by the rabbis is often called “midrash” from the Hebrew root *DRSh* which conveys the idea of “to search.” It is a process through which the rabbis, in their various times, sought to explicate the legal portions of Torah (*Midrash Halachah*) and the narrative, ethical and value-laden story texts (*Midrash Aggadah*).

Our rabbis taught that the revelation of Torah, the five books of Moses, was accomplished in two modalities. The written text, *Torah Shebichtav*, was dictated by God to Moses on Sinai. The second mode of revelation was an oral Torah, *Torah She’Baal Peh*. This “text” was passed on orally by Moses through a chain of tradition that included, ultimately, the books of Mishnah and Gemorah as well as the rabbis’ midrashic commentaries.⁵ They suggested that the written law was a direct and complete revelation to Moses who faithfully transmitted it to succeeding generations. This concept is known as the Masorah, or the

5. When Mishnah, codified about 200 CE, and Gemorah, codified about 500 CE, are printed together they are known as Talmud. The Talmud is the classic compendium of the Jewish oral tradition. It has been commented upon through the ages to the present time. Most of the Talmud is concerned with halakah or legal matters. It does contain a significant amount of *Aggadah* or narrative material as well.

faithful transmission of the tradition.⁶ This fundamentalism⁷ was described by Maimonides⁸ in his commentary on the last Mishnah of the talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin*. Here, in his comment on *Perek Helek*, (Tr. *Sanhedrin*, chapter 10, Mishnah 1) the RaMbaM articulates what came to be known as the Thirteen Principles of Faith. Principle 8 reads:

Principle VIII. That the Torah is from heaven [God]

And this is that you believe that all of this Torah that was given by Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, that it is all from the mouth of God. Meaning that it was received by him entirely from God. And it is not known how Moses received it except by Moses himself, peace be upon him, that it came to him. That he was like a stenographer that you read to him and he writes all that is told to him: all the events and dates, the stories, and all the commandments. There is no difference between “And the sons of Cham were Kush, and Mizraim, and his wife was Mehatbe’el” and “Timnah was his concubine” and “I am Hashem your God” and “Hear Israel [*Hashem*⁹ your God, *Hashem* is one]” for it was all given by God. And it is all *Hashem*’s perfect Torah; pure, holy, and true. And he who says that these verses or stories, Moses made them up, he is a denier of our sages and prophets worse than all other types of deniers [form of heretic] for he thinks that what is in the Torah is from man’s flawed heart and the questions and statements and the dates and stories are of no value for they are from Moses Rabbeinu, peace be upon him. And this area is that he believes the Torah is not from heaven. And on this our sages of blessed memory said, “he who believes that the Torah is from heaven except this verse that God did not say it but rather

6. An example of the Masorah is found in tractate *Avot* of the Mishnah, perek one, which says, “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly.” One can see the rabbinic bias in this particular text as Moses’ brother, Aaron the high priest, is excluded from this chain of traditional transmission.

7. Louis Jacobs, in his work *Principles of the Jewish Faith: An Analytical Study* (Basic Books: New York, 1964), draws attention to this fundamentalism in his introduction to the analysis of Maimonides’s Thirteen Principles. Jacobs speaks of instances where new knowledge seems to contradict ancient formulations. He describes acceptance in the face of contradiction as “*sacrificium intellectus*.”

8. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known also a RaMbaM, 1135–1204.

9. “Hashem, “The Name,” is one of a number of devices used as a substitute for the Tetragrammaton, *Yod He Vav He*. This most powerful name of God was pronounced but once a year by the high priest in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement.

Moses himself did [he is a denier of all the Torah].” And this that God spoke this and that, each and every statement in the Torah, is from God and it is full of wisdom (each statement) and benefit to those who understand them. And its depth of knowledge is greater than all of the land and wider than all the seas and a person can only go in the path of David, the anointed of the God of Jacob who prayed and said “Open my eyes so that I may glance upon the wonders of Your Torah” (Psalms 119). And similarly the explanation of the Torah was also received from God and this is what we use today to know the appearance and structure of the sukka and the lulav and the shofar, tzitzis, tefillin and their usage. And all this God said to Moses and Moses told to us. And he is trustworthy in his role as the messenger and the verse that teaches of this fundamental is what is written (Numbers 16). “And Moses said, with this shall you know that Hashem sent me to do all these actions (wonders) for they are not from my heart.”

Contemporary Orthodox Judaism, as represented by the Orthodox Union, simplifies the statement, to wit, “I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given [by God] to Moses.”¹⁰ In the spirit of contemporary fundamentalism (“God said it, I believe it, that ends it”), we might feel compelled to put our questions and concerns aside. If God spoke these words then we must live with the moral ambiguity of a father commanded by God to sacrifice the son, whom he loves, as a burnt offering.

Yet the rabbis, both ancient and modern, cannot allow this understanding of the text to stand. The very core of our being rebels at the very thought that God, who creates and loves and guides and teaches, would demand such a thing. Child sacrifice was a pagan practice, not a Jewish practice. The rabbinic treatment of the text we know as midrash calls upon us to address this question of morality and more, as well as the questions of meaning in every era of Jewish history. Rabbi Harold Schulweis speaks of our understanding of biblical text in relationship to the midrashic pursuit.

Rabbinic midrashim of dissent are numerous and religiously significant. These midrashim or rabbinic parables are elaborate metaphors and legends that fill the moral lacunae of biblical narratives, unburdening the believer from a submissive reading of

10. “The RaMbaM’s Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith,” Orthodox Union, <http://www.ou.org/torah/rambam.htm>.

scriptures and a subservient stance toward the Sovereign Commander. In midrash, God hears moral arguments and cancels decrees. **In this way, the biblical text is not the last but the first word of God.** The Bible is not a closed book, but open to the multiple interpretations of its sages.¹¹

Understanding Torah as God's *first* word allows us, in our time, to create not the last word, but the *next* word in an unfolding understanding of the revelation. Torah remains relevant through our reflection and growing understanding of the text.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AKEDAH

One cannot help but see the parallelism between our text and the beginning of Abram's journey toward covenant.¹² The Torah portion called *Lech L'cha* (Gen. 12:1—17:27) depicts Abram's calling. God says:

Get up from your land, from the place of your birth, from your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation; I will bless those who bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.¹³

Abram rises to do this command without question. The text is simple and clear: "So Abram went as God had spoken to him."¹⁴ The formula for separation from his ancestral culture and faith is likewise simple. He is commanded to separate from the local culture (land), from his community (place of birth) and from the family that nurtured him (father's house) and go to an unspecified place. Abram is a man of faith and a man of action, for he neither questions nor objects. Because he recognizes the voice of the one God, because he neither objects nor hesitates, Abram is called the first Jew and the one with whom God establishes the *brit*, the covenant. The covenant is reiterated and sealed several times¹⁵ and

11. Harold M. Schulweis, *Consciences: The Duty to Obey and the Duty to Disobey* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008), 12. Emphasis mine.

12. Several characters in the Genesis narrative have their names changed at significant points in their lives. Three examples would be Abram who becomes Abraham (Gen. 17:5), Sarai becomes Sarah (Gen. 17:15), and Jacob who becomes Israel (Gen. 32:29).

13. Gen. 12:1-2. NB All Hebrew Bible references follow the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible.

14. *Ibid.*, v. 3.

15. See *ibid.*, 13:14-17; 15:1-7, 17-18; 17:1-27.