

The Akedah as a Lost Opportunity
(based on presentation by Moshe Halbertal on July 3, 2013)
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774
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D'var Torah

Three great Jewish philosophers of the past half-century,
Three very different perspectives on the tale we are about to tell.
One sees this Biblical story as a paradigm of self-denial,
another as a moment of self sacrifice,
and a third as a terrible tale, a failure, a submission where engagement would
have been better, a lost opportunity to stand up in the face of injustice.

The Israeli Yeshayahu Leibowitz viewed Jewish law as the essential aspect of Jewish life, the core element, both constitutive and definitional of it. And that halacha, that Jewish law... is devoid of any human interest. It cannot be evaluated in human categories as to how helpful or healthful it is, or even in terms of moral analysis. To instrumentalize religion is a form of idolatry! When Achah HaAm very famously said that “more than Israel has kept Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept Israel,” praising observance of the day as a way of maintaining our identity, Leibowitz viewed that as religious-nationalist idolatry. God commands, and we obey, and what it does for us is entirely beside the point. His project was to keep halacha pure – even from moral principles! And so, for him, self-denial is central... and the Akedah is therefore a paradigm. It is a moment to be repeated, emulated. Every act of obedience to Jewish law for its own sake is 1/60th the Akedah. It is an act of giving up the self, and to Leibowitz that is what this story is about.

Joseph Soloveitchik, too, viewed self-sacrifice as central to the religious life, but for very different reasons. To him, the issue is psychological – the focus is not on pure obedience, but about the benefit to the depth of the human personality that comes from knowing there are limits, that there are some things we want which we cannot have, or must hold ourselves back from. Surrender of our innermost desires, even when no one is watching, that is, to Soloveitchik, the highest spiritual achievement – and the Akedah, then, is a model of such submission.

My teacher, David Hartman, who passed away this February, and whose own children's and other students' teachings have influenced many of my remarks throughout these High Holy Days, David Hartman has a totally different view of the Akedah. He sees it as a lost opportunity, or even worse. There is a sacrifice here, but it was not of Isaac. It was Abraham who sacrificed something, and what he offered up...was his own conscience! He compares this Abraham unfavorably to the one a few chapters earlier who, when told of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, stood up and argued with God. There, Abraham retained an independent moral awareness, and holds up moral challenge, not simple loyalty, as the highest level of a relationship.

Why this tale at this time? Because of the link to the ram's horn, and the sound of the shofar? Or a chance to raise these issues, and wonder what stance we should take, what kind of people we should be, in the face of the tests and trials of our time?