

## The Land of Isaac? From 'Glory of Akedah' to 'Isaac's Fear'

Yael S. Feldman

The latest Israeli anthology devoted to “biblical” poems (edited by Malka Shaked) harbors a statistical surprise: Isaac, traditionally considered the least heroic of all biblical figures, “stars” in more Hebrew poems than do Abraham, Moses, or King David. This is quite a revelation for a culture emanating from a tradition known as the “Father religion” (as opposed to its younger sibling, the “Son religion”).

Indeed, the persistence of the so-called “sacrifice” of Isaac in the Israeli mind is well known to Israelis, but less so to outsiders. The fact is, however, that more than any biblical narrative, this story has become a focal trope in Zionist thought and Hebrew letters. Most Israelis appreciate the binding as the metaphor for national sacrifice, and hence Isaac naturally stands for Israel’s fallen warriors.

Moreover, whereas in the early days of the Zionist revolution, the Exodus from Egypt and the journey in the wilderness may have been serious contenders, these themes clearly lost the race in the wake of World War II and the struggle for independence. Since the 1940s, the Akedah has become a key figure in Hebrew literature. Paradoxically, it came to represent both the slaughter of the Holocaust and the national warrior’s heroic death in the old-new homeland.

The latter was not, however, the invention of the 1940s. The military appropriation of Isaac was the product of the pioneers in Jewish Palestine in the early 20th century. Determined to exchange the role of the traditional Jewish victim (*korban*) for the role of a willing self-sacrifice (also *korban* in Hebrew!), these young survivors of the East-European pogroms and their aftermath were willing to give up their life on the altar of the motherland. Moreover, since most of them were fatherless — some literally orphaned, others miles away from the parents they’d left behind in Europe — often there was no “Abraham” in their reworking of the scene (nor was there an angel to stop the act). As a result, they did not necessarily identify with the biblical Isaac. The Isaac of Genesis 22, of the twice repeated “and they walked together,” was apparently too passive; he was an obedient follower of his father.

Their model, rather, was the post-biblical

Isaac, the son who often volunteered for his own immolation, sometimes even “joyfully,” as in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Targums, Josephus, Medieval liturgy, and the Crusade chronicles (not to mention the New Testament...). In my book *Glory and Agony: Isaac’s Sacrifice and National Narrative*, I trace the modern reinvention of this willing Isaac to Berl Katznelson, who in 1919 coined the paradoxical expression “*osher Akedah*” (the bliss/glory of self-binding) to describe the zeal and excitement felt by those who first volunteered for the British Army’s Jewish Legion in the First World War. The next step, taken up by the pioneer-poets of the 1920s, is best expressed in Yitzhak Lamdan’s poem “*Akud*” (Bound): “... But this is not me, a different Isaac was there./ Different was the binder, and different the binding./ I *did* know where I was being led to/ nor was it God who commanded my going for a test./ I *myself* so loved the journey/ that I didn’t even inquire about the lamb...” (Emphasis added).

This volunteering position is the target of S.Y. Agnon’s irony in *Only Yesterday*, his monumental 1946 paean to the pioneers of his youth in the “Land of Isaac.” Soon enough, however, Agnon’s “Isaacs” were followed by a different brand of literary willing Isaacs. Populating Israeli literature of the 1940s and ’50s, these new Isaacs naturally represented the sacrifices made by the young in the War of Independence. By then, however, the contemporary writers *qua* Isaacs were not orphaned anymore. Their “Abrahams” were right there, available to be typecast in the unsavory role of the one commanding the sacrifice. In the corpus of that generation, Isaac was still a willing self-immolator, but not his own agent: he volunteers to go along with his father’s plans, ready for the slaughter if needed. However, center stage was given — paradoxically perhaps — back to the father. It is the contemporary Abraham who was now imagined not only as the source of the command but also as the one who either “volunteers” to take the blame or is blamed by the “son.”


This sense of guilt or blame can be quite tempered, as in Yigal Mossinsohn’s 1949 play “In the Negev Plains,” or in Haim Gouri’s iconic poem, “Inheritance.” It can also be ferocious,

Yael S. Feldman holds the Abraham I. Katsh Chair of Hebrew Culture and Education at New York University, where she also serves as a professor of comparative literature and gender studies. Her pioneering study, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women’s Fiction* (Columbia University Press), was a National Jewish Book Awards finalist in 2000; its Hebrew version won the Friedman Memorial Prize for Hebrew Literature in 2003. Her new study, *Glory and Agony: Isaac’s Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford University Press) was a National Jewish Book Awards finalist in 2010.

as in Moshe Shamir or S. Yizhar's unprecedented fictional encounters, in which fathers feel guilty or are blamed [respectively] for choosing to sacrifice the other — especially the next generation — over sacrificing themselves. It was this indignant moral judgment, sounded shortly after the Sinai Campaign (1956), that soon captured the imagination of the younger generation. In the 1960s, that peer group offered a new fictional spin on the old story. In their narratives, not only had the Akedah completely morphed from “binding” to “blood sacrifice,” it had also moved from the realm of traditional biblical/Jewish psychology to that of its neighboring culture, classical Greek drama. In contrast to the harmonious walking together imagined in Genesis as well as throughout premodern Jewish history and even in some of the cultural products of the 1940s-50s, the Akedah now began to be reinterpreted as the Hebraic equivalent of the Oedipal scene, and especially as a Freudian Oedipal scene. Although this oedipalization of the Akedah was first introduced in Hebrew drama in the early 1940s, the violent potentiality of this turn came to the fore only in the 1960s, in the work of the young A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, among others. Much attention has been lavished in particular on Yehoshua's special blending of the Akedah with the Oedipal conflict, which peaked in his 1990 masterful novel, *Mr. Mani*, as well as on Oz's popular story “The Way of the Wind.” In both, the “Isaacs” of the narrative ultimately meet a violent though unheroic death: Oz's protagonist directs his aggression against himself not in euphoric glory (*osher*) but rather in protest

and despair over his Laius-like, overdemanding, father; Yehoshua's “son” seems to seek out an end to a life of psychological and ideational frustration, and is finally murdered without resistance by the “Ishmaelites” on the Dome of the Rock, while his disapproving father watches nearby without intervention.

This oedipalized Akedah is still with us today, though it is often less aggressive and more desperate. In 1990, Yehoshua openly declared a “vendetta” against the Akedah, insisting that we must try to “undo it by acting it out” — as he himself did in the narrative of *Mr. Mani*. We must strive to extinguish the mesmerizing magic of this story, he insisted, because one can never be sure that “the knife will continue hovering in midair and not strike home instead.” A different means for the same end was suggested by author Shulamith Hareven. Urging women to exercise their special “talent for sanity,” she called upon them to counter the primal scene of filicide shared by all three monotheistic [and Freudian] traditions and create a different, maternal narrative, as she herself did in her biblical novella *After Childhood*.

This call for resistance seems to have dissipated by the 2000s. While David Grossman's recent fictional “mother” expresses her protest by fleeing “*To the End of the Land*,” some of the younger authors appear to have given up the fight altogether. Rather than rebelling against the constant demand for self-sacrifice, they merely replace the Akedah with another biblical metaphor of quite a different order: *Pachad Yitzchak*, Isaac's Fear, that ancient God that evokes not heroism and military courage but rather fear and trembling. 

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## Violence and Secrecy: On Masculinity and the Akedah

SARAH IMHOFF

**B**iblical scholars explain that the story of the Akedah marks a turning point from ancient Near Eastern cultural traditions that include human sacrifice to a strikingly illustrative polemic against human sacrifice. Do *not* sacrifice your son, God tells Abraham. But ironically, the very acts that mark this watershed cultural transition away from violence are violent in themselves. In this story of terrifying duty, the threat of violence still lingers for this father and son. And as much as both of them

would surely like to forget the harrowing episode, it was a defining part of the process that made each one into a man of God. Even at its most perplexing moments, the narrative also resonates with contemporary questions about what it means to be a man. Gendered issues are contextual, not timeless, but Abraham, Isaac, and the incident on Mount Moriah raise two crucial themes about modern masculinity: violence and secrecy.

Violence and sacrifice are not identical, and

**Sarah Imhoff** is a visiting assistant professor in the Borna Jewish Studies Program and Religious Studies Department at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her teaching and research interests focus on gender and Jewish history.