

# Rembrandt's Akedah

BRYNA JOCHEVED LEVY


In 1914, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who would later become the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the State of Israel, visited the National Gallery in London. His aesthetic sensibilities were aroused by the artistic grandeur that he encountered there. He was particularly transfixed by Rembrandt's paintings: "...the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty." (*Jewish Chronicle of London*, September 13, 1935)

Rembrandt van Rijn's prodigious activity in painting biblical scenes reflects his love of and intimate knowledge of the Bible. His biblical scenes are not merely an exercise in historical painting, they contain his own passion and intensity as well as a remarkable degree of his innovative biblical interpretation.

*And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. Then the angel of the Lord called him from heaven: 'Abraham! Abraham!' and he answered, 'Here am I.' And he said, 'Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.'*  
(Genesis 22:10-12)

Consider the play of hands in this canvas painting. The helpless hands behind Isaac's back render him a passive sacrificial offering. As for the hands of the angel of the Lord — one hand dramatically arrests the violent act at the critical moment, and the other knocks the knife from Abraham's hand.

But what is Rembrandt communicating through Abraham's left hand? Why does he cover the face of his child? Does the murderous hand asphyxiate the boy and position his neck for slaughter? Or does Abraham cover Isaac's face to spare him the sight of his father committing an unthinkable act? Or could it be that at the moment of terror, Abraham, the compassionate father, utterly dedicated to upholding the divine commandment to slaughter Isaac, is nonetheless unable to look his beloved son in the eye?

Abraham's face displays everything we would expect: confusion, shock, and total lack of comprehension. Having girded himself for this death march, he is taken aback when called to a sudden halt. How did Abraham reconcile this withdrawal of the divine command with the original directive? If it was not to be consummated, what then was the purpose of this difficult and perplexing ordeal? 

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn  
"Sacrifice of Isaac"  
Oil on canvas. 193 x 132 cm  
Holland, 1635



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Dr. Bryna Jocheved Levy, a Bible teacher in Israel, was the first woman awarded a doctoral degree in biblical studies by Yeshiva University. Levy is a leader in the movement for women's Torah studies, and the founder and dean of the Joan and Shael Bellows Joint Graduate Program in Bible and Biblical Interpretation at Matan: The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies in Jerusalem. She is the author of *Waiting for Rain: Reflections at The Turning of the Year*. Levy curated and wrote the online exhibit "Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt," featured on [www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt\\_eng/](http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_eng/). Permission to adapt this article was given by George S. Blumenthal and the Center for Online Judaic Studies 2003. For more information, contact [www.brynalevy.com](http://www.brynalevy.com).

## Here I am, Hineini

HADAR SUSSKIND

"*Hineini*" means "here I am" but the power of the phrase is far greater. It is the acceptance of a charge; taking on a task or responsibility. *Hinieni*. I was enveloped by it as I stood

guard in Beaufort in Lebanon, but-tressed by it as I rose to speak as a delegate at the World Zionist Congress, inspired by its ancient call as I walk the halls of Congress. Like my ancestors before me, I am here. *Hinieni*.

Hadar Susskind is vice president of policy and strategy at J Street.

## Here I am, Hineini

ERICA BROWN

In a world full of distractions, the proper way to translate "*Hineni*" today is "I am fully present." I am fully present in my life. I am fully present with my children. I am fully present in my job. I am fully present when I am in conversation with you. I am fully present as a servant of God. This means paying closer attention to the

sacred duties I assume and trying to live on higher ground. I am fully present as a Jew. I am fully present as a citizen of the world, partnering in its perfection. Being fully present today — with the challenges of technology — cannot be assumed. It is hard work; an aspiration.

Erica Brown, scholar-in-residence at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, is the author, most recently, of *In the Narrow Places: Daily Inspiration for the Three Weeks* (OU/Koren).