THE AKEDAH:
MACHLOKET L'SHEM SHAMAYIM SOFA L'HITKAYEIM

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This paper addresses Shubert Spero's article "The Akedah: Machloket L'Shem Shamayim," JBQ *28:1 (January 2000), that was a response to my own article "Saving the* Akedah *from the Philosophers,"* JBQ *27:3 (July 1999). Special attention is devoted to the ethical unacceptability of child sacrifice and to the trustworthiness of Divine promises.*

Some texts graciously invite a wide range of internally consistent interpretations. Others foil all attempts at explanation, throwing off would-be exegetes as an unbroken horse throws off its rider. The *Akedah,* the story of the binding of Isaac, belongs to the latter category. Jewish readers seek an interpretation of the *Akedah* that answers simultaneously to a number of different criteria. Ideally, exegesis must make sense of the actual words of the text, integrate the *Akedah* with the broader narrative of Abraham's life, and make the *Akedah* meaningful in terms of the world-view(s) espoused by scripture. Finally, if the Torah is to be taken seriously as a source of values, the lessons learned from the *Akedah* must be found to be both intellectually acceptable and profound by contemporary readers. Inevitably, interpretations of the *Akedah* which answer to some of these criteria fail at others. For instance, it would be easy to read the *Akedah* as glorifying the religious value of child sacrifice, but that reading would run afoul of biblical and modern rejections of such barbarism. On the other hand, more theologically acceptable interpretations of the *Akedah* tend to turn a blind eye to the plain meaning of the text.

Given these difficulties, I am hardly surprised that my own essay "Saving the *Akedah* from the Philosophers" has not been greeted with universal agreement. In retrospect, I might describe my interpretation as one which tries to make the *Akedah* theologically palatable by stressing the exegetical importance of God's promises to Abraham and of the general moral temper of the Torah. Naturally, this leaves me open to the charge that other interpretive factors have been neglected.

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I am pleased that Shubert Spero saw fit to devote an entire article to criticism of my essay. In my present response to Spero's criticisms, I do not claim to present my view as a seamless, comprehensive and ultimate interpretation of the *Akedah* (indeed, my opening paragraph points to the impossibility of such an interpretation). However, in answering several of Spero's complaints, I hope to clarify and make salient the peculiar strengths of my reading.

According to Spero, my interpretation is based on two presuppositions. The first of these is that, "The *Akedah* presented Abraham with a moral problem. That is to say, stripped of its religious terminology, to *bring up Isaac as a burnt-offering* means to kill him, which is murder" (p. 56). This statement troubles me. A central point of my article was precisely that the *Akedah* did not present Abraham with a moral problem. Given that God had promised to Abraham that the covenant would continue through Isaac (Gen. 17:19), Abraham knew that no evil would befall his young son. *A priori* there could be no question as to the moral ramifications of Abraham actually killing Isaac, since such a killing would entail an impossible breach of the Divine promise. Spero's observation that, "there is every indication in the text that he [Abraham] did not consider what he was about to do as possibly being murder or in any way immoral" (p. 56) supports my reading. Abraham was indeed certain that his actions would not result in the murder of Isaac.

Spero obviously intends to make a deeper point. He thinks that even if God had allowed Isaac to be killed, this would create no moral dilemma for Abraham. The exegetical basis for this claim is that Abraham did not challenge God's command to sacrifice Isaac, while Abraham did challenge God's announced intention to destroy Sodom. While I admit that this argument carries some weight (if God had explicitly talked over these issues with Abraham, the meaning of the *Akedah* would have been much clearer all around) the two episodes are crucially dissimilar. While God explicitly told Abraham that Sodom would be destroyed, He never said that Isaac would die. Rather, Abraham was commanded to perform actions, which, in ordinary circumstances, would lead to Isaac's death. However, the circumstances under which Abraham was to perform these actions were anything but ordinary, and involved, from the start, direct Divine intervention through prophecy. Even if Abraham had gone through with the sacrifice, an omnipotent God could reverse even the seemingly irreversible. Those who find such a possibility repugnant may

be advised to read Shalom Spiegel's book, *The Last Trial,* which describes the role of Isaac's death and resurrection in rabbinical literature.

Appropriately, Spero quotes the Divine message to Abraham in this connection: *'Now I know that you are a God-fearing person seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me'* (Gen. 22:12). While some creative fidgeting may reconcile this verse with my interpretation, it is most naturally read as referring to the real possibility of Isaac's death. I am not too troubled by Genesis 22:12, since its plain meaning does not jibe with Spero's own reading either. In themselves, the words *you have not withheld your son* imply that Isaac was not merely a candidate for sacrifice, but, contrary to the surrounding text, was indeed sacrificed. Any coherent reading of the *Akedah* which does not employ text-critical or midrashic means to modify the general story must tinker with the plain meaning of this verse.

For people who turn to the Torah as a source of spiritual instruction there is an even stronger incentive for tinkering with the plain meaning of Genesis 22:12. The notion that Abraham was called upon to actually bring about Isaac's death is so repugnant that it must be rejected out of hand by anyone who wants to make theological sense of the story. Spero (in the unique circumstances of the *Akedah*) does not share my qualms regarding human sacrifice. The philosophical basis for Spero's claim that Isaac's death would not have been a moral problem for Abraham is that, "God the owner of us all is in effect asking for the return of a gift that Abraham had received unexpectedly, gratuitously and miraculously" (p. 57). He further writes (p. 58) that:

> What was involved in the *Akedah* as a sacrifice were the following elements:
>
> 1. The natural feeling of love and devotion of a father to his son,
> 2. one's only son there being no chance of another,
> 3. a son received in old age after he had given up all hope,
> 4. a son whom God had designated as the link to a glorious future.

Surely this understates the gravity of the situation. Isaac was not merely Abraham's son and God's gift, but, in the first place, a human being in his own right. It may be entirely commendable to return a gift, or even to sacrifice one's own chances of happiness and fulfillment for some greater, mysterious purpose. It is something altogether different to take someone else's life. I could understand the point of the Torah telling us of an Abraham who was

prepared to give up his very life for God's sake. What lesson could we learn from an Abraham who is prepared to kill an innocent child for the glory of God? Spero owes us further explanation why the *Akedah*, in his reading, involves no conflict between God's command and the demands of morality.

God's promise to Abraham that Isaac will continue Abraham's family and covenant (Gen. 17:19, 21:12) is the main textual source of exegetical disagreement between Spero and myself. I take God at His word and to be speaking plainly. I further assume that it would be impossibly immoral for God to renege on this promise. In my interpretation, Abraham had every reason to depend on God to save Isaac from harm. In fact, if Abraham had questioned the reliability of God's promise, he would have been guilty of a serious lapse of faith. Spero deploys an array of arguments in his attempt to downplay the importance of God's promise for Abraham. He writes, "Even for a man of faith like Abraham, the following doubts surely should have arisen" (p. 59). He then lists the points in the following order:

1. Am I sure I remember correctly what God said to me many years ago?
2. Am I interpreting His words correctly?
3. Perhaps what He said was conditional on there being an Isaac and God's present command supersedes the promise?
4. Do I know God so well that I can be certain that He does not change His mind?
5. Moreover, is this "trust in God" or rather trust in one's own interpretation of what was said?

Spero's arguments are of unequal force. Point 1 suggests that Abraham may have felt unsure regarding the content of his earlier prophecies regarding Isaac. I find this unconvincing because God made the promise concerning Isaac in order to soften the blow of the rejection of Ishmael (17:15-22) and of his eventual banishment (21:12). It is implausible that Abraham could become forgetful of a prophecy that had already served as part of God's justification of a fateful command which Abraham had found very difficult to perform; that is, the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar. Points 2 and 5 could be as easily applied to God's command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. If prophecy is such a tricky affair, surely Abraham should have balked at the notion of performing human sacrifice on the basis of his own fallible interpretation of

God's command. Point 3 reads the promise regarding Isaac as if God had watered it down it with a subtle legalistic escape clause.

From the standpoint of traditional Jewish exegesis, Point 4 is the most threatening to my case. While the notion that God might renege on His promises would seem to constitute an obvious contradiction of our usual notions of Divine justice, it is well founded in classical Jewish literature. Spero rightly cites Rashi on Genesis 32: 11 to the effect that Jacob was not sure that he could depend on God's promise as protection against Esau. Spero's argument can be supported with an additional citation. Maimonides, in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, builds up Jacob's expression of uncertainty into the general principle that God may renege on promises made concerning the prophet himself or herself, and which have not been announced to the prophet's audience. Clearly, my interpretation of the *Akedah* would be greatly weakened if Maimonides' principle could be applied to God's promises to Abraham. Apparently, if Abraham is understood as thinking along the lines of Rashi and Maimonides, he had good reason to fear that God might not save Isaac at the *Akedah*.

To this I would first answer that I need not accept Rashi's interpretation nor, presumably, the principle which Maimonides built upon it. Even if Jacob was uncertain of God's promised protection (and this is itself challenged by Nachmanides), we cannot be sure whether Jacob's fear of Esau resulted from his commendable theological acuity or from the unfortunate faintheartedness attributed to him by some classical Jewish exegetes. Jacob's faith in God's protection may have been strained by the imminent danger posed by Esau. In a moment of personal weakness Jacob may have expressed theologically unjustified but psychologically understandable doubts about the outcome of their meeting. Jacob's all-too-human consternation does not necessarily reflect a theological principle to which his fearless grandfather Abraham would also subscribe.

Suppose I accept Maimonides' principle. Must I apply it to my understanding of the *Akedah*? Both Maimonides and Rashi make it clear that God would not renege *unjustly* on a personal promise made to a prophet, but rather only in reaction to the prophet's sins. Thus Jacob is said by Rashi to have feared that *due to some sin* he had become unworthy of divine protection from Esau. The situation of the *Akedah* is crucially different. Isaac and Abraham were

not threatened by some external danger, but rather by the direct consequences of Abraham's performance of a divine command. According to Maimonides' principle, if Abraham had killed Isaac, this would have constituted some kind of divinely commanded self-inflicted punishment. Just at the moment of Abraham's greatest act of faith, God would judge Abraham an unworthy party to Divine promises, a sinner who deserved to kill his son by his own hands. I submit that such a possibility was too grotesque to merit Abraham's consideration.

Although the various exegetical and theological considerations discussed so far are interesting enough in their own right, I would venture that they did not motivate Spero's critique of my article. What most bothers Spero is that my interpretation seems to trivialize both the message of the *Akedah* and Abraham's greatness. He claims that I have reduced Abraham's trial to "make believe" and his piety to clever calculation. If Abraham's faith in God's promises left him certain that no evil would befall Isaac, the *Akedah* is reduced to a farce. Although the idea of offering up one's son as a sacrifice is usually terrifying, when one knows that God will ensure a happy ending, "overcoming an instinctual fear is not much of a test" (p. 59).

In order to answer this complaint I must differentiate between one's intellectual relation to a belief and one's existential relationship to a belief. We are all only too aware of how this distinction works in regard to moral principles. We all know intellectually that we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves, honor each other as beings created in the image of God, and so forth. But how consistently do these beliefs, even when held with absolute intellectual certainty, inform our day-to-day lives? Any fool can tell us that Joseph would have sinned had he submitted to the advances of Potiphar's wife. While the moral calculation was simple, its application to reality demonstrated Joseph's spiritual greatness, winning him the traditional title Joseph the Righteous. I submit that the same considerations apply to Abraham's performance at the *Akedah.* It is one thing for Abraham to know at an intellectual level that God's promise will protect Isaac from danger; it is quite another for Abraham to depend on God's promise in the otherwise terrifying circumstances of the *Akedah*. Abraham faces a perfectly clear intellectual situation, but that does not imply that he skipped towards Moriah whistling and carefree. We might imagine Abraham battling with his own natural fears and in-

clinations, constantly reminding himself of the reality and force of God's promise and of his duty to perform God's will. Similarly, Joseph must have strenuously reminded himself of the reality and force of the intellectually elementary moral imperative not to submit to Potiphar's wife. Spero is well aware of these considerations, yet disagrees with my assumption that the *Akedah*, as I have understood it, would call for Abraham's spiritual greatness. I can appreciate his disagreement; we have arrived at a difference of empathetic intuition which is not likely to be solved through exegetical reasoning. My own empathetic understanding of biblical characters is obviously far from infallible, and so having presented my case, I will press it no further.

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In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth **(Genesis 1:1).**
The major lesson of the story of Creation is that the world did not come about by mere chance, but had a single Creator to whom all human beings are responsible.

And God created man in His own image . . . **(Genesis 1:27).**
The lesson here is that human beings were all created in the divine image. Thus, all men are brothers to be treated with respect and love.