ABRAHAM AND ISAAC: HUMAN FRAILTY AND TRAUMA IN GENESIS

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The story of the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis is, of course, the foundational account of God's choice of the Israelites as his Chosen People and the great blessings that he bestows on Abraham and his descendants. And yet beneath those monumental events lies a seemingly mundane series of intimate personal stories. The patriarchal accounts include depictions of faith and self-sacrifice, as well as righteousness, courage, forgiveness, and love. But they also portray episodes of petty conflict and enmity within the chosen family, and their sudden slips into terror and doubt.

The patriarchal history is the story of remarkable but imperfect human beings who are caught up in two dramas at once. One is divine, majestic, and intended for good, but is largely hidden from them. The other is a family saga that verges at times on classical tragedy and comedy, and occasionally on melodrama. Much of the ancestral history is figural and teleological. But it is also colored by psychological realism. On the one hand, the main actors are collective typological figures whose stories can be read as depicting Israel's past and figuring future events. On the other hand, the ancestors are highly individualized literary figures who are portrayed with complex character development. Robert Alter calls this duality the literary miracle of Genesis.

The patriarchal narratives display the blessings of being favored by God but also reveal its human cost. Abraham and his descendants are both exalted and riven by their chosenness and, as a family, they inflict severe distress on each other. Seen from that perspective, much of Genesis 12-50 is an account of dysfunction and trauma. But the narrative arc of Genesis leans in the direction of spiritual, moral, and emotional growth. And that opens the possibility of healing and reconciliation. For that to happen, the text stresses the importance of human kindness, love, and forgiveness, as well as God's *hesed*, his steadfast love.

Many commentators have cited the sibling rivalries and the other conflicts in Israel's ancestral family, often treating them as isolated events. This study applies a wider lens, focusing on the family dynamics, dysfunction, and

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trauma across generations in the patriarchal history. It considers why the narrative returns so often to the patriarchs' fallibility and suffering. And it discusses why Genesis repeatedly portrays them as complex human beings rather than as uncomplicated, flawless heroes.

The patriarchs' story begins with Abraham's great faith and obedience. In chapter 12, the Lord commands him to leave his home and his family. And so, at the age of seventy-five, Abraham leaves his *bet-ab* (the house of his father), heading for a destination that God has not even named. Abraham is the first prophet. God himself calls him a *nabi*, a prophet, who has the power to save lives with his prayers. He is also the first human in the Bible to show compassion for others, the first to call for justice for the innocent, and the first to have the courage and diplomatic skill to bargain with God.

Abraham is a man of transcendent faith. But the text makes it clear that he is only a man, and he repeatedly slips into anxiety and disbelief. Almost immediately after God first says that he will bless him in chapter 12, Abraham appears to forget God's promises. Afraid that the Egyptians will be smitten by his beautiful wife, Sarah, and will kill him and take her for themselves, Abraham behaves as if God had made no promises at all. Taking on the role of trickster, he asks Sarah to say that she is his sister. Richard Elliott Friedman notes that all commentators have agonized over this.[1] Some have suggested that Abraham's motives were clever or pragmatic. Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno, for example, proposed in the sixteenth century that Abraham's trick is an ingenious way to make the Egyptians enrich him, rather than kill him. According to Sforno, Abraham reasoned that they would give him a dowry and gifts to win his approval for them to marry Sarah. Then he and Sarah would leave.[2] But if that is the plan, it is foiled, twice. In this episode in Egypt and again when Abraham repeats the wife-sister trick in Gerar, the foreign princes take Sarah. Only a few verses earlier, in a scene juxtaposed to the one in Egypt, God himself assures Abraham that he will bless him, magnify his name, and make a great nation of him. But Abraham's fear of men momentarily overshadows his awe of God and his trust in God's promises. He lies, making his wife sexually available to the Egyptians and jeopardizing God's plan for them and for Israel. Then he acquiesces when she is taken to the Pharaoh. It is especially disturbing, to modern sensibilities at least, that he accepts lavish gifts from Pharaoh in return. Phyllis Trible puts it bluntly: she

calls Abraham a wimp and a pimp.[3] But perhaps we can understand this more sympathetically: Abraham is subject to the same frailties as other human beings, and his reaction is a psychologically realistic illustration of the power of mortal dread over even a uniquely good man.[4]

Years later, Abraham doubts again when he falls on his face and laughs at God's promise that he and Sarah will have a child in their old age. He asks instead that Ishmael may thrive. Sarah laughs at God's promise in the next chapter. Late in their lives, however improbably, he gives the elderly Sarah away a second time, in Gerar. In the next chapter Isaac is born, and one chapter later, God asks Abraham to sacrifice of Isaac.

Abraham complies, but this is not without extreme personal cost, especially for Isaac. Interpreters have speculated on what goes through Abraham's mind during this episode, but less attention has been paid to Isaac. The emotional impact of these events becomes an organizing principle in Isaac's portrayal. He is depicted as damaged for life, and his characterization may even be informed by observed aspects of actual trauma.

First, let's consider trauma. People commonly use the term casually, calling life events traumatic when they inflict extraordinarily intense anguish. Many episodes in Genesis do appear to be traumatic in that general sense. But trauma is also a clinical diagnosis with specific diagnostic features. In the clinical sense, a trauma is a psychic injury so destabilizing that it overwhelms normal mental, emotional, and biological functions.[5] The trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk observes that deeply traumatized people feel "a mixture of numbness, withdrawal, confusion, shock, and speechless terror." When the effects of severe trauma persist, it can result in PTSD. The main diagnostic criteria include reliving the traumatic event and avoiding stimuli associated with it. Posttraumatic fear can lead to feelings of helplessness and isolation. Victims may experience increased irritability, hypervigilance, or distress, or they may feel emotionally numb and disconnected. Either can be symptomatic of PTSD, since traumatic stress tends to produce psychological extremes.[6]

Virtually every member of the patriarchal family suffers severe distress at some point in Genesis. Their circumstances often seem hopeless and at times they fear for their lives. Many of those episodes are so intense that we may well call them traumatic, at least in the informal sense. But Genesis often doesn't describe its characters' inner lives in detail, or at all. Still, despite

those silences, the ancestral history depicts a daunting array of extreme stresses. That is especially true in the story of the Aqedah (the Sacrifice or Binding of Isaac), and a web of evidence may suggest that Isaac does have a severe reaction to that event. The signs are circumstantial but abundant.

Isaac is the promised son, but he is not born into the most promising circumstances. Leslie Brisman calls his birth traumatic. His ninety-year-old mother thinks of herself as decrepit and is embarrassed that people will laugh at her for giving birth in old age.[7] His father is a great man who overshadows him in every way. Although Isaac is born into a lofty role as the carrier of a great blessing, there is no suggestion in the text that he wants or merits that responsibility. Still, with Isaac's birth in Genesis 21, God's longstanding promise to make a great nation of Abraham moves forward at last.

Then, in the next chapter, God appears to renege on his promise and to annul the plan. He suddenly calls on Abraham to take Isaac up to a mountain in Moriah and sacrifice him. Abraham brings Isaac there, travelling for three days without telling him what he is about to do. When they arrive, Isaac notices that they have everything they need for an animal sacrifice except an animal. So, he asks his father, *Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?* That is the first thing Isaac says in Genesis, and Alter observes that characters' first spoken words in the Bible often define them.[8] Isaac is defined here by his bafflement as he walks into existential danger. On the mountain, Abraham binds his son, lays him on the altar, and prepares to kill him, all without a word or even a gesture of fatherly love or comfort.

The scene is even more terrifying because God has specified that Isaac should be an *ola*, a whole burnt offering – also known as a holocaust. Commentators often say that Abraham is about to slit his son's throat, but an *ola* required much more than that. It involved cutting and chopping an entire sacrificial animal into pieces, disposing of its blood and hide, and burning it to ashes. At the last moment, an angel of the Lord stops Abraham from slaughtering his son. Still, Isaac has been subjected to the ultimate threat. Elie Wiesel calls Isaac the first holocaust witness and survivor, and this episode may well depict traumatization. Wiesel, a Holocaust witness and survivor himself, observes that Isaac never frees himself from the trauma that violated his youth: the near-holocaust on the mountain haunts him for the rest of his life.[9]

Genesis suggests the impact on Isaac indirectly, in a series of details that realistically depict a profound and long-lasting injury. For the rest of his life Isaac remains a secondary figure, more acted upon than acting. More than anyone else in Genesis, he is almost childlike in his neediness. He craves sensory gratification, especially savory food, as the text mentions five times. Isaac is largely passive. He doesn't even choose his own wife. Instead, without consulting with him, Abraham dispatches a servant to find him one. Isaac is so passive that he doesn't speak a word in the whole episode. His only part in it appears in a single verse that suggests his need for comfort and consolation: he takes Rebekah into his mother's tent, loves her, and finds comfort in her after his mother's death. He is the only character in Genesis who needs to be comforted for the death of his mother. The few adventures he has on his own aren't even original: they tend to repeat his father's experiences. He does pray for Rebekah to have children, though, placing his faith in God rather than resorting to concubinage, as his parents did.

Isaac's main actions occur in one chapter, Genesis 26, which is in large part about his debacle when he travels to the land of Gerar. The Lord promises to be with him, to bless him, to multiply his offspring, and to give them the lands that he has promised to give to Abraham's descendants. But Isaac is frightened anyway. He settles in Gerar and, in the very next verse, he makes his beloved Rebekah sexually available to the Gerarites. Like father like son: Isaac tells them that she is his sister, hoping that they won't kill him. Looking out a window, Abimelech, the ruler of Gerar, happens see Isaac fooling around with Rebekah and realizes that Isaac has misled him. Abimelech rebukes Isaac, who confesses that he was afraid to admit that she is his wife.

The Lord tells Isaac, "Fear not" and assures him that he will be with him. But the fear and trembling in the title of Kierkegaard's book, though meant to describe Abraham, characterize Isaac even more accurately. Still, the Lord blesses Isaac again and he becomes wealthy in Gerar, with crops, livestock, and servants. As a result, Abimelech expels him, and the Philistines envy him and stop up his wells. In each case, Isaac avoids confrontation. He peacefully moves on until he digs a well that does not lead to trouble with his neighbors.

Isaac is abundantly blessed by the Lord, but his portrayal nonetheless fits the profile of traumatic injury. Van der Kolk observes that trauma is especially harmful when it happens at the hands of people on whom one depends for

nurturance and security. When the source of the trauma is a trusted caregiver, it can shatter that trust and leave the victim feeling isolated.[10] People who have suffered trauma often avoid stimuli associated with the event later. Trauma victims also can develop problems with emotional regulation and cognition, especially when dealing with stressful situations, and their responses may be intensely irritable. They also may develop illnesses and fear dying early or abruptly. And being traumatized once makes it more likely that the person will be traumatized again later.[11]

All of those things appear in the story of Isaac. He is almost butchered and burned by the person who is charged with protecting and caring for him. Trauma victims avoid the source of the terrifying experience, and that is true here: Isaac has no contact with his father again. As several readers have noted, the narrator conspicuously does not say that Isaac comes down the mountain with Abraham after the Binding. Isaac's only words to his father in all of Genesis are his question about where the lamb for the sacrifice is. After that, he never speaks to Abraham again. The next time we see him he has left his father's house and is living alone in the Negev Desert. In many ways he is defined by what he avoids or doesn't do. Although Abraham mourns and wails for Sarah when she dies, there is no mention that Isaac does, or that he is even present when Abraham buries her.[12]

Trauma can lead to chronic health conditions and the expectation of impending death. Isaac suffers from both: he goes blind and expects to die twenty years before his actual death. The midrash attributes his blindness to the tears of the ministering angels at the Aqedah, which fall into Isaac's eyes, causing them to grow dim later in life. That elegantly captures the idea that Isaac's loss of vision is a response to the unnaturalness and sadness of the Binding.[13]

Many trauma survivors are retraumatized, and that happens to Isaac. Both times he is victimized by people we might expect to love and protect him. It happens first when his father nearly sacrifices him, then again years later when Rebekah and their son Jacob deceive him. In Genesis 27, Isaac expects to die and wants a delicious meal before he passes away. So, he tells Esau to hunt for some game. In fact, the text specifies that Isaac loves Esau because he loves the savory game that Esau brings him. Rebekah, by contrast, loves Jacob, who, God has told her, will prevail over his older brother. That divid-

ed parental favoritism plays out in a deceit that fulfills God's oracle but causes a rift in the chosen family. The effects last for decades.

Rebekah bossily instructs Jacob to take advantage of his father's blindness and his brother's absence to steal the blessing that Isaac intends to give to Esau. The ruse is preposterous: His outfit is outlandish, it's the wrong food (kid, not wild game), his voice doesn't sound like his virile older brother's, and he claims to have returned from the hunt too quickly. Isaac is understandably suspicious. And yet the trick works easily – too easily, giving the scene a fairy tale quality. That, too, may owe to the text's being marked by details typical of trauma. Diminished cognition and difficulty in dealing with stressful circumstances can be sequelae of trauma, and Isaac seems almost impaired as he tries to figure out if he is being duped at this critical moment in his life. A man who takes comfort in sensory pleasure, Isaac relies on his sensory perceptions – the sound of Jacob's voice, the feel of his skin, the smell of his garments – to test whether he is being deceived. Like a child, Isaac is unable to tell the difference between kidskin and his older son's hairy hands and neck.[14] It apparently never occurs to him to use his wits, to ask questions that only Esau could answer. Isaac eats the dinner, but he is still afraid he is being fooled. So, he invites Jacob to kiss him – and sniffs his clothing, just in case, to make sure it smells like Esau's. That seems to convince him, and he gives Jacob the blessing. When Isaac learns that he has been deceived, he is retraumatized. J emphasizes the severity of his agitation with a striking visual description, saying that the horrified Isaac quakes with a very great and violent trembling.

Several eminent critics consider Isaac to be feckless and weak. Meir Sternberg sees him as "sightless, baffled, feelings in clash with reason, self-image eclipsed by paternal example, ill at ease with every single member of his family." Wiesel calls Isaac the most tragic figure in biblical history. Everett Fox says that Isaac has almost no personality of his own and is practically a non-character who is both literally and figuratively blind. Gordon J. Wenham observes that Isaac is an ineffectual man who gets pushed around.[15] But perhaps we can reframe Isaac's portrayal by reading it more compassionately, as the story of a victim of a terrifying near-death experience that caused lasting damage and diminishment.

Still, Isaac redeems himself. He affirms the legitimacy of Jacob's new stature as *bekhor*, and perhaps even its place in God's plan, when he tells Esau that *Yes, he will be blessed*. Then, at Rebekah's urging, he calls Jacob to him. Without a word of recrimination over Jacob's very recent deception and theft, Isaac charges him to find a wife from Rebekah's family in Paddan-aram. Acting with patriarchal dignity and authority, he blesses Jacob again, more fully than the first time. Isaac, damaged and infirm, puts aside any anger or resentment he may feel and behaves nobly toward Jacob. That advances God's plan and is Isaac's final act in Genesis.

Why does Genesis return so insistently to the dynamic of failure, dysfunction and suffering in Israel's ancestors?

First, it establishes the frailty and fallibility of human beings. Even people who have been blessed by God can forget their faith and abandon those who depend on them, especially when they are afraid for their lives. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all do that at their weakest moments. Earthlings are the sometimes-disappointing material that God has to work with. As Nahum Sarna points out, "The biblical heroes are not portrayed as demigods or perfect human beings. They are mortals of flesh and blood, subject to the same temptations and possessed of the same frailties as are all other human beings." Harold Bloom goes so far as to assert that J has no heroes, only heroines.[16] I would put it somewhat differently: the patriarchs display extraordinary, even heroic virtues and strengths at various times. But, in the end, the unblinking realism of Genesis reveals how flawed people are. As for their wives and daughters, they are every bit as clever and determined as the men, and just as flawed in their own ways. They all err. But God can turn even bad actions to good ends in Genesis, and his plan comes to pass despite the humans' failures and doubts.

Second, as Burton Visotzky says, we can identify with these people precisely because of their weaknesses and dysfunction.[17] The consequences of their mistreatment of others can serve as warnings to us about human vulnerability and the need to act with kindness and love, especially toward our children.

Third, Genesis addresses the reality of human suffering and trauma, much as the tragedies of ancient Greece do. Bryan Doerries argues that this was the original purpose of classical Greek tragedy. He concludes that these ancient

plays foster compassion and understanding for the tragic characters, and, by extension, for ourselves.[18]

Genesis serves a similar function, but with a crucial difference. Like the tragedies, it gives voice to timeless human experiences of suffering and grief, but it adds to that the cost of being chosen. Genesis comes close to tragedy. When Abraham and Isaac make their wives available to foreign princes and lie about it, when Abraham and Sarah laugh at God and she lies about it, when Jacob lies to his father and steals Esau's blessing, and when Jacob's older sons sell Joseph into slavery and deceive their father about it – each of those episodes could provoke God or men and potentially lead to a tragic outcome. But unlike the Greek plays, Genesis ends in inclusion and reconciliation. That is made possible by God's *hesed,* in concert with the love and forgiveness that the characters ultimately display. God redeems his chosen ones, even when that seems impossible. That provides a comfort that the tragedies do not.

NOTES

1. R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (HarperCollins, 2001; ebook, 2012), note on Genesis 22:19.

2. Sforno: *Commentary on the Torah* (Rahway, N.J.: Mesorah Publications, 2021), p. 64.

3. P. Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. P. Trible and L. M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, Kindle ed.), ch. 2. See also Visotzky, *Genesis of Ethics* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996; Kindle ed), ch. 2.

4. See N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 94-95. See also Levenson, "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," pp. 4-7.

5. See B. A. van der Kolk, *Psychological Trauma* (Washington, D.C., and London: American Psychiatric Publishing, 1987), pp. xi-xii et passim; "The History of Trauma in Psychiatry," in *Handbook of PTSD: Science and Practice*, M. J. Friedman, L. M. Keane, P. A. Resnick, eds. (New York and London: Guilford Press, 2007), pp. 19-36

6. Van der Kolk, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma," pp. 1-22. See also C. Caruth's discussion of reexperiencing trauma as "possession by the past" in "Introduction: Recapturing the Past," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. C. Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2, pp. 151-57. Also see *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Sciences*, ch. 3 and A. Fletcher, *Wonderworks: Literary Invention and the Science of Stories* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2021), p. 19.

7. Genesis 18:12, 21:6. L. Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. xvi.

8. R. Alter, *The David Story: A Translation and Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York and London: Norton, 1999; Kindle ed.), note on 1 Samuel 17:26.
9. E. Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, Marion Wiesel, transl. (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1976; Kindle ed.), "The Sacrifice of Isaac."
10. A. L. Busch and A. F. Lieberman, "Attachment and Trauma: An Integrated Approach to Treating Young Children Exposed to Family Violence," in *Attachment Theory in Clinical Work with Children*, D. Oppenheim and D. F. Goldsmith, eds. (New York and London: Guilford Press, 2007), p. 139; "SAMSHA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," p. 7.
11. "Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Sciences," *NCBI Bookshelf, Treatment Improvement Protocol Series*, 57, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Rockville, Maryland, 2014, ch. 3. See van der Kolk, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma," p. 23.
12. See M. J. Kohn, "The Trauma of Isaac," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 20.92 (1991), pp. 96-104.
13. Genesis Rabbah, 56:5, 65:10. See J. N. Trachtman, "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Vision," https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20435270 .
14. Sforno stresses the vast difference between human and goat hair and conjectures that Isaac's sense of touch was weakened, along with his sight (*Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*, 142).
15. M. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 350; Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, "The Sacrifice of Isaac"; E. Fox, *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1983), p. 97; G. J. Wenham, *Word Bible Commentary 1: Genesis 1-15* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 2, p.194.
16. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 94; Bloom, *Book of J*, p. 32.
17. Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics*, ch. 1.
18. B. Doerries, *The Theater of War* (New York: Knopf).