

BOOK REVIEW

Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought by Aaron Koller (Philadelphia: JPS; Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2020), 223 + xxxiv pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

Genesis 22:1-19, the *Akedah*, the “Binding” of Isaac, has “haunted readers for thousands of years. The story is compact, taut ... there is only one brief dialogue ... The paucity of literary details contrasts sharply with the power of the story told ... [it is] one of the most enduringly terrifying stories in the Bible” (p. xx). In the Introduction to this book, Aaron Koller, quoting Moshe Bar-Asher, notes that “the questions that the Akedah raises are far better than any of the answers that have been suggested.” Traditionally read twice a year, once in the autumn in its normal Torah cycle, and again at Rosh Hashanah. It causes one to “tremble, and anyone who has any sort of ethical sensibility will continue to protest and not to understand” (p. xxii).

Koller’s book is generally readable and thoughtfully composed; it concentrates “on interpretations that result from thinkers thinking about the Akedah from a philosophical or theological vantage point: what does it say about God, believers, faith” (pp. xxvii-xxviii). Koller divides his work into eight chapters. The first sets the stage by investigating how “primarily Jewish readers have understood, responded to, and used the Akedah” (p. xxix). Chapter two discusses the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s 19th century essay *Fear and Trembling*, which seeks to address an ethically oriented approach to the Akedah (see pp. 29 ff.). Kierkegaard refers to Abraham as a “Knight of Faith.” Koller argues that Kierkegaard’s essay is “deeply problematic...[because] it can be boiled down to a single lesson, [which]...is that true faith may necessitate the violation of the ethical on occasion and that the person of faith may in fact defy what she knows to be ethical for her faith, on rare but real occasions” (p. xxviii). In chapter three

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Koller makes reference to Jewish writers who, like Kierkegaard, lived in the 19th century (see pp. 55 ff.). He presents arguments somewhat similar to Kierkegaard from giants in the Jewish rabbinic world including Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer), Mordechai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (the Izbicer), and Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (Malbim).

Chapter four is devoted to two great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, the German-Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz (pp. 66 ff.), and the Lithuanian-American rabbi and existentialist, Joseph Ber Soloveitchik (pp. 72 ff.). “Both were profoundly affected by Kierkegaard’s thought in general, and his approach to the Akedah in particular” (p. xxx). Koller challenges the conclusions of both of these thinkers.

The fifth chapter is devoted to “Criticizing Kierkegaard.” A central focus in this chapter is “The Erasure of Isaac.” Koller quotes the contemporary philosopher Moshe Halbertal who points out that Kierkegaard’s “Knight of Faith,” Abraham, “was willing to sacrifice his moral obligation as a father in order to follow God’s will ... [but] the real victim of the story is Isaac, not Abraham. Isaac would have been slaughtered in the end.” Then Koller states clearly, “Ignoring Isaac in the story of the Akedah is monstrous. This is the ethically fatal problem with Kierkegaard’s reading of the narrative” (p. 99).

Next, in the sixth chapter the author begins with an exploration of child sacrifice in ancient Canaan, and points out that in that context, killing one’s child was not considered unethical. Here he also addresses the idea “that the *second* part of the story – the *non-sacrifice* of Isaac – is one of the primary ethical teachings” of the Akedah (p. xxxi, emphasis in original).

Drawing on what Koller understands to be the thinking of Rambam (Maimonides, 12th century), and Joseph ibn Kaspi (14th century), in chapter seven he argues “that God *partially* – but only partially – desired the sacrifice of Isaac, while God *fully* desired that Abraham not sacrifice him” (p. xxxi, emphasis in original). In this chapter titled “Maimonides and the Complexity of the Divine Will” Koller posits that “it is possible to read the story of the Akedah as rejecting, but not altogether repudiating, the initial command to Abraham to sacrifice his son ... Maimonides shows how to understand the two stages of the Akedah in a way that is both textually and philosophically coherent” (p. 127).

Finally, in chapter eight, Koller works through some troubling biblical texts before he reaches his closing thoughts. These texts include the narrative of Micaiah ben Imlah – 1 Kings 22; Isaiah 6:10; and Ezekiel 14:9-10. He then shares these thoughts: The Akedah teaches us a powerful lesson. Children, “like all other human beings, cannot be mere adjuncts in someone else’s religious experience ... one person’s religious fulfillment cannot come through harm to another. The trial of Abraham cannot involve the murder of Isaac” (p. 147). This is followed by a short conclusionary section. He notes that for “Kierkegaard and the Malbim, the fact that Abraham was alone with God on the mountaintop is critical to understanding the religious point of the story: the fundamentally personal nature of faith” (p. 153). Yet he continues by noting that we must remember that actually Isaac was there as well. Koller’s last words say it well: “As a society, we must allow knights of faith to ascend the mountain to be alone with God. But we must not allow them to bring Isaac along” (p. 154).

Readers of this review might want to get a kind of introduction to Koller’s thinking on this subject by reading his short essay on the website, TheTorah.com, “Abraham Passes the Test of the Akedah But Fails as a Father” by accessing this URL: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/abraham-passes-the-test-of-the-akedah-but-fails-as-a-father>

Koller’s views and conclusions have been challenged by some more traditionalist Orthodox thinkers as one might see by doing an online search.

The book is enhanced by a Bibliography, Endnotes, and both an Index and an Index of Texts. In addition the Jewish Publication Society offers a complementary study and discussion guide which provides some extra texts, guiding questions, and scholarly sources. It is available at <https://jps.org/books/unbinding-isaac>