

## KIDDUSH HASHEM AND A GAME OF SECRETS

By Aaron Finestone

In his 1950 novel, 'The Wall,' John Hersey writes about a fictitious diary from the Warsaw Ghetto.

The entry of May 7, 1943 -- relates an incident in a bunker. German soldiers were down the street. A baby was crying. His mother could not control him.

"Israel (the baby) howled. An intolerable contest was now established --- between the will of a single infant and the rage and fear of nearly a hundred adults. Rapaport (the diarist) says he himself was now drawn despite himself into the mob fury against the intractable baby. A shot distantly heard in a moment between screams tipped the balance of the contest. Yitzhok walked to Rutka (the mother) and spoke to her in a gentle voice.

----Give me the baby. Let me try to quiet him.

He took the child and carried it across the room away from Rutka. Rapaport says he could not see exactly what Yitzhok did: he only saw that the commander was hunched over slightly, and suddenly (too suddenly Rapaport says) the child was silent. Rapaport

saw the faces in a circle around stooping Yitzhok; they contained a mixture of relief and horror. Yitchok carried the baby back to Rutka. She was still on her knees. She had no idea what had happened, only that Israel had stopped wailing, and that Yitzhok had brought this about. She looked up at him through her tears, and her face was grateful and eased.

Rutka, as she took the baby in her arms: --- Thank you so much! How did you manage?

Rutka did not know until the infant's cheek grew cold against her breast that it was dead."

When I read THE WALL years ago, I did not believe that such a killing of a child could have happened.

As I prepared this talk, I learned that the Akeidah was precedent for taking a life in the sanctification of God's name. Kiddush Hashem.

The Akeidah is a web of secrets.

I call your attention to the work of Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who died in 2004. He was born into a Sephardic family in Algeria. In "The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret," Derrida speaks of "a secret, hidden, separate, absent, or mysterious

God, the one who . . . , without revealing God's reasons. . . ." demands that Abraham offer Isaac as a sacrifice. "All that goes on is in secret. God keeps silence about God's reasons. Abraham does also. . . ." Derrida writes.

When Isaac asks where is the lamb for the offering, Abraham replies that God will provide. Derrida writes, "It cannot be said that Abraham does not respond to him. Abraham keeps his secret at the same time as he replies to Isaac. He does not keep silent and he does not lie. He does not speak non-truth. . . . He does not speak of it to Sarah, or to Eliezer, or to Isaac. He must keep the secret (that is his duty), but it is also a secret which he must keep as a double necessity because at the bottom he can only keep it: He does not know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret."

Derrida says Abraham betrays ethics. His silence, or at least the fact that he does not divulge the secret of the sacrifice is certainly not designed to save Isaac.

Abraham presents himself before God, the unique, jealous, secret God, the one to whom he says, "Here I am." But in order to do that he must renounce his family loyalties, and refuse to present himself before humans. He no longer speaks to them. That at least is what the sacrifice of Isaac suggests, Derrida writes.

In "The Genesis of Justice," law professor Alan Dershowitz writes that Abraham may have gone along with God's command for self-serving reasons.

"He believed that if he disobeyed God's direct order, God would kill him as God had killed Lot's wife. By killing his own son, Abraham would be saving himself," Dershowitz writes. Abraham may have believed that if he refused God's command, both he and Isaac would be killed by God, but if he complied, God might spare at least one of them.

Dershowitz recounts a midrash on Abraham's self-interest. According to this midrash, the Akeidah shows that Abraham believed in Olam Habah---the world to come. He would not have agreed to sacrifice his only son and continue living a life without hope and without a future. He was ready to listen to God's command, knowing that for his sacrifice in this world, God would repay him well in Olam Habah.

Maimonides refuses to attribute Abraham's compliance to fear of consequences. "For Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God would slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is humanity's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment." Dershowitz writes.

The American poet Chana Bloch, who died in 2007, offers a different view. She portrays Abraham as Resolute in his faith, accepting the order of God without doubt. In her poem "Sacrifice," Bloch writes

The patriarch in black takes

candle and knife  
like cutlery,  
rehearsing under his breath  
the Benediction on the Death of an Only Son.

The Akeidah is a story of revelation. The Everett Fox translation is instructive. God told Abraham to take Isaac and "go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing."

As Abraham was about to slay Isaac, God's "messenger called him from heaven and said: Avraham! Avraham! He said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, do not do anything to him! For now I know that you are in awe of God --- you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me."

Abraham saw a ram in the thicket and offered up the ram in place of Isaac. Fox continues, "Avraham called the name of that place YHWH Sees. As the saying is today: On YHWH's mountain (it) is seen."

There has been a double revelation.

Abraham has revealed himself to God. God has revealed God's self to Abraham.

Dershowitz writes that by commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God was telling

Abraham that in accepting the covenant, there were no assurances that life would be perfect. Being a Jew often requires sacrificing that which is most precious --- even children.

Dershowitz writes that during the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Holocaust, many "Abrahams" killed their own "Isaacs," to prevent their forced conversion, torture, rape and eventual murder. The traditional view of the Akeidah influenced the willingness of Jews "to turn the Biblical prohibition against murder into an act of Kiddush Ha-Shem (honoring of God).

From the Holocaust we have the account of the 93 teenage martyrs from the Beis Yaakov girls school in Cracow. There are different versions of the story. On January 12, 1943, the Canberra Times reported that 93 girls signed a letter which was smuggled out through Switzerland. The girls were about to be forced into a brothel for German soldiers when they committed suicide. The letter stated, "Our ages are between 14 and 22. The Nazis took everything away except our nightgowns. The soldiers are coming but we have some poison and shall drink it; we have no fear. Our only last wish is --- please, say a prayer for the 93 dead children."

According to Dershowitz, before taking poison, they collaborated on a poem, which included the following lines:

"Death does not terrify us; we go out to meet it. We served our God while we were alive; We shall know how to sanctify God by our death. We shall test --- the test of the binding of Isaac."

To paraphrase Dershowitz, God warned Abraham that the Covenant offered no assurances that sacrifices would not be required. Sometimes God would intervene. Sometimes God would not. That is the nature of a covenant. The worst of tragedies do not mean that God has broken the covenant. Religion is not a panacea for all of life's tragedies.

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All quotations and paraphrases have been adapted.

Sources:

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