Shimon Levy

**Notes Towards a Production of the Binding of Isaac (Akedah)**

**Opening: Biblical text, designed in a stage play format, punctuated in a contemporary style, for the convenience of the actors.**

And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham.

**God: Abraham.**

**Abraham: Here am I.**

**God: Take now thy son, thine only son… whom thou lovest… even Isaac! and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.**

And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

**Abraham (to his young men): Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you.**

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they went both of them together.

**Isaac (to Abraham. his father): My father? (!)**

**Abraham: Here am I, my son.**

**Isaac: Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?**

**Abraham: God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son (?)**

So, they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order. And bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

**The angel of the LORD (from heaven) to Abraham: Abraham, (?) Abraham!**

**Abraham: Here am I.**

**Angel: Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me. (?!)**

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went, and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-jireh; as it is said to this day: “In the mount where the LORD is seen.”

**Angel: By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to My voice!**

So, Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba

**Epilogue**

And it came to pass after these things, **that it was told Abraham, saying: Behold, Milcah, she also hath borne children unto thy brother Nahor: Uz his first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begot Rebekah; these eight did Milcah bear to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she also bore Tebah, and Gaham, and Tahash, and Maacah.**

While the Book of Genesis offers a dramatic relationship triangle, whose vertices are God, Abraham (father) and son. Christianity preserved these figures but reversed their relationship in a brilliant theological move and as a proclamation of the new covenant. In Christianity, God does not ask the father to sacrifice his son to Him, which Isaiah Leibowitz defines as a theocentric approach, but rather actually sacrifices Jesus, His own son, for the salvation of mankind. This anthropocentric perspective is not satisfied with a ram, like Abraham and his God. The happy ending of the Christian Akedah stage play only commences once Jesus and those who have received his salvation are invited to ascend to heaven. Indeed, in the Middle Ages and later, the Church permitted stage plays of the story of the Akedah in city squares or on top of wagon carts, in England, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. These performances provided both entertainment and religious education, as the Akedah story was understood, among other things, as a prefiguration of the crucifixion of Jesus. And yet, the dramatic foundations of this narrative, nay, even, their theatrical depth, can be found in **Genesis** 22.

Utilizing Aristotelian terms that apply mainly to classical drama, and sometimes to biblical dramas as well, we will first review the place designated for this biblical horror story: one of the mountains in the land of Moriah. The playwright refrained from providing an exact location for the dramatic space that is set aside for the sacrifice. The plot is stretched out over the three-day journey of Abraham, Isaac, the two young men, and the ass, after mentioning that it, “Came to pass after these things.” These “things” are two dramatic and fascinating episodes that appear in Genesis 21: the conflict and subsequent covenant with Abimelech, and most importantly in the context of Abraham’s relationship with his sons – the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael that is a precursor to the Akedah. To present the Akedah in all of its terror, the narrative extends over three days instead of just one, as we also find with the Greeks. This movement is also measured as the distance from Beersheba to Mount Moriah, around a hundred kilometers (62 miles). The plot of the Akedah stage play, which is proclaimed in advance as God putting, “Abraham to the test,” is the instruction, canceled at the last minute, to offer Isaac as a burnt-offering, **“Upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”** There is great dramatic tension in the uncertainty of whether Abraham will pass the test and offer his only beloved son, and possibly even greater tension – if he will not pass the test; possibly, perhaps it will be God who will not pass the test that Abraham is setting up for Him?

The stage directions in the Bible, if we utilize the terminology characteristic of the theater, list seven human figures (corresponding to the number of characters in the work), who, in order of appearance are: God, Abraham, two (silent) young men, Isaac, an angel, as well as one or several offstage character or characters, who is veiled behind the words “It was told [to] Abraham, saying.” An ass also participates in this play, but it is Isaac, rather than it, who carries the wood for the sacrifice. The happy conclusion will have the non-human ram as the burnt-offering. The playwright connects the killing tools and the sacrifice with those who carry them to the performance. The sensitive viewer understands that the minimalist language of objects focuses the attention on the language itself by representing and exchanging verbal emotional expressions. The wood for the sacrifice that is collected on the way to the slaughter, the fire (probably already kindled and carried by Abraham as a torch, or in some metal vessel) and the knife are carried by Abraham. The slaughter and the kindling are in the hands of the father, the wood and the one to be burned — the son. The event requires an altar, which in terms of stage, is both an area of activity, and also serves as a lighting accessory.

The movement diagram towards the spectacle of the sacrifice of the son, as well as the performance itself opens with the sweeping mandate “*Lekh Lekha*/Go Forth.” Then, during the three-day journey, as mentioned, filled by oppressive silence, only interrupted by a short dialogue, the place that God intended for the father to sacrifice his son is discovered. An additional movement instruction indicates seeing a place “afar off” and approaching the place of the expected sacrifice: “And they came to the place which God had told him.” The place of the ram in the thicket is also crucial, so the text also indicates approaching it. At the conclusion, another movement is recorded – utterly non-neutral and innocent – back to Beersheba.

The structure of this horror masterpiece consists of a prologue that serves as a layered and enticing introduction, seven images, and an epilogue. The division of images below is based on the scenic transitions, in other words, on the entry or exit of a character, or a change in the plot setting. Within the supremely tight structure, six, full or fragmented, two-way, and one-way, dialogues can be found, as well as stage directions that reinforce both the dialogues and the potential performative aspect of the event, i.e., its distinct theatricality. This performative connection is mainly expressed in the stage performance of some of the elements of stage language, such as the movement – the slowing down and acceleration implied by the movements and stops of the characters – which dictate the pace of the plot’s development, its meaning, and its intensity.

As in any great performance, the playwright allows the non-verbal stage languages ​​to express emotions, rather than slipping into emotional verbal kitsch, and to verbalize in the stage directions, or in the lines of the characters, that, humanly speaking, what is currently taking place is a terrible and horrifying event. Even if it is “only” a test, that will end, as implied in advance and further on in the text (Abraham proclaims in the plural: “I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and **[we will] come back to you**.” Is this a lie? A prophecy? A hope?...) without the slaughter of the son.

First Image

A two-way dialogue between God and Abraham opens with a polite request, “Take now,” which adjourns with the brutality of a slowly intensifying close-up, a series of four measured approaches to the sacrifice, as interpreted in a well-known Midrash. When Abraham is instructed: “Take now thy son,” he replies, “I have two sons,” possibly adding to himself that “Indeed, one of them I have already expelled.” At this point, another voice, God, is heard, “Thine only son,” and in a sub-text, Abraham brings to mind, “Each is an only son to his mother,” Hagar and Sarah. Then follows, “Whom thou lovest” — “Quite right,” Abraham begins to think to himself, as he now begins to understand what exactly God has in mind, “Indeed, I love both of them, despite my actions towards Ishmael.” At this point, the sudden Divine command lands with a bang: “Isaac,” removing any last remaining doubt as to whom God is referring to.

With great wisdom and sensitivity, the Midrash provides Abraham with a hidden text, an opening that provides room for the imaginations of the audience as well. The degree of clarity and stage explicitness of this speechlessness depends, of course, on the direction of this image, the ability of the actor, and the sensitivity of the audience. God still postpones the main directive, “Get thee into the land of Moriah,” before he pronounces, “And offer him there for a burnt-offering.” The cunning playwright softens the horror of “And offer him there for a burnt-offering,” by adding, “Upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of,” as if slightly blurring the meaning of the directive, minimizing the level of shock caused by the previous words. Whoever plays God in this section should speak slowly, perhaps using only his natural voice? Should he plant pregnant pauses between the words? Should he provide enough time for Abraham to comprehend? To digest? To be prepared. To agree. To get organized.

Second Image

And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

Abraham gets organized, and then speaks to the young men, a one-sided dialogue. After the first image, God withdraws from the show, and never appears again. Further on, an angel will take His place. Placing a character offstage serves several dramatic purposes. One of them, as we learned from Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, intensifies the expectation, perhaps for God, certainly for redemption and salvation. Another is to generate Søren Kierkegaard’s *fear and trembling*. Another possibility is to raise the question: Why should God be present in such a violent production?

After the speech in the previous image, and God’s command is certainly a speech act, the fifty-two words in this image contain intense activity in eight verbs: rose early, saddled, took, cleaved, rose up, went, lifted; four further verbs in the request to the young men: abide, go, worship, come back. The director of the stage play may wish to utilize the verbs that describe Abraham’s organizing activities before embarking on his journey as a proposed *mise-en-scène* since the sequence they create – from waking up until viewing from afar the place of sacrifice – is saturated with unbearable tension, increasing from action to action, in light of their purpose, and meaning. No less theatrical are the necessary gaps of silence between the performed actions.

For example, what exactly was Abraham thinking or imagining while he was busy chopping the wood for the burnt-offering? From what space in his soul did he first raise his eyes, and then see the place afar off? How did he know that this was in fact the intended place? As this place was still somewhere far of, Abraham fills the distance until the area of the sacrifice with comforting words to the young men: **“Abide ye here with the ass,”** and in an equally ironic vein, as Abraham and his audience in the hall are aware of what Isaac and the young men on the stage do not yet know, he indirectly reassures Isaac as well: “**And I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you.”**

On the stage, additional tension emerges between the acts of preparation for the sacrifice, including the facial expressions and movements of Abraham, who is performing these actions, and the calm he attempts to convey in his speech to the young men, and to Isaac, who is present and silently listening. As an accompanying *image*, one can focus on the conversation of the two young men who were left behind with the ass, and wonder what they brayed, what they said, and what they thought.

Third Image

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they went both of them together.

**And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: My father.**

**And he said: Here am I, my son…**

**And he said: Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?**

**And Abraham said: God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.**

While the second image focused, stage-wise, on the dialogue between silent actions and the speech to the young men concealing them, the third image concentrates on the dialogue between the verbal language and the supraverbal language of the sacrificial accessories. The sensitive playwright added, in a gentle and sharp stage direction, the (seemingly?) obvious implied meaning: “**And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father**.” The director of the image is invited to struggle with the word “together” which connects the victim and the one doing the sacrificing, between the fire, the knife, the wood of the burnt-offering; between the father and the son, between the “behold” and the “where?”

Fourth Image

**So they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.**

After another walk, where the father’s silence overlaps with the silence of the son, the notion that they are in this “together” is highlighted again. One senses a deliberate slowing down of activity, as the pair approach and transition from walking to arriving, to building the altar, to bounding Isaac on the wood, to Abraham “stretching forth his hand,” and “taking the knife” – all in preparation for the upcoming slaughter. In cinema, the director may choose to film this in slow-motion. In film, seemingly the more realistic medium, the characters are projected onto the screen of the film, while in theater they are “truly” there. Film theorist André Bazin put it like this: “The stage welcomes every illusion except that of presence… the cinema accommodates every form of reality save one—the physical presence of the actor.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The stage performance of the Akedah requires a live presence, and an unmediated experience between the stage and the audience, and the inevitable confrontation with the hovering question, “If I were called to sacrifice my most cherished thing of all, would I obey?”

The fourth image is located in the middle of the stage play, during the climax, and contains no dialogue, which creates the potential – as commentators have well understood – to slip into pathos or kitsch. David Heyd views this narrative as an experiment that Abraham conducted on God – and God blinked first.[[2]](#endnote-2) Given the many passages of the Bible that present an anthropocentric perspective, many of which are also found in the biography of our forefather Abraham, such a subversive-rebellious position is certainly enjoyable for the (secular) soul and helps to overcome the emotional-moral gap involved in a psychotic sacrifice of a son. Directing this image is not necessarily less tense and suspenseful than one would expect from a scene of a God that tests human beings.

Fifth Image

**And the angel of the LORD called unto him (out of heaven), and said: Abraham, Abraham.**

**And he said: Here am I.**

**And he said: ‘Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me.**

An interesting acting exercise can be offered to the actor who plays Abraham. He will attempt to express his self-presentation, his “here am I” in three different forms, once to God, once to his son Isaac, and once to an angel, who needed to call him twice – a brilliant stage direction that serves as an indirect characterization of the degree of concentration and focus that Abraham invested in raising his hand to his son’s neck. As in a suspenseful film, the horror is suspended and postponed until the very last second, and with it, the belief in God, or in man – all according to the point of view of the stage-manager and the audience.

The fact that ultimately it is an angel – and not God – that prevents the slaughter, provides space for the director to provide several fascinating stage interpretations. Is this an indirect confession that Abraham emerged as the victor of this conflict, and it was unpleasant for God to see himself as the loser in this tug-of-war? A triumphant smile with a slight hint of pale relief plastered across the face of Abraham...

Sixth Image

A sacrifice without a victim is inconceivable in this stage play, and it is no coincidence that a ram found itself caught in the theological-ethical-emotional thicket. The subversive director will compensate the bloodthirsty audience with the blood of the ram. Maybe this time Isaac will assist his father with the slaughter, and the kindling of the fire, and thus overcome a difficult trauma.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went, and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-jireh; as it is said to this day: “In the mount where the LORD is seen.”

Seventh Image

And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, **and said: By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed**.

**Immediately following the blessing, the director brings the image to its conclusion:** Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

The imagined normality of Abraham’s return to the young men is quite striking. Here, the genius playwright again uses the word “together” which in retrospect can be interpreted quite differently from the previous times. A more natural and understandable normality is reflected in the *homeopathic blessing, according to which*, *the willingness* to sacrifice a child can serve to inspire the desire to have many more children. This blessing remains with us, until this very day. The epilogue is dedicated to this theme; the promise and its immediate fulfillment. To the clever audience member, it is implied that God, and his angel messenger, fulfilled their promise, without delay. Out of the names of the thirteen newborns mentioned in the epilogue – the happy ending – I find Tahash and Maacah to be endearing, but I especially love the names, Tebah and Gaham.

The epilogue concludes, in the same form as the stage play began:

And it came to pass after these things, **that it was told Abraham, saying: Behold, Milcah, she also hath borne children unto thy brother Nahor: Uz his first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begot Rebekah; these eight did Milcah bear to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she also bore Tebah, and Gaham, and Tahash, and Maacah.**

1. André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkely 1971, p. 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David Heyd, “Between Response and Responsiveness: On Michael Sgan-Cohen’s Hinneni,” *Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture*: *Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation* eds. R. C. Washton Long, M. Baigell, and M. Heyd, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2009), pp. 273-285. [*Studio* 122, April 2001, pp. 42-49. (Hebrew)] [↑](#endnote-ref-2)