

# TWO DIALOGUES OF ABRAHAM WITH GOD

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There are many tales about Abraham that include dialogues between him and an interlocutor. Such dialogues are often a fragment of a larger story, a depiction of an event. These dialogues may be between Abraham and another human being or an exchange between Abraham and God. Yet there are two dialogues in the latter category that stand out in their theological or philosophical significance, for they contradict each other and thus are incompatible. They cry out for comment and interpretation. Each of them expresses a different concept of the nature of the God-man relationship. Indeed, one of them, on the intended sacrifice of Isaac, or the *aqeda* (the Hebrew word for “binding”) of Isaac,<sup>1</sup> assumes that man must obey divine demands blindly, even to the point of committing an atrocious crime. Another conveys the idea that man’s moral judgment can be formed and asserted in a free way and that God may be challenged by man, if the latter has reason to doubt the intrinsic value of the divine decision or deed.

Thus, the two dialogues can be said to

conduct a hidden dialogue between two theological-philosophical approaches that seem irreconcilable. This tacit dialogue, in the last resort, amounts to the fundamental question, Is it absolute obedience to divine commandment or moral judgment that ought to guide human conduct? To put it bluntly: Does morality precede religion, or does religion precede morality? The ideal answer would be that the two questions are not in conflict with one another. Yet, at this juncture, one is reminded of the question of Socrates in Plato’s *Euthyphro*: “The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved by the gods?”<sup>2</sup> Transposed to our problem, it amounts to asking, Does God follow what is right because it is right, or is it right because of God’s arbitrary choice? Morality and religion confront each: which of the two has precedence?

As is well known, Platonic dialogues conclude either with a query, because the Socratic insistence on logical consistency cannot be

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satisfied by the interlocutor, or with a positive philosophical presentation of a major issue that forms a substantial component of Plato's philosophy. Thus, apparently, the critical Socratic-Platonic approach and the constructive work of Plato produce a philosophical system and a distinctive picture of cohesive reality. In the case of the two tales of Abraham, the hidden arguments of the two dialogues are not explicitly stated. Yet they remain and are present in the mind of the devout reader. Indeed, they may become a provocative issue that turns into an incessant question mark, upsetting and even disturbing the reader.

The two profoundly different dialogues may easily bring to mind dichotomous characterizations of Western civilization through the ages. It may have started with Philo Judaeus (20 BC–AD 50), who sought to link Judaic beliefs with Greek philosophy and had a great influence on Christianity. Some kind of synthesis of Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy was initiated by Maimonides (1135–1204) and discussed by other medieval thinkers and had its counterpart in Christianity. Shemuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), an Italian rabbi and scholar, spoke of Atticismus and Abramismus, the first representing philosophy, arts, and science, the latter standing for religion and ethics. Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) spoke of Hebraism and Hellenism. Interestingly, Leo Strauss, professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago, commented on Jerusalem and Athens as representatives of two different cultural orientations, and apparently some of his students saw it as a philosophical foundation for neoconservatism—which proved to be a mistake.

**T**he two dialogues differ from each other, and not only in the theology or philosophy they represent, as the difference in the message affects the posture and the

conduct of each of the interlocutors. In the Sodom and Gomorrah dialogue, the main figure is Abraham, who responds to the divine decision to annihilate the sinful cities by challenging the divine decision on moral grounds, namely that some righteous people may perish there. God is almost passive and merely responds positively to Abraham's concerns. In the binding of Isaac case, it is God who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, and this time Abraham, far from questioning the divine decision, meekly proceeds to execute the command. The sequence of events leads to a happy ending of sorts, with God retaining the absolute power and judgment and Abraham reduced to a mere pawn in the hands of the Almighty. There is no Socratic consistency in the two dialogues. Abraham exhibits Socratic qualities in the case of Sodom, but they disappear in the case of the demanded sacrifice of Isaac, where God is not Socrates in search of truth, but an absolute ruler testing the obedience of his subject in a ruthless way.

It is noteworthy that the dialogues, while dealing each with a monumental issue, confine their respective theologies or philosophies within the space of very short stories—a masterpiece of saying much in a clear and succinct manner, for which biblical Hebrew is noted.

There is more to the two tales of Abraham that deserves attention, which justifies the following more detailed analysis of each.

**T**hese two Abrahamic stories present two different—indeed contradictory—attitudes of the Patriarch to God's intended actions or demands. It is this contradiction that has puzzled me and that, in my opinion, has never been satisfactorily resolved, impelling me to expand on each of the tales and the possible, or rather impossible, affinity of the two narratives.

One of the stories encapsulates the element of *belief* in Judaism; the other, the element of *morality*. Belief and morality *may* be compatible but are not *necessarily* so, as a philosopher of religion will have to conclude, whatever his confession, if any. Thus, the problem reaches beyond the pages of the Hebrew Bible and becomes universal.

Our first tale appears in Genesis 18:17–33. The half chapter contains a remarkable story. It is set in the context of a wider tale dealing with the morally corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Because of the sins of the inhabitants of these cities, God—who is a God of justice and righteousness—decides to destroy the sinful cities, including their inhabitants. Prior to taking the action, however, He wishes to inform Abraham of the design.

Abraham's privileged standing is linked to the special role that his progeny will play in future history: "they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and (right) judgment" (v. 19), which will set an example for all the nations of the earth. In other words, Abraham's heirs will be selected as the model of a just and moral community. It is this relationship with Abraham and the historical destiny and duty of his descendants that impels God to share His designs with him.

The divine resolve is clear and simple and transpires from the context, even if not explicitly stated. It is totally to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with their inhabitants. The logic of the story is straightforward and overwhelming in its simplicity: the cities have grievously sinned, their citizens are evil people, and they deserve the ultimate punishment, which God is ready to mete out. If this argument seems irrefutable, Abraham's reaction comes as a surprise. Instead of accepting God's just decision, he raises a question: "Wilt thou annihilate the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous in the city; wilt thou destroy

(all) and not lift (the punishment) to the city for the sake of fifty righteous that are in its midst?" (18:23–24).

And to make sure that God (and the reader) clearly understands his reasoning, Abraham amplifies the argument with an explicit moral exhortation: "Be it far from thee to do a thing like this, to kill the righteous with the wicked; that the righteous would be like the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the judge of the whole earth do (right) judgment?" (18:25). Clearly, the indignation of Abraham at such a possibility cannot be contained.

Significantly, God does not rebuke Abraham, as an earthly judge probably would, but agrees to refrain from destroying Sodom if fifty righteous are found in the city. (Apparently, the separation of the righteous from the wicked is not considered as a possibility.)

As the dialogue proceeds, Abraham brings down the number of righteous for whose sake the city would be spared to ten. Interestingly, he does not try to bring the number down to one and prove himself to be the absolute winner in the debate; for his concern is saving the lives of concrete individuals. Nor is the dialogue intended to show Abraham's bravado, for Abraham, while exhibiting what might be called *chutzpah*, actually is afraid of awaking God's anger. Not only does he limit his haggling to ten individuals, but during the argument he also takes a self-effacing posture vis-à-vis the Almighty: "Oh let not the Lord be angry and I will speak" (v. 30), for "I am but dust and ashes" (v. 27). Abraham trembles with fear, yet courageously insists on his point of view and persists in his quest to save the lives of the innocent.

Thus man is presented here not as a humble petitioner for God's mercy but as a bold defender of the principle of justice. Abraham

does not ask for God's pity but for man's right. The dialogue is between two beings, one almighty and the other "but dust and ashes"; both are moral judges, equals who speak the same language and implicitly are subject to the principles of ethics.

This means that the moral imperatives are the ultimate authority over conduct—human or divine. Before such authority, both man and God have to bend their wills, and by such authority both have to abide. Abraham embraces such a position with his whole being. God confirms it by complying with Abraham's demands, and finally by action, when he takes Lot and his family, the only righteous people, out of the city before destroying it. God the Almighty is unequivocally committed to justice and righteousness, and the doubts of Abraham about such unity of Might and Right are dispelled.

The second tale, as already mentioned, is found in Genesis 22:1–18. It opens with an explanatory statement of the narrator that "God tested Abraham" or "put Abraham to test," a more precise translation of the Hebrew text than that offered by the King James version. As the following story evolves, the reader encounters an ingenious but ruthless and cruel trial, a veritable *experimentum crucis*, to which Abraham is subjected. For God addresses Abraham in these words: "Take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for holocaust on one of the mountains which I will indicate to thee" (v. 2).

What is Abraham's response to this demand to sacrifice his only beloved son on the altar of belief? Is it an outcry of disbelief and outrage? Does he revolt or express shock at the divine demand that he commit a murder, a murder of his son—clearly an innocent boy? Nothing of the sort! Abraham, who

argued passionately for the lives of *possibly* innocent people who were strangers to him, does not utter a word of protest, of doubt, let alone of indignation, at God's demand of the life of a blameless child.

Abraham says nothing. He rises early next morning, saddles his ass, and makes other preparations, including cleaving the wood for burning the offering, and sets off on the journey with Isaac and two helpers. On the third day, on spotting the place, Abraham leaves the helpers and the ass, loads the wood for the offering up of Isaac, takes the fire and the knife, and proceeds to the designated location. When Isaac asks where the sacrificial lamb is, Abraham responds with an evasive answer: "God will choose him the lamb for the holocaust, my son" (v. 8).

Although the narrator does not explore Abraham's state of mind, the crucible through which he passes, the reader cannot fail to realize it by following the details that the narrator presents. Each step in Abraham's activity—preparing for the trip, taking the implements of slaughter and burning, responding to the innocent question of Isaac with an evasive answer, loading the wood on him—cries out to heaven with anguish. With anguish but not in protest! And perhaps not to heaven but merely to the reader. For the order came from heaven, and the obedient Abraham is left alone with his belief and his devotion to God, from whom he does not expect mercy. He blindly does His bidding. The belief and the obedience are absolute and supreme. In the name of belief, he is ready to do anything, a horrific crime in the eyes of others and the sacrifice of his very son. It is not the moral imperative that reigns supreme over man and God. It is man's trust and belief in God that are the ultimate authority of human conduct.

The conclusion of the story offers an unexpected relief. As Abraham is on the point of

slaughtering his bound son, an angel of God stops him, saying, “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not spared thy son, thine only son from me” (18:12). A ram, incidentally caught in the thicket by his horns—a veritable *aries ex machina*—is substituted for Isaac and duly sacrificed, an apparent tribute to conventional ritual and worship.

Yet the story is not satisfied with the conventional conclusion. It is followed up by what is intended to be a monumental moral, as the Lord swears to Abraham: “Because thou hast not spared thy son, thy only son, I will bless thee and multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand on sea shore and thy seed shall take possession of the gate of his foes” (vv. 16–17). The reward for total, blind faith in God and unhesitating obedience to Him is, if one can put it that way, the sharing of power. Obey the Almighty and His might will rub off on you! Whereas, in the dialogue with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham shares with God the sovereignty of Right; in the tale of the binding of Isaac, he gets a chunk of divine Might. Indeed, one could go a step further, although it would be a step beyond the tale itself, and suggest that by being ready to commit a moral outrage, Abraham was allowed to enter the realm of Power or Might, where morality is thrown to the wind.

The story of the binding of Isaac, *Aqedat Yitzhaq* as it is usually referred to in Hebrew, if taken as an independent religious message and judged in its own terms, raises questions as to why the ram was introduced into the tale and why it had to be slaughtered? If God’s intent was to test Abraham’s unconditional belief, as the story proclaims, the goal was achieved the moment Abraham raised his knife-wielding hand to slaughter his son. Why add the essentially irrelevant,

and even confusing element, of providing a meal for the deity—apparently not as tasty as human flesh but satisfactory! Was this a tribute to the prevalent belief—clearly pre-Israelite—that gods had to be fed because of their enormous appetite, which preferred human children as *pièce de résistance*?

Whatever the explanation may be, and it *cannot* be satisfactory to a religious person of our times, the inconsistency has largely passed unnoticed or has been conveniently ignored. Moreover—and this is even more surprising—the contradiction between the two tales of Abraham has not aroused a profound soul searching among Jews and Christians, as one might expect. The issue is avoided rather than forced. Abraham and his alter ego do not seem to be aware that they confront a crisis of identity.

To add yet another curiosity, it is noteworthy that, of the two tales, it is the story of the binding of Isaac that seems to be preferred in the Jewish postbiblical rabbinic tradition. This is not explicitly declared, but one cannot ignore the fact that Abraham’s blind devotion is extolled in prayer, notably on Yom Kippur, when his readiness to commit the ultimate sacrifice is used for a claim of divine compassion for the contrite sinners addressing God on this holy day. As a matter of fact, the relevant passage from Genesis is read *every day* as part of the morning prayer.

One need hardly be reminded that for Christians the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice is much more important than for Jews, for it is viewed as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of Jesus for the sake of the salvation of believers through future ages. This is not merely a biblical tale—important as such may be; it is a central dogma of the Christian creed. Alas, the treatment of Abraham’s absolute and total obedience to the divine demand can be seen by Kierkegaard as a primary and total impulse that overrides

all rational and emotional considerations. When Kierkegaard asserts *Credo, quia absurdum est*, he points out that only absurd action can prove belief, for if there is a rational explanation and justification of action, belief is not necessary.

This, to be sure, is a mystical response. One might as well argue that a flying camel exists because such a phenomenon is absurd. Mystical experience remains a mystery, which cannot be comprehended or argued rationally.

Returning to Judaism, does it regard the story of the binding of Isaac as dominant? Has the blind belief in the commandment of God been endorsed vis-à-vis the injunctions of righteousness and compassion of the Torah itself? Has Judaism discarded the rigorous prohibition of child sacrifices and the death penalty for offenders, as well as the passionate outcries of the prophets against the horrific practice even during the reign of some kings of Judah?

The answer is no, an unequivocal no. The prohibition of and the outrage at human sacrifices remain firm and uncompromising. “Thou shalt not kill” is not subject to compromise. The sacrifice of children, as practiced by other peoples in the region, is specifically singled out: “Whoever it be of the sons of Israel or of the stranger who liveth in Israel, that giveth his descendant unto Moloch, he shall be put to death.”<sup>3</sup>

Still, despite the vigorous condemnation of the worship and cult of the Canaanites, the horrid practices apparently spread and even were followed by some people in Jerusalem during the reign of some kings of Judah. In the words of Jeremiah, which sum up the situation in plain but vigorous words: “They built the sanctuaries of Baal in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, to transfer their sons and their daughters (by fire) to Moloch, which I commanded them not and which occurred

not to me.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, when one reads the historic references to the worship of Moloch in Jerusalem, the *Aqeda* may suddenly appear in gory colors.

To be sure, Isaac was not sacrificed, and it has even been argued that the story conveys and symbolizes the historic transition from child sacrifice to its abolition. Thus, the tale of the binding of Isaac remains a testimony to total religious devotion—apparently ignoring the potential horror to which it might have led had not God dispatched His angel in time to prevent it. Abraham’s faith and trust in God remains worthy of admiration. God’s interference in time to prevent the consummation of faith in sacrifice proved the righteousness and compassion of God.

The two tales of Abraham are of great interest not only to the readers and admirers of the Bible. They are of importance for the understanding of Judaism and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Christianity, and even monotheistic religions as such. Indeed, they may also be relevant to situations in which religious belief is substituted for by an ardent ideology, a secular religion, one kind of *ism* or another—a matter that can be pursued by selecting certain trends in history in the past two or three centuries.

It can be suggested, and I assume, that monotheistic beliefs perceive God as almighty as well as just and compassionate. But what if He were one or the other—either almighty or just and compassionate? Whom would we address?

The question would be rejected by a theologian as silly and irrelevant. The fact is, he would argue, that He is both, and the suggestion that He might be either the one or the other is itself a heresy. And so the average believer stops raising the question—at least when he or she addresses a rabbi or a priest.

Yet individuals, or the community, when

addressing a prayer to God, especially when under the stress of an impending calamity, turn almost instinctively to the powerful and almighty, and their belief becomes more ardent as the danger increases. They are not inclined to turn to God the righteous, either because such a God knows what He has to do (*pace* the doubts of Abraham in the first tale), or because the petitioners feel that they deserve the punishment, or for some psychological reason.

The problem persists and is not theoretically or theologically resolved. Although it does not dominate the prayer, which, in Judaism, foremost praises the Lord for His wise and righteous management of the universe and for His kind and compassionate concern for His people, there are widespread manifestations of behavior that reveal an attempt to secure God's help by resorting to means that border on superstition and magic. There is the symbolic sacrifice of a chicken, sent to the slaughterer on the eve of Yom Kippur, after a ritual that makes it the redeeming offering for the family. This seems an attempt to influence the Almighty the way it was done in antiquity, by making the animal pay for human sins, and which contains a magical element.

Yet, should the question be asked as to which of the two is more important, or even decisive, in the internal conflict between Right and Might, Judaism's reply, inferred from two millennia of reflection and declared opinions, seems to be decisively in favor of the God of righteousness and mercy, namely Right.

And so the two Gods in one, God and His alter ego, exist in the mind of the believer, despite the inner contradiction of the theological positions. One sees the dichotomy but ignores it. One adjusts one's inarticulate perception of God to the needs of the day or the hour and leaves the concern about the

*true* nature of God to those few who have the penchant and the time to reflect on the big issues that confront humanity.

The ethical commitment of Judaism—in its religion and even in its quasi-religious and often non-religious positions and manifestations—remains the main characteristic of the Israelite-Judaean culture. And if other religions act similarly, they may well be following Judaism's example. Such contribution to Western civilization may be the true meaning of the divine prediction that because of the pursuit of righteousness and justice by Abraham's descendants, "all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed through him."<sup>5</sup>

**T**he history of the coexistence of ethics and power, of might and righteousness, or at least of the expectation of such coexistence, has not been confined to the Israelite-Jewish belief. It has been an ageless situation preoccupying the best religious minds in Europe throughout centuries. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, the Danish theologian-philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) spoke of the "leap of faith," that is, blind commitment to religious belief. It is such irrational trust that is the ultimate proof of genuine piety.

Of course, once the belief is blind, any demand God allegedly has on man may be justified, and a Pandora's Box of abuse of power, human power, is opened. Thus, if the early Christians were ready to sacrifice their lives for their belief, as soon as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church did not hesitate to use its might to persecute the followers of other religions and to exterminate heretics. Power, as the saying goes, corrupts. The rulers of the church, living in spiritual proximity to the Almighty, started to feel mighty themselves and acted accordingly. The excesses of the believers during the Crusades are well

known. Some of the popes of the Renaissance did not hide their militant disposition and their political skills.

When the struggle between the Catholic Church and the Protestant believers started, at one point the principalities in Germany agreed on a new clearly formulated religious policy: *Cuius regio, eius religio*. It was the ruling monarch of each state who could decide which variety of Christianity to accept for his principality. The distinction between the might of religion and the secular might of princes was wiped out. It was Might, in whichever garb, that ruled.

Was this unholy alliance of religion and state, were these growing manifestations of the unrestrained rule of Might originating in blind belief, the consequences of religious belief? Was religion the root of this evil, as it manifested itself again in another creed at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

The answer to this question-assertion is no. A leap of faith may occur in other domains of human ideas and institutions. Thus the leaders of the French Revolution, which proclaimed the ethical slogans *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, did not hesitate to kill innocent people in the Reign of Terror for the sake of political power. Robespierre, who enjoyed the reputation of being incorruptible, excelled in this performance. Indeed, he was not a thief; he was merely a killer.

This manifestation of republicanism was not the only case of blind religiosity outside the sphere of religion. Other cases followed. Nationalism often assumed religious fervor, with masses ready to sacrifice their lives—originally for political freedom. This was often followed by suppression of other nationalities and occasionally developed into imperialistic schemes. Nationalism may have been an old sentiment, but it reappeared with great vigor in the nineteenth century and greatly affected its fortunes and misfortunes.

Need one be reminded of other *isms*: fascism, communism etc.? Each of these proclaimed new beliefs, new ideals, new eternal values. But each relied on blind faith as well, and the latter tended to be increasingly dominant.

**W**hy do ideas, ideals, even genuine ethical demands, often degenerate into terrible perversions of their own selves? Why is a cogent ethical quest so often followed by a blind belief? Why is the latter allowed to ride roughshod over the former?

One possible reason for the readiness, or even eagerness, to make the leap of faith (religious or ideological) is frustration with the efforts to comprehend the human condition and man's relationship with reality or destiny through rational exploration. For whatever the results of such exploration, it leaves problems and situations that resist a systematic inquiry. The notion of a righteous and compassionate deity leaves the visible iniquities and the suffering of the innocent inexplicable. They must be due to some other forces than those of the good God, or perhaps to reasons that man is incapable of understanding. To overcome such destructive doubts, people may choose to trust God blindly—that is to say, without asking questions.

But then some believers may feel that certain small acts they do on their own initiative, such as when Orthodox Jews kiss the Mezuzah, may secure their contact with the incomprehensible and thus prove helpful in the restricted territory of extradoctrinal belief.

Or perhaps people resort to nonreligious and irrational ways to affect God or Destiny by a magical or quasi-magical rite in order to calm their own doubts, to allay the creeping sense of disbelief. Such a threat, to which many a believer may be occasionally exposed, is countered with an act of superstition (a



small leap of faith) that, though addressed to God, is meant for the sneaking forces of evil.

Then one can think of the hypnotic and gratifying emotion of behaving like the others, like everybody else. The sense of peace of mind and satisfaction one feels in joining a crowd, literally and metaphorically, in being able to substitute the personal pronoun *I* with the collective *We* is not an extraordinary situation. It may hide even in the hearts of ardent individualists who find relief from the never-ending quest to resolve intricate moral questions as they surface in personal

and public life, by embracing religion, or another pseudo-religion such as nationalism or other *ism*, and declare in word and action, “We believe!”

People want answers, full and unshakable answers. Total belief can offer such answers better than an ethically controlled religion. So can various ideologies—mostly of more recent vintage. Where there is a demand, the supply of commodities follows. And so the business of life goes on.

But so does the search for the true and the right.

1 Genesis 30:17–33.

2 Plato, *Euthyphro* 9–10 (Benjamin Jowett translation).

3 Leviticus 20:2.

4 Jeremiah 32:35.

5 Genesis 18:18–19.