In the concluding paragraph of an article on the Akeidah, the late Tikva Frymer Kensky wrote that “in its stark horror and ambiguous statements, the story of the Akedah remains the central text in the formation of our spiritual consciousness.” In Genesis 22:1 it begins, “After these things, God tested (nisah) Abraham,” in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. As Wendy Zierler puts it, “Abraham offers no emotional or ethical response to the command. He simply sets out with his son to do God’s bidding.” The Akeidah (Gen. 22:1–19), the binding of Isaac, is considered to be the ultimate spiritual moment, when a man expresses willingness to sacrifice his beloved son to demonstrate fealty to his Lord. This central text has continued to horrify generations, and in Sören Kierkegaard’s words, arouses “fear and trembling.”

The Hebrew for a burnt offering that goes up to God is olah, and is used to describe Abraham’s offering of his son. The Sages understand the test (from the word nisah) to mean a trial, one of many trials—physical and psychological incidents that retarded Abraham’s adjustment in Canaan and endangered his marital status. According to the midrash, fiery associations are among the many obstacles Abraham had in his journey before he got to the point of bringing his son Isaac as an olah. Another obstacle was the famine in the land, which caused Abraham to go down to Egypt.

The King James Bible, however, translates, the word, nisah, as “tempt,” not as “test”! To tempt is to solicit to sin, to entice, to

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entrap, with the purpose of bringing about the fall of a person. The KJV may have translated it in this way because the translators were influenced by Rashi’s reading of the Talmud. If that is so, then who is the subject of the temptation?

“SOME TIME AFTERWARDS” Some of our Rabbis say (BT Sanhedrin 89) that this line refers to after the incident with Satan who accused [God] saying “From all of the festive meals that Abraham made, he did not offer You a single bull or ram.” God responded, “Everything Abraham did was for his son. Yet, if I were to tell Abraham to sacrifice him before me, he would not delay.” (Rashi, 22:1)

Is it God being tempted to play with Abraham, as he did with Job? Or is God testing Abraham to see if he gives into the temptation of filicide that was widespread in his time? One might ask where God was during these trials or temptations. Why was there lack of moral guidance to Abraham? From a theological perspective, what is worse, the problem of an abusive God/father who demands sacrifices of his son/people or a God who tempts people to sin?

Looking at Abraham from a relationship perspective and in particular with his troubling relationship with God, I can understand the transition in his character from one who fights back to protect his family and the other who abandons his family to fate. There is no contradiction if we view Abraham as a person who has experienced trauma and abuse as a son, a brother, a husband, and a believer. If we regard him as a multiple victim of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), then Abraham behaves consistently when he heeds God’s call to sacrifice Isaac. To see how this works, we must look at the back story of Abraham’s life, which is to be found in Rabbinic midrash and commentary. It is possible to argue that the midrashim we will be looking at are supplying us with the original “censored” text, especially the one having to do with Abraham’s near death by Nimrod in the furnace. We will start with two midrashim that explain Haran’s death.

The first one depicts Terah as a manufacturer of idols. Abraham destroyed these idols. His father was furious and seized him and delivered him to Nimrod. Nimrod throws him into the fiery furnace saying, “Behold, I will cast you into it, and let your God whom you adore come and save you from it.”
Now Haran was standing there undecided. If Abram is victorious, [thought he], I will say that I am of Abram’s belief, while if Nimrod is victorious I will say that I am on Nimrod’s side. When Abram descended into the fiery furnace and was saved, he [Nimrod] asked him, “Of whose belief are you?” “Of Abram’s,” he replied. Thereupon he seized and cast him into the fire; his inwards were scorched and he died in his father’s presence. Hence it is written, AND HARAN DIED IN THE PRESENCE OF [AL P’NEI] HIS FATHER TERAH.8

The Rabbis translated al p’nei as “because of”; that is, he died because his father manufactured idols!

According to Aviva Zornberg in her book The Murmuring Deep, “Nachmanides treats the fiery furnace midrash as not only historically true but essential for the meaning of Abraham’s narrative.” There is no good reason why this narrative is omitted from the biblical text, but as Zornberg points out, “the repressed persecution story leaves us with a significant gap.”9 She states the case even more strongly:

In this stark retelling of the midrash, the essential fact is that Abraham’s brother was killed by his father, who had originally intended Abraham’s own death. By handing him over for execution, Terah is, virtually, killing him. And when he is saved, his brother’s actual death is directly attributable to Terah . . . This memory of horror is not recorded in the written biblical text.10

The other midrash is less well known and speaks of attempted fratricide:

And Haran died “al p’nei” his father Terah. Until this time no son had died before the father. And this one, why did he die? Because of what happened in Ur Casdim. When Abram was shattering Terah’s idols; and they were jealous of him and threw him into the fiery furnace. And Haran stood by, adding fuel to the fire and was enthusiastic about the flames. Therefore it is said that Haran died before his father Terah. In Ur Casdim. The name of the place is like the fire (urim), relying on a verse from Isaiah 24:15, “honor the Lord with lights.”11

In this source Haran is among those jealous of Abraham and fanatically wishes to participate in his murder. Haran is the one, in
this text, who is in charge of stoking the fire in the furnace, and he is in the process of feeding the fire when the flames shoot out and consume him. In this Midrash both the brother and father are out to kill Abraham. Haran is gleeful while making the fire as hot as possible so that killing Abraham will “make his day.” Thus according to these two midrashim, Abraham has experienced abuse at the hand of Nimrod the king, his father, his brother, and indirectly by God.

Besides using the tools of Rabbinic midrash and later looking at some modern poetry to comprehend Abraham’s action, I find Judith Herman’s book *Trauma and Recovery* very useful for her description of PTSD:12

> Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death.13

This of course is what, according to the midrash, Abraham has certainly experienced. Herman writes that “the person may feel as if the event is not happening to [him]...a bad dream from which [he] will shortly awaken.”14 Herman points out that the victim who suffers from PTSD may feel

> a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve . . . Perceptions may be numbed or distorted . . . Time sense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion.15

These may have been Abraham’s feelings as he went up the mountain, slowly but inexorably.

When we return to Genesis 11:26–32, we find lacunae that leave much to the imagination. The text does not say why they left, nor does it say why they stayed in Charan. Was Terah alive when Abraham and Lot left? What did Abraham feel about leaving? Would he have liked to stay and comfort his father? Did his love for God get in the way of making amends with his father?

Clearly there is a need for even more “back story,” which the commentators and the midrash continue to provide. According to Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12:1, Abraham’s father, Terah, lived for
another sixty-five years in Haran and in taking his grandson Lot away from him, he severed the family relationship and deprived Terah of his grandson Lot. When the family leaves Egypt, after strife with Lot, Abraham proposes that his nephew’s herdsmen separate from his. Abraham already separated Lot from his grandfather and country and now he does so from himself.

Why is Abraham so much a master at separation from his close family? Is this a fatal flaw in him? According to Judith Herman, “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others.” If this is so, can it account for Abraham’s ease in letting Lot go, then Sarah (with the real possibility of losing her), and then Hagar and Ishmael and finally Isaac?

It would seem that the Sages picked up on this as well. For in a famous midrash the Rabbis try to change the order of the text to show that Terah died in Charan. Why do they do this? To show that Terah was wicked, and like all wicked, are called dead even during their lifetime. Why do they do this? They do this so as not to detract from Abraham’s greatness.

Yet in this same midrash we read that Abraham was afraid that people would say, “He left his father in his old age and departed.” Therefore God reassured him by saying: “I exempt thee (l’cha) from the duty of honoring thy parents, though I exempt no one else from this duty.” The Rabbis deduced this from the emphasis GET THEE (LECH L’CHA), where lech (go) alone would have sufficed. And this is why God recorded Terah’s death before Abraham departed. So one part of the midrash implies that Terah is the old father that Abraham dishonorably leaves behind, and the other says that Terah is an evil person whom Abraham had the right to leave behind.

What are we to make of this contradiction? I find it strange that the Rabbis would prefer to reverse the order of the biblical text rather than acknowledge that Abraham had the right to detach himself from a possibly abusive father. In reading Kierkegaard, I am struck by how the second half of the midrash is a perfect example of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” And this first act of “suspension of the ethical” later permits him to do other unethical acts. Could it be that the Rabbis sensed something murky in Abraham’s past when they referred to him as a Job-like figure and vice versa and that God’s test of Abraham is similar to Job’s because of Satan’s intervention?
What are we to make of a God who submits to a challenge of Satan and plays with people like sport to the flies? Who unfairly puts his people to a test, puts temptation in their way, to see how great is their faith, their love for Him?

It is difficult to accept Kierkegaard’s conclusion that God tempted Abraham to prove his faith by rejecting morality. This kind of faith is seen by many as “religious” only in an extreme or fanatical way, and as such a kind of idolatry, or perversion of religion, which always factors in a moral dimension. Besides what does God gain by having an exemplar of faith act immorally? Why tempt him to do so? This is the sine qua non question that has plagued generations of readers, both religious and secular, when they confront the text of the Akeidah.

In previous work I have discussed the effects of a God who abuses his people. Some of these images include executioner, mass murderer, and divine deceiver. These images are problematic because God acts unethically or immorally, uses excessive force, and sometimes doesn’t offer an opportunity for repentance. Most of us would prefer not to contemplate a God who is too dangerous to approach and too incomprehensible to make sense of, a God who might simply demand extreme and devastating behavior. We avoid all thought of the paradox that the very foundation of the world might also contribute to its devastation.

Another troubling image of God that I will point to briefly, since I have written so much about this elsewhere, is that of God the husband/lover of Israel, who has total power over his female people. In one midrash we see Abraham depicted as a woman, a daughter whose father owns the house she lives in and is aroused by her beauty and wants to show it off to the world.

NOW THE LORD SAID UNTO ABRAM: Go Forth from your Land etc. (12:1). R. Isaac commenced his discourse with, Listen daughter, and look and incline your ear; and forget your people, and your father’s house (Ps. 45:11). R. Isaac said: This is a mashal, about someone who traveled from place to place and saw a birah (building, castle, capital city) burning. He wondered: Is it possible that this birah doesn’t have a leader? The owner/master of the birah looked out and said, “I am the master of the birah.” Similarly, since our father Abraham was constantly wondering, “Is it conceivable that the world is without a leader/guide/master/ruler?” God looked out and said to him, “I am the ba’al, the...
owner of the world the Sovereign of the Universe.” So let the king be aroused by your beauty, since he is your lord (Ps. 45:12): Let the king be aroused by your beauty and show it off to the world. Since he is your lord, bow to him (Ps. 45:12): hence, THE LORD SAID UNTO ABRAHAM: Go forth etc.24

Abraham is again depicted as a woman, this time as the unformed little sister, in another midrash on the same verse.25 Here she offers herself up to be sacrificed in an act of kiddush HaShem or martyrdom. The idea that God is Abraham’s lover appears also in Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah. Here it is Abraham who is obsessed with God and has what can only be described as lovesickness.

Halacha 2: [Love] is an attribute of Abraham our father, who was called “his beloved” because he worshiped him out of love. And it is a quality that was commanded by Moses in that we are to “worship our God” . . .

Halacha 3: What characterizes proper love? That a person should love God with a great excessive, very strong love, until one’s soul is bound up in love of God and is obsessed by this love as if he is lovesick; and his mind is not freed from the love of that woman; and he is always obsessed by her, whether it is in his resting or rising, or whether he is eating or drinking. Moreover the love of God in the heart of those who love Him is obsessive, like the commandment to love with all your heart and soul (Deut. 6:5). This is alluded to by Solomon who stated through the Mashal, “for I am sick with love” and in fact all of the Song of Songs is a mashal/parable about this issue.26

Rabbinic literature is sensitive to these images of God the lover and the obsession with the beloved, but do not necessarily see them as troubling, full of potential menace, and contributing to abuse. Lovesickness, is pathological by nature—it affects decision making, it distracts one from what is moral. It further dislocates one who is already fragile.27 Furthermore, love should not harm.28

When Abraham is depicted as a dependent woman, he is, like Herman’s traumatized patient, primed for God:29 “The greater the patient’s emotional conviction of helplessness and abandonment, the more desperately she feels the need for an omnipotent
rescuer.” The fact that he loves God and God loves him makes it seem natural to follow God to wherever and whatever he demands.

Despite the threats hanging over him, the Rabbis are at great pains to make it look as if Abraham is an active willing participant in what God demanded of him. A midrash says that God was with him when he willingly offered (nadavta) . . . to enter the fiery furnace and would have emigrated sooner to the land if he had been permitted to do so earlier.

What is the nature of the God Abraham is expected to follow? The Rabbis write that this God places the righteous in doubt and suspense, and then He reveals to them the meaning of the matter. That is why it is written, “TO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW THEE.” The Rabbis view this putting of the “righteous in doubt and suspense” as a sign of God’s love.

R. Levi said: “Get thee” is written twice, and we do not know which was more precious [in the eyes of God], whether the first or the second . . . And why did He not reveal it to him [without delay]? In order to make him even more beloved in his eyes and reward him for every word spoken, for R. Huna said in R. Eliezer’s name: The Holy One, blessed be He, first places the righteous in doubt and suspense, and then He reveals to them the meaning of the matter. Thus it is written, TO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW THEE; Upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of; And make unto it the proclamation that I bid thee (Jonah III, 2); Arise, go forth into the plain, and I will there speak with thee (Ezek. III, 22).

In addition, the Rabbis are making an equation between Lech L’cha and the Akeidah. Lech L’cha is also a foundational text, because it encourages (perhaps in the case of going up to the Land of Israel, even enshrines) leaving loved ones behind and it encourages detachment. Perhaps if Abraham (and others who wish to leave) would think it out clearly, they might hesitate to follow the lure of Lech L’cha. In both cases God does not reveal his intentions to Abraham until the very end.

Zornberg refers to Rashi’s explication of the verse “to the land that I will show you.” Rashi writes that God “did not reveal which land immediately, in order to make it precious in his eyes.” Zornberg builds on this to show that “the effect of suspended naming
is to achieve an intimacy . . . tantalize him and endow him with an experience of mystery.” She interprets this as suspense. She describes this as follows: “He will travel without solid ground under his feet . . . [he will be] off balance . . . [it will be] a painfully tantalizing process, in which delay only increases the horror of realization.”34 Whereas she reads this positively, I read this as further abuse. Instead of giving Abraham agency, God keeps him in his power and cruelly tantalizes him until the end. Surely this is not a sign of love.

In a transaction with Abraham in Genesis 15, God appears to Abraham in a machazeh (a vision), telling him that he will protect him and provide for him. Following the b’rit bein habetarim (the covenant of the pieces of animals), Abraham falls asleep and a great dread of darkness falls upon him. He has a nightmarish vision of a smoking oven and a flaming torch, which according to Zornberg reminds him of Nimrod’s fire. She writes that

forgotten, repressed, absent from the biblical text, is the story of the fiery furnace, in which the child Abraham was thrown, to test his faith in the invisible God . . . Its total absence from the written biblical text suggest that it is an unthinkable, even an unbearable narrative, banished from Abraham’s memory.35

It is unbearable because Abraham is being treated as a pawn by God. If he were truly a partner, God would share with him what is on his mind, so that Abraham can react appropriately, take into account all options and then make up his own mind. On the surface, this is what God seems to do in Genesis 18:17 when he says: “Am I to hide [lit. cover up, mechaseh] from Abraham that thing which I do.”

Initially God treats him as a full partner, but since He goes on his way to do what he had planned to do all along, destroy the town and its evil inhabitants (except for Lot and all his family), what is Abraham to make of all this? Why did he not continue to protest? Did he end up being a passive bystander, or was he complicit in the destruction as the Israeli poet Meir Wieseltier (b. 1941) writes in his poem “Abraham”:

The only thing in the world that Abraham loved was God.  
He did not love the gods of other men,  
Which were made of wood or clay and of polished vermillion . . .
He did not appreciate anything in the world, only God.
He never sinned to Him; there was no difference between
them.
Not like Isaac, who loved his coarse-minded son; not like Jacob
Who slaved away for women, who limped from the blows that
God gave him at night,
Who saw angelic ladders only in dreams.
Not so Abraham, who loved God, and whom God loved,
And together they counted the righteous of the city before
they wiped it out.

Wieseltier sees a straight line from Abraham’s willingness to see
Sodom wiped out and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac in the name
of love.
I would not go so far; for I see his acquiescence to what eventu-
ally happens as being the way a traumatized soul such as Abram
has reacted to what has happened in his past—and he has already
done the unthinkable by casting out his first born son.
Yet one can argue that Abraham shows great initiative in Gen-
esis 14 when invaders took his nephew Lot from Sodom. I use Her-
man’s words to view this as a form of

recovery [which] is based upon the empowerment of the survi-
vor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place
only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isola-
tion. In [his] renewed connections with other people, the survi-
vor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or
deformed by the traumatic experience.36

Thus, when Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive,
he went in pursuit as far as Dan and brought back Lot and his pos-
sessions. And when the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me
the persons, and take the possessions for yourself,” Abram said to
the king of Sodom, “I swear to the Lord, I will not take so much
as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘It
is I who made Abram rich.’” So it is here that Abraham takes the
moral high ground, something he has never done before.
Unfortunately this is to prove the exception to what I am claim-
ing is his usual way of acting and Abraham reverts to his previ-
ous behavior in Genesis 16 when the story of the interaction be-
tween Sarai and Hagar is highlighted. Without any protest, Abram
passively heeds Sarai’s request to take Hagar so she can have a son through her. When Sarai blames Abram, “The wrong done me is your fault!” (chamasi alecha), and makes him feel guilty, Abram again passively gives in to Sarai and says, “Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Why this lack of concern about his potential seed? Is it fear of his wife? Is it because he knows that Sarah was also once taken and traumatized? Is this why he allows her some leeway when she lashes at those around her? It doesn’t help that God condones Sarah’s abusive behavior through His agent who tells Hagar to submit to this abuse from Sarah. I don’t want to exonerate Abraham because of the abuse he has suffered in the past, but it seems that Herman’s explanation, about the cycle of abuse passing on, is valid here. Herman writes:

The protracted involvement with the perpetrator has altered the patient’s relational style, so that [he] not only fears repeated victimization but also seems unable to protect [him]self from it, or even appears to invite it. The dynamics of dominance and submission are reenacted in all subsequent relationships.37

For sure the trauma that afflicted Abraham is passed on to Isaac in the form of passivity in the face of abuse—and this trait will be passed on to the biblical family. Abraham’s tears, according to the midrash, blinded Isaac. As he held the knife “tears streamed from his eyes, and these tears, prompted by a father’s compassion, dropped into Isaac’s eyes.”38 And Isaac will, in turn, turn a blind eye to the cheating and neglect that Rebekah and Jacob inflict on Esau. Jacob, too, will be a passive parent when it comes to not seeing the family dynamics taking place with his own children. The inappropriate parenting that has taken place in Abraham’s household is thus passed on to the next generation.

In addition to trauma and abuse, there is also the issue of attachment and lack of attachment. There are many types of attachment. John Bowlby was the first to use the term when he encountered trauma during World War II. He described attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.”39 He believed that the emotional bonds formed by children with their mothers had a continuous impact on their life choices. In this theory it is important that mothers are available to their child’s needs and that the child knows that the mother can be depended on to give
him a sense of security. Abraham’s father is identified in the bible, but his mother is given only a name in the Talmud—Amathlai the daughter of Karnebo:

R. Hanan b. Raba further stated in the name of Rab: [The name of] the mother of Abraham [was] Amathlai, the daughter of Karnebo [from Kar, “lamb,” Nevo (“Mount of Nebo”)]; [the name of] the mother of Haman was Amathlai, the daughter of Orabti [from Oreb, “raven”] and your mnemonic [may be], “unclean [to] unclean, clean [to] clean.” [Haman’s grandmother was named after an unclean animal (raven, cf. Lev. 11:15; Deut. 14:14); but Abraham’s grandmother bore the name of a clean animal.]40

I am assuming Amathlai was never present for Abraham in his life. One can only speculate on her absence and her detachment from her three sons, and it is not clear what purpose the Midrash has in even assigning her a name—and more curious the connection to Haman’s mother.

Perhaps the Talmudic text hints at an insecure attachment that is caused by stressful life events, such as neglect, death, abuse, and migration. In this situation you keep looking and hoping that someone or something will come about to give you back what you lost.41 Did Abraham’s lack of attachment begin in early childhood or later when he had his life spared, and his brother Haran was sacrificed in his stead? Perhaps it begins around the time of the Akeidah.

According to Phyllis Trible, the Akeidah, first and foremost, tests Abraham’s willingness to detach from his son so as to be able to turn to God:

To attach is to practice idolatry. In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God. The test, then, is an opportunity for understanding and healing. To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom. To give up human anxiety is to receive divine assurance. To disavow idolatry is to find God.42

Thus it would appear that God tempts Abraham to turn away from human attachment and choose divine attachment instead. Trible says this is to disavow idolatry, but surely Abraham’s eagerness, to “over-worship” God, his excessive love of God, and his willingness to sacrifice his son to prove his love, may be considered
a form of idolatry. On the one hand, Abraham wants to carry out what was a secure clear-cut command given by God, the source of all his security. Yet he is given a contradictory command not to sacrifice by the angel. Can this be another major factor contributing to his insecurity? There is no certainty when God’s commands contradict conscience and morality. Abraham is faced with the fact that he must challenge God’s commands, for they are contradictory. Both cannot be acted upon! If he totally disregards the first one, he is destroying a revelation from God, and breaching his own sense of security in God. If he totally disregards the second he is violating his own sense of justice and ethics, and also ignoring a Divine revelation.\textsuperscript{43}

God, too, appears to be insecure about Abraham’s love. Why did he doubt him and put him to the test? If, as Judith Herman maintains, “traumatized people lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God,” it is logical that God, who knows all about the trauma Abraham has experienced, would doubt Abraham’s total faith in him. This would help to explain, why with the backing of Satan (as with Job), He would be tempted to put Abraham to the test.

According to Rashi, Abraham was ambivalent about whether to choose his love of his son or his love of God. It is clear that God wins out, but the cost is that he loses his son Isaac. According to Wendy Zierler, “The outcome of the Akeidah is that Isaac no longer appears in the story as Abraham’s loved one. Perhaps even more startling, by the end of the story God is not Abraham’s loved one either.”\textsuperscript{44} In the words of the poet, T. Carmi (1925–1994) in his poem “The Actions of the Fathers”: “The voice from on high disappeared . . . And the voice within him (The only one left) said: Yes, you went from your land, from your homeland, the land of your father, and now, in the end, from yourself.”

Until the momentous, horrific, command of the Akeidah, Abraham has only followed orders: \textit{lech l’cha, asher arecha, sh’m\textbf{a} b’kolah, kah na,} etc. What Abraham suddenly understands, in his moment of truth, is that his unavailable mother figure, Amathlai, and three past father figures, Terah, Nimrod, and God have sacrificed him to what they perceived as the greater cause. Terah, perhaps in protecting his status as an idol producer and for the love of his younger son,
Haran, offered him as a sacrifice to Nimrod. Nimrod who literally wanted to burn him up and succeeded in doing so to his brother Haran, so that nothing was left of him, and who truly was an *olah*. Finally, God, who is so fixated on getting Abraham to accept the covenant and enter the promised land that he allows and even encourages Abraham to act dishonorably in leaving his father behind, using his wife Sarah, sending off Ishmael and Hagar at Sarah’s request, and, most of all, in what has been referred to as the great testing of Abraham, telling him to sacrifice his remaining son in order to prove his obedience and faith. It is not clear what exactly is God’s motivation, hence all the speculation over the generations.45

However, Abraham’s greatness is that he breaks his own cycle of abusive behavior by not following his previous role models and by not sacrificing Isaac. In Zornberg’s words: “Abraham’s work is to fathom the compulsions that led to filicide; to know in the present the full force of an experience of terror that lies enfolded in his past; to wake from his trance at the angel’s call.”46

God does not tell him to sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac (*ta-chat b’no*). It is Abraham who SEES the ram and has a “click moment.”47 The Hebrew hints at this magnificently by using the word “achar”—in fact the cantillations, the Torah trope emphasize it (*ah-ch-ah-ah-ar*).48 There is another way! “*Vayisa Avraham et-einav, vayar, v’hinei, ayil ACHAR ne-echaz bas’vach b’karnav*” (Gen. 22:13).49 Abraham makes a physical effort (*vayisa*) to raise his eyes; and then he SEES (*vayar*) an alternative (*achar*). There is another way. There is an out; he can truly see what is in front of him. Despite the hinted complication of the word (*bas’vach*, also a maze), it suddenly seems very simple. The ram (*ayil*) is for him. The “*hinei*” is representative of the two mentions of *hineini* (Here I am) in the text when he was willing to slavishly follow God’s demand. Abraham is truly **here, now, in this new moment of truth**, as is the ram, the substitute for his son. He says, “I can stop the cycle of violence.” Even though God has demanded proof of his love, he does not have to burn his son as a sacrifice. He has something else to offer, “ACHAR”; and this strange usage offers the reader closure by taking us back to the beginning of the story, *achar hadevorim ha-eleh*. It is something different, pointed to him by the Angel, something new that can lead into a more promising future—when there will be no more need to sacrifice. His greatness is that he does not have to be a repeat offender or a “serial” sacrificer.50
At the decisive moment when he SEES the ram he, of his own volition, chooses to sacrifice it rather than his son. Abraham has two potential models of God. One is that of an unswerving worship in Maimonidean fashion: an obsessive worship of God as a lovesick man. But God does not tell him to worship Him that way, and Abraham chooses to follow the second command, the Angel’s. The Angel, is the ACHER, the one who gives him a way out. He is also divine, but his message is that it is okay to sacrifice the ram, and not the son. So even though it is the only action Abraham takes on his own initiative with no specific command from God, it is because he has been able to decide on his own that some of God’s commands do not have to be obeyed literally and can be carried out symbolically. The ram is tachat b’no, in place of his son, but that is Abraham’s decision.

His decision is not to inflict any more abuse, to realize that he can avoid repeating the abuse (the attempted filicide and fratricide) that was done to him in the past. He can say, I have choices, and this is what I choose. This is his real test, the one where he reaches deep into himself and with great courage defies God’s temptation of him to repeat the pattern of abuse. This test he passes. He has avoided the temptation. He has achieved autonomy or agency. He has, in Herman’s terminology, recovered from his trauma. He has chosen not to use the model of Maimonides’ love, but one of his own choosing.

Herman suggests several steps of recovery—and as a psychiatrist, she would probably tell Abraham to go into analysis. According to her, for successful recovery it is necessary to go through three stages:

We need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. An understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering the past. The fundamental stages of recovery are:

1. Establishing safety
2. Reconstructing the traumatic story
3. Restoring the connection between the survivor and his/her community.

One can argue that the angel, by offering an alternative, has created a safe environment for Abraham to choose his own model of
worship. The midrash has helped him reconstruct the traumatic primordial story of the fire and the abuse he has suffered in his past history. Now all that remains is to restore the connection between himself and the community. It would seem that the latter is the easiest, because we all know that when he sends Eliezer off to find a wife for Isaac, he is ensuring a future connection between himself and the community. Yet, we cannot forget that the trauma he has inflicted on both of his sons has resulted in neither of them communicating with him for the rest of his life.

Part of this has to do with God’s place in the previous scenario of abuse. Where is God in this scenario? Has he retired totally from Abraham’s life in disgust? I like the idea of the abusive God saying (like some parents), “Well I acknowledge my mistakes, I am doing t’shuvah and yes, I may have been abusive while you were growing up, but now you are a grown-up, you are a free person and I am proud of you, in that your first act was NOT to repeat the abuse that I have raised you with. And now you must take responsibility for your own actions.” Sadly, however, as a result of previous decisions, Abraham must still cope with the death of his wife (possibly his fault according to the midrash) and the disappearance of and non-communication with his son. These are not punishments, but consequences of previous abusive acts. What has been done cannot be undone, but the steps forward will hopefully teach the next generation how to behave—and note that both his sons do indeed come to bury him.

Abraham is a complicated human being, for morally speaking, he can argue with God over the fate of Sodom, yet can be morally neutral about sending Ishmael away and willing to slaughter Isaac. Once he has been willing to overstep the boundary of being a moral human, God never again addresses Abraham directly. Yet he does become more sensitive to others. He marries Keturah, has more children, provides for them during his lifetime, and sends Eliezer to arrange a marriage for Isaac and Rebekah. Thus Abraham serves as a quintessential exemplar of humanity and the cycle of stories illustrates human complexity in dealing with trauma. In this sense, there is recovery.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), who died in action during World War I on November 4, 1918, hints in one of his most powerful poems, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” that Abraham actually “slew his son.” Although there are midrashic sources that
hint at Isaac’s slaughter at his father’s hand, these are not main-
stream, and so it is only fair to give Abraham the last word.

In two summations of his traumatic life he says to Avimelech: “God made me wander from my father’s house” (Gen. 20:13).

and later to Eliezer: “The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from my native land” (Gen. 24:7).

There is poignancy here, for Abraham recognizes in retrospect that he was unable to feel mourning at the time. And this is part of his recovery when he says about himself that he had been forcibly taken from his father’s home and his homeland by God, forced to wander and possibly be mislead by God (hitu). For it was indeed God who took him from his birth land. This is the trauma from which Abraham almost never recovers. It is what is inscribed on his heart and possibly at the root of his tortuous love affair with God. This trauma, to a certain degree, is the one that we as a people, starting from Abraham through the aftermath of the Holocaust, have experienced, as one big tattoo inscribed, not only on our arms to identify ourselves, but as a trauma that, as in the prayer of the Sh’ma, has literally and figuratively been inscribed on our hearts and in our psyche. It is in the poet Haim Gouri’s word, our “heritage,” and the fact that according to him, while Abraham did not slaughter Isaac, in the end, we are “born with a knife in our hearts.” The continuing question is how to preserve memory of this suffering and at the same time recover from this very memory of our trauma. We need to figure out how to live lives that have meaning, nourish generations to come and help them in turn deal with the complexity of our lives and a seemingly remote and at times absent or quixotic God.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in the unit of Psychology and Bible in London, July 2011. A version of this article appears


10. Zornberg, Murmuring, 189.

11. P’zikta Zutarta (Lekach Tov) Gen. 11, 28. I thank Michael Graetz for bringing this source to my attention.

12. Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery (New York: Basic Books 1992, 1997). The 4th edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defines trauma occurring when “the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of self or others,” and “the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 427, 428.

13. Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 33.


15. Ibid., 56.

16. Ibid., 133.

18. “If such be the case, then Hegel is right when in his chapter on ‘The Good and the Conscience,’ he characterizes man merely as the particular and regards this character as ‘a moral form of the evil’ which is to be annulled in the teleology of the moral, so that the individual who remains in this stage is either sinning or subjected to temptation (Anfechtung). On the other hand, he is wrong in talking of faith, wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against the fact that Abraham enjoys honor and glory as the father of faith, whereas he ought to be prosecuted and convicted of murder.” Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 39.

19. BT Sanhedrin 89b; see also Midrash Tanchuma on Lech L’cha 10; Zornberg, The Murmuring Deep, 185.


25. Midrash Tanchuma Lech L’cha 2.

26. Maimonides, Hilchot T’shuvah, chs. 2 and 3.


29. Zornberg, Murmuring, 178, writes that at the moment of the Akeidah, “Abraham’s fear and desire make him ripe for the sacrificial act” (emphasis mine).

30. Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 137.
33. I would like to thank Menorah Rotenberg for this insight, personal communication.
35. Ibid., 188.
36. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.
37. Ibid., 138. Note, since I am talking about Abraham, I have changed the gender from female to male.
40. BT *Baba Batra* 91a.
41. Perhaps Haman’s lack of confidence in himself, and the need to build himself up by destroying the “other,” namely Mordecai and the Jews, is blamed on his mother’s absence. But the similarity ends there, since Abraham’s mother is associated with *har neveo* (and a clean animal) and Haman’s mother with an unclean bird.
43. Unpublished paper by Rabbi Michael Graetz, “Abraham, the First Masorti Jew,” published as a weekly column called *pina masortit* on ravnet for about ten years, date unknown.
45. Yair Lorberbaum gave a lecture as part of the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization Public Lecture Series at NYU: “‘Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest’: Was Isaac Truly Beloved by Abraham? By God?” (November 30, 2010). In this talk he suggested that the source of all this testing is God’s insecurity and jealousy of Abraham. He simply wants Abraham for himself and puts all sorts of obstacles in his path—including keeping him childless for so many years. And now when there is a child, he tries to get Abraham to get rid of it.
47. The expression “click moment” is usually associated with feminism. However, it probably originated with photography—the moment that the photographer frames the picture in her mind, using her eyes as the guide, which is the artistic moment of truth—then s/he clicks the button and preserves this vision for the future. It has been suggested to me that one can look at the three-day time frame of the journey to Moriah as a period that Abraham put to use by reflecting, confronting his past, and
building up resilience. And so when he returns (v’nashuvah) to his lads, he is on his way to finding alternative behaviors to his abuse. It is true that one can argue that recovery is a process rather than a click moment, but I am not sure that Abraham has completely recovered (nashuvah); for his previous behavior has consequences for which he cannot totally make amends (t’shuvah). Furthermore the sparseness of the text and the leitmotif of “seeing” that repeats itself over and over lend themselves to the click moment associated with both feminism and photography.

48. I am fully aware that I am taking liberties with my interpretation of Achar; but since the vocalization is the Masoretes’ choice, one could also punctuate it and therefore pronounce it as acher. So I am doing it both ways!

49. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary, 103, translates this as: “Abraham lifted his eyes: he now could see a ram [just] after it was caught by its horns in a thicket.” The Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary, 120, translates this as: “When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns.” In the commentary it writes: “‘a ram behind [him]’ or a ‘ram, later [caught].’” It points to some manuscripts that say this is “‘a single ram’” (ayil echad), which differs by only one similar-looking letter.


51. See Michael Graetz, “Abraham, the First Masorti Jew,” n. 43 above in this paper.

52. This is from a nice summary of Herman’s Trauma and Recovery on the Web site http://www.uic.edu/classes/psych/psych270/PTSD.htm.

53. See too my depiction of God (in the first person) in the Akedah issue of Sh’mà (September 2011): 8.


55. Haim Gouri, “Heritage”:

The ram came last of all.
And Abraham did not know
That it came to answer the boy’s question—
First of his strength when his day was on the wane.
The old man raised his head.
Seeing that it was no dream
And that the angel stood there—
The knife slipped from his hand.
The boy, released from his bonds,
NAOMI GRAETZ

Saw his father’s back.
Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed.
He lived for many years,
Saw the good, until his eyes dimmed.
But he bequeathed that hour to his descendants.
They are born
With a knife in their hearts.