

Binding Isaac

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The story of how Avraham took his son Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him to God is iconic. It has been interpreted and re-interpreted so many times in so many different ways from Christianity to Leonard Cohen. Early Christianity saw the failure of Abraham to actually kill his son as a sign of weakness. They believed that when their founder Jesus was killed, this was God finally expressing His commitment to humanity by killing His own child, the greatest of all "gifts." Abraham and Isaac had failed the test. Jesus had passed it.

Leonard Cohen in his poem and song Isaac's Story puts it in a modern context of parents killing their children by sending them off to Vietnam. But the refrain "I will kill you if I must" goes completely against the spirit and the text of the Torah. There God says clearly "Do not touch the child." Killing is an act allowed only in self-defence.

Greek and middle eastern cultures did indeed believe in killing first born children to appease the gods or for revenge. Whether it was Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia, Medea killing her brother and children or Minos of Crete. Infanticide as an act of devotion (or as in Sparta to weed out weak babies) was common in the ancient world from China to Germany. It typifies everything the Torah despises about Paganism and seeks to distance itself from. Sadly sacrificing children is making a come back in the Middle East today where they are sent out to die with the bombs they carry.

The story in the Torah is very clear, that God does not want human sacrifice no matter what the cause. The narrative starts off unambiguously saying that this was a test, a test case as we might say, to establish what is acceptable and what is not. God may be the most powerful force in the universe but we should not imagine that the way to worship God is by sacrificing what we hold dearest. That is why we may ignore almost all the commandments in the Torah in order to save life. The commandments are for life, not death. They define the limits as to how far we should or should not go in worshipping God. Such narratives make a clear point. To distort them is perverse.