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## In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah

Wendy Zierler

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## IN SEARCH OF A FEMINIST READING OF THE AKEDAH

Wendy Zierler

Being a feminist woman, or a womanly reader, means  
that every issue is a feminist issue, and there is a  
feminist perspective on every subject.  
Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Song of Songs*<sup>1</sup>

Our horrified reaction to the traditional reading of the *Akeda* shocks us  
into awareness of our religious rejection of obedience to harmful  
decrees and “laws that are not good.” In its stark horror and  
ambiguous statements, the story of the *Akeda* remains the central  
text in the formation of our spiritual consciousness.  
Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Akeda: A View from the Bible”<sup>2</sup>

### *Searching for the Missing Matriarch*

This is an essay about presence of absence. More specifically, it is about how feminist readers of the Bible can discern or conjure up the voices or values of women in the Bible in spite of or in light of their absence from the written page. The specific biblical episode in question is that of the *Akedah* (Gen. 22:1–19), the binding of Isaac, which, notwithstanding its status, in the words of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, as “the central text in the formation of our spiritual consciousness,” continues to horrify and bewilder. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son; Abraham offers no emotional or ethical response to the command, but simply sets out with his son to do God’s bidding. God, reconsidering, sends an angel to call off the test and then a ram as a replacement sacrifice. Can that possibly be the complete story? The Bible offers a text shot through with troubling holes. My feminist reading of this episode begins, then, with a response not to what is readily visible in the story, but to what is missing.

In her introduction to the *Feminist Companion to the Bible* series, Athalya Brenner draws on the writing of critic Jonathan Culler to identify three levels or moments that define a feminist reading of a text. The first involves “a personal identification with and discussion of female literary characters.” In the second moment, the reader identifies and opposes the ways in which a text has previously been read by a male-biased readership. In the third, s/he looks at the social and political values expressed not by previous readers, but by the text itself, exposing the androcentric values “that are found to condition a text, are expressed in it, and perpetuated by it.”<sup>3</sup>

There are instances in which identifying (with) female characters and exposing the androcentric biases of the text or its former readership do not result in a useful or empowering feminist re-reading. If the text really “matters,” as Frymer-Kensky suggests in relation to the *Akedah* story, one may need to go further than these three interpretive stages to identify a countertraditional text that resonates with one’s feminist values, that provides one with a way to live with the text and encounter God within it. One may need to supply an additional interpretive moment, one that helps to reconstruct or reconfigure the text along different lines, to identify another paradigm. I have elected to quote Brenner here, not because I believe her taxonomy of feminist reading strategies proves exhaustive or all-encompassing, but because it provides a good place to begin. In the case of a feminist reading of the *Akedah*, the first interpretive moment—identification with and discussion of female literary characters—helps catalyze a hermeneutical process that eventually leads to the discovery of alternative voices.

Based on the chapters that precede Genesis 22, one would expect the major female character in this narrative to be the matriarch, Sarah. But if Chapter 21 begins with God’s “remembering of Sarah”—her promised pregnancy and the subsequent birth of Isaac—the opening of Chapter 22 constitutes a forgetting. Abraham, Isaac, the servants, the angel of God, and the ram all appear in the ensuing verses, but Sarah, who loomed so large in the preceding chapter, in person, laughter, and speech, has now gone missing from the narrative.

I am not the first to respond to Sarah’s disappearance from the text. The rabbis sensed it keenly and composed their own responses to the question of where Sarah was during the *Akedah* and what she knew about Abraham’s plans. The search for the woman character in this story thus leads to hermeneutic moment number two—revealing the assumptions and biases of the rabbis as they search the text for Sarah.

*Genesis rabbah* 58:5 attributes the cause of Sarah's death at the beginning of Chapter 23 to the events described in Chapter 22:

ויבא אברהם לספוד לשרה. מהיכן בא? רבי לוי אמר מקבורתו של תרח לשרה בא. א"ל ר' יוסי והלא קבורתו של תרח קדמה לקבורתה של שרה שתי שנים! אלא מהיכן בא? מהר המוריה ומתה שרה מאותו צער לפיכך נסמכה עקידה לויהיו חיי שרה.

And Abraham came to mourn Sarah. Where did he come from? Rabbi Levi said, from the burial of Terach [his father]. Rabbi Yosi said, But Terach's burial preceded Sarah's by two years! Rather, he came from Mount Moriah, and Sarah died from that grief, which explains why the story of the binding of Isaac comes right before the passage [that commences], "And the life of Sarah was . . ."

The one certainty upheld by this midrash is that at some point, Sarah heard about the *Akedah*. The rabbis do not even entertain the possibility that the Mount Moriah test came and went without Sarah finding out *something*. They refer to this *something* as "that grief," indicating their assumption of its sorrowfulness for Sarah. Does this mean that Abraham did not experience it as a "grief"? Do the authors of this midrash believe that mothers grieve more than fathers over the absence/suffering/death of their children? If not, what else might the use of the term "that grief" indicate? Do Abraham and Sarah share the same religious vision, or does Sarah's death from "that grief" provide evidence that they have diametrically opposed religious viewpoints, leading the one to experience the *Akedah* as a transcendent moment and the other to experience it as a calamity?

There are other questions. Like the *Akedah* story itself, this midrash, to borrow the words of Erich Auerbach, is "fraught with background."<sup>4</sup> What exactly does it tell us about Sarah's knowledge of Abraham's plans to sacrifice Isaac? Did Abraham tell her what God ordered him to do with his son? If so, when? Did he tell her before leaving the house, and did she fall down dead in the aftermath of this revelation? Or, kept in the dark about the planned binding, did she die of shock when she finally received reports about what Abraham was trying or had tried to do on Mount Moriah? These questions hover over our reading of this excerpt from *Genesis rabbah*. We are left wondering.

Another midrashic source, from *Tanhuma* (attributed to a fourth-century Palestinian rabbi named Tanhuma Bar Abba), directly addresses these issues and, as such, offers a more overt presentation of rabbinic readerly bias. In this text, the rabbis assume that it was inconceivable for Abraham simply to have absconded with Sarah's child for three days; in an effort to understand how Abraham convinced Sarah to let him take Isaac up the mountain, the rabbis conjure up a conversation that reflects their sense both of what Sarah knew and of what role she, as a woman, played in Abraham's spiritual framework.<sup>5</sup>

אמר אברהם מה אעשה אם אגלה לשרה נשים דעתן קלה עליהן בדבר קטן כ"ש בדבר גדול כזה, ואם לא אגלה לה ואגנבו ממנה בעת שלא תראה אותן תהרוג את עצמה. מה עשה? אמר לשרה תקני לנו מאכל ומשתה ונאכל ונשמח. אמרה לו מה היום מיומים ומה טיבה של שמחה זו? אמר לה זקנים כמותינו נולד להם בן בזקנותם כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמח. הלכה ותקנה המאכל, כשהיו בתוך המאכל אמר לה את יודעת כשאני בן ג' שנים הכרתי את בוראי והנער הזה גדול ולא נחנך ויש מקום אחד רחוק ממנו מעט ששם מחנכין את הנערים אקחנו ואחנכנו שם. אמרה לו לך לשלום. מיד וישכם אברהם בבקר ולמה בבקר? אמר שמא שרה תחזור בדבורה ולא תניחני אקום בהשכמה קודם שתקום היא ...

At that very moment, Abraham thought, "If I inform Sarah, women are light-headed about little things; all the more so about such a big thing. But if I don't tell her and steal him away, when she doesn't see him, she'll kill herself. He said to her, "Prepare us some food and drink, and we'll celebrate today." She said to him, "What's the reason for this celebration?" He said to her, "Old people like us give birth to a son—it is incumbent upon us to celebrate!" Amidst the celebration he said, "You know, I was 3 years old when I encountered [recognized] my Creator. This lad is getting older and hasn't been educated. There is a place far away where they educate boys. I'll take him and educate him there." She said, "Go in peace." Without further ado, "He arose early in the morning." Why [so early] in the morning? He thought, "Sarah may change her mind and not let me go. I'll get up early, before she does."

Implied in this midrash is Abraham's great spiritual merit for being willing to fulfill God's command—and Sarah's spiritual / intellectual / emotional inability to measure up to the test and accrue similar merit. What impedes Abraham from telling Sarah what God has asked of him is the principle that

*nashim da'atan kalah*, a principle invoked here as a statement of feminine ethical deficiency.

In order to understand this negative statement about feminine nature, it helps to turn to other occasions when the rabbis made similar pronouncements. One such instance is a talmudic passage in BT *Shabbat* 33b. R. Shimon Bar Yohai, threatened with execution for berating the Roman government and its technological achievements, hides out in the *beit midrash*. His wife brings him food. When the decree against his life becomes more grave, he abandons this study-house refuge and elects instead to hide out in a cave, reasoning that *nashim da'atan kalah*—women are of unstable temperament, and so his wife, if tortured, might give him up to the authorities. In this context, the expression suggests that women, constitutionally—despite their proven ability to withstand the pain of childbirth!—cannot handle pressure and pain and are likely to succumb to torture, even if animated by a “higher purpose.” By analogy, Sarah’s light-headedness—her physical, psychic, and spiritual weakness—would disqualify her as a partner in Abraham’s journey to Moriah.<sup>6</sup>

Even as this midrash assails women’s spiritual capacities, or suggests an ingrained difference between masculine and feminine ways of being in the world, the machinations to which Abraham must resort in order to get Isaac out of the house with Sarah’s “permission” indirectly acknowledge the power that Sarah exercises within the domestic realm. The midrash thus highlights a perceived tension between maternal and paternal spheres of influence and ambition. In the imagined conversation, Abraham lies to Sarah, saying that he wants to take Isaac out of the home to be educated theologically; to be inculcated, as it were, in what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has referred to as the “Law of the Father.” (The conversation presupposes that only a father would want to take a child away from home; it does not even consider the possibility that Sarah would initiate a schooling plan for her son, thereby giving her some time to herself.) The values expressed in this midrash find echoes in later Jewish attitudes about the responsibility of a father to educate his sons in Torah and about the need to detach a son from the maternal, domestic sphere of influence. As Mark Zbrowski and Elizabeth Herzog write in their depiction of *shtetl* education for boys:

Entrance into the kheyder is a painful experience for the mere baby who is taken away from his mother’s familiar presence to spend ten or twelve hours a day at study. The child cries, the mother may be tearful, but wrapped

*In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah*

in his father's prayer shawl the boy is carried out of babyhood, out of the home circle, beyond the enveloping warmth of feminine protection. And though the mother may weep, she would never oppose the commandment to teach Torah to a "big boy who is already three years old."<sup>7</sup>

In the midrash, Abraham exploits, as it were, Sarah's perceived reluctance to oppose the commandment to teach Torah to a "big boy." He lies and relies on her support for the system in order to create the conditions by which he can do an act that would never garner her support, one that would detach mother (and father) from their son not only during the day-time school hours but for all time. Abraham demonstrates concern for Sarah's opinion and well-being, but his conviction with regard to her light-headedness and his determination to prevaricate at all costs rather than consult with her about God's command all combine to make this midrashic commentary on Sarah's whereabouts during the *Akedah* at best unsatisfying, and at worst, deeply troubling.

*Recent Feminist Readings of the Akedah*

The midrashim cited above exemplify the rabbinic effort to justify Sarah's absence in Genesis 22 on the basis of chauvinistic notions of masculine and feminine difference. Feminist readers of the Bible have continued the quest for Sarah in Genesis 22, but, in contrast to the rabbis, these readers have used Sarah's nonappearance as an occasion to engage what Brenner, with Culler, identifies as hermeneutic moment number three, that is, to expose the androcentric values that "condition" the biblical text, "that are expressed in it, and perpetuated by it."

One such oppositional reading is that presented by poet and critic Alica Ostriker, in *Feminist Revision and the Bible*. Ostriker asserts that "the complete absence of Sarah from the *Akedah* constitutes a loud silence."<sup>8</sup> In response to this silence, Ostriker draws on the work of Carol Delaney and argues that the *Akedah*, in a feminist reading, is

a narrative of gender politics which inscribes the "binding" of the sons to the theocentric word of the fathers. . . . [T]he meaning of the *Akedah* "is to be found not in the end of the practice of child sacrifice but in the establishment of father-right" over the prior institution of mother-right.<sup>9</sup>

Like the midrashists who discern a connection between the *Akedah* and the death of Sarah, Ostriker reads Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites for a burial plot for Sarah as a coda to the *Akedah*:

Whereas the Hittite elders twice offer the patriarch a sepulcher to "bury the dead," he twice declares his intention to "bury my dead *out of my sight*" (King James Version; italics mine [A.O.]). This interesting phrase, usually erased in modern translations, firmly emphasizes Sarah's disappearance. The Hebrew *milefanai* literally means "from my face," or "from before my face"; idiomatically, it means "away from my presence." A common biblical locution, it is also used when the speaker is God, to express or describe a casting off, as when the seed of Israel "shall cease from being a nation before me" (Jeremiah 31:36). . . . Sarah must not merely die and be buried but must be eliminated from presence, that is, from consciousness. Sarah's burial signals that the defeat of maternal power is the condition/consequence of the male covenant.<sup>10</sup>

The *Akedah* thus becomes the story of the narrative binding, sacrifice, and burial of Sarah, not only out of Abraham's sight, but also out of the sight of the reader. Ostriker's reading stems from her observation that the Bible frequently introduces women characters who support and propagate the patriarchy, but then dismisses or, in this case, buries them when they outlast their narrative usefulness.<sup>11</sup> She adduces other such examples, including Miriam and Rebecca, who "are foregrounded as active agents at the beginning of the story, and disappear by the end of it" (p. 47). Ostriker's observation of this biblical pattern is important and compelling. But in this case, is it true? Does Sarah really disappear as a narrative presence?

I'll return to this question later. In order to formulate my answer, I first need to introduce another feminist response to the *Akedah*, that of Phyllis Tribble in her essay "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah." According to Tribble, the *Akedah*, 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.<sup>12</sup>



What Tribler objects to in this story of detachment is Abraham's central role in it. According to Tribler's reasoning, attachment is Sarah's problem, not Abraham's. Abraham has already demonstrated his willingness to detach from family, by leaving his birthplace and paternal home and migrating to Canaan, and by passing Sarah off as his sister, both to Pharaoh and to Abimelech. Sarah is the parent who is more attached to Isaac; Abraham has another son, Ishmael, but Isaac is Sarah's one and only. According to Tribler,

[i]n view of the unique status of Sarah and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham, ought to have been tested. The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, non-attached, the model of faithfulness.<sup>13</sup> (p. 285)

Like that of Ostriker, Tribler's exegesis responds passionately to Sarah's absence from the *Akedah* narrative. In contrast to Ostriker, however, Tribler's feminist argument expresses itself through a desire to rewrite Sarah back into the story and place her next to Isaac on Mount Moriah. If Midrash Tanhuma suggests that women are not temperamentally suited to such tests, Tribler argues that Sarah, in her condition of attachment, is a far more credible candidate for testing than Abraham.

Tribler's analysis makes me uncomfortable for several reasons. To begin with, I wonder about her wholesale acceptance of the high spiritual merit of the *Akedah* exercise and the theological premium she places on detachment. While I demur, as a feminist, from the ways in which Sarah is marginalized, do I really want to give Sarah a role in this story of would-be murderous detachment? While I, too, am anxious to discover ways and precedents for women to be incorporated into our notions of religious transcendence and our narrative of spiritual seeking, do I want to adopt this particular model of transcendent God-encounter? Do I want "in" on the notion that the "solitary individual, non-attached," is the ultimate "model of faithfulness"?

Over the past two decades, feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan have written about the differences between masculine and feminine development and have insisted that the feminine mode be assigned greater merit than it had in patriarchal narrative and culture.

Chodorow argues that girls, having been mothered by mothers, have a different disposition with respect to the developmental process of individuation. Girls come out of the oedipal phase

with a basis for “empathy” built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another’s needs and feelings). Furthermore, girls do not define themselves in terms of the denial of preoedipal relational modes to the same extent as boys. From very early on . . . , girls come to experience themselves as less-differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well.<sup>14</sup>

Building on the work of Chodorow and others, Carol Gilligan, in her groundbreaking book, *In A Different Voice* (1982), explores and compares the moral choices made by boys and girls. In assessing these differences, Gilligan considers the contrast between two models of selfhood: “between a self defined through separation and a self delineated through connection, between a self measured against an ideal of perfection and a self assessed through particular activities of care.”<sup>15</sup> Feminist theorists of autobiography have extended these insights even further to a discussion of the difference between the notion of isolated selfhood, as projected by such classic male autobiographers as St. Augustine or Benjamin Franklin, and the selves constructed by female and minority autobiographers. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, “in taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead, this new identity merges the shared and the unique.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in her now classic work, *Standing Again at Sinai*, Judith Plaskow argues that the idea that the self “develops detached from and in opposition to others is a core part of the mythological, psychological, and political bases of patriarchy.” Against this “separative notion of self,” Plaskow offers a “feminist affirmation of the communal character of selfhood.”<sup>17</sup>

In light of these feminist theoretical positions, Tribble’s decision to champion the *Akedah* as a narrative of individuation and attachment, and to plead for Sarah’s rightful place as the one who ought to have been detached, appears at once well founded and very problematic. It is true that Sarah is more attached

than Abraham. But do we want to consider that a liability or an advantage? As feminists looking for ways to read and relate to the Bible, do we want to remake our matriarchs, psychologically, morally, and religiously, after the hyper-individuated model of solitary men, or do we, rather, want to identify ways in which feminine interdependence and the “self defined through connection” can find spiritual expression and meaning in our most sacred canonical texts?

### *An Alternative Feminist Reading of the Akedah*

Earlier in this essay, in response to Ostriker’s reading, I asked whether it is indeed true that Sarah is buried “out of sight” in Genesis 23. On the contrary, I believe that Sarah’s absence from the *Akedah* narrative allows her to endure in the story as an alternative to the Abrahamic theology of detachment. Tribble asserts: “Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham” (p. 286). However, the glorification of Abraham that occurs in the wake of the *Akedah* experience is at best partial. Both Abraham and Isaac pay a steep price for their visit to Mount Moriah. Ultimately, Isaac’s adulthood and marriage bear the imprint of this traumatic event, leading him to seek solace not in detachment, but rather in love and connection. The model for it, of course, is not his father, Abraham, but his mother, Sarah.

In the context of a course on the subject of “Love in the Bible,” I have repeatedly asked students where they think the Hebrew verb for love (*a.h.v*) first appears in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Mostly, they expect to find it in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or in that of Abraham’s marriage to Sarah. It is stunning and disquieting to find love’s first mention in Genesis 22:2:

ויאמר קח נא את בנך את יחידך **אשר אהבת** את יצחק ולך לך אל ארץ המריה והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך.

Take, pray, your son, your only one, *whom you love*, and go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you.<sup>18</sup>

If Abraham is the first individual recorded as loving in the Bible, and God asks him to sacrifice his beloved child, then this test appears to be about Abraham's need to declare the priority of his love for God over his love for his son. The notion of such a conflict is evident in a famous comment by Rashi on the word *vayahavosh* ("and he saddled [his donkey]") in v. 3, immediately after the command to sacrifice Isaac:

ויחבש - הוא בעצמו ולא צוה לאחד מעבדיו, שהאהבה מקלקלת השורה.

He [saddled it] himself and did not order one of his servants to do it, *because love upsets the rule* [of regular/dignified conduct]. (emphasis added—W.Z.)

Love prompts Abraham to depart from his regular practice. But love for whom? Is it Abraham's great love for his son, whom he is about to sacrifice, that compels him to take this private moment to attend to his donkey? Or is it his great love for God? Rashi's comment is clipped and ambiguous, implying that Abraham struggled, in the earlier morning hours, with competing emotions.

By the end of Chapter 22, God wins out, but at great cost. The Bible depicts this cost starkly and honestly. Abraham and Isaac had walked to Mount Moriah in a spirit of togetherness (vv. 6 and 8)—*vayelekhu sheneihem yahdav*—but when Abraham makes the decision to bind Isaac and place him on an altar, that solidarity is forever shattered. An angel intercedes and commands Abraham not to "reach out his hand" against his son, but by then, the damage to Abraham's relationship with Isaac (and vice versa) has already been done. The word *yahdav* (together) is repeated one more time in this chapter, but with a crucial difference. At the end of the chapter, Abraham returns to his servants (*ne'arav*, as opposed to Isaac, *hana'ar*) and walks with *them* together (*yahdav*) toward Beersheba (Gen. 22:19). Note the ingenious rhyme of the words *yahdav* and *ne'arav*, a detail that highlights Abraham's solidarity with his servants rather than his son. Never again does Abraham walk together with Isaac. This dramatic change in their relationship is signaled by another important textual repetition-with-a-difference. At the beginning of the chapter, we recall, Isaac is designated as Abraham's son, his only one, the one that he loves. But in vv. 12 and 16, when the angel of God twice assures Abraham that he has passed his spiritual test and notes with approval his willingness to give up his son Isaac, the text lops off a vital element from the previous designation.

You have not held back your son, your only one, from me.

The outcome of the *Akedah* 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 isn't Abraham's loved one either. If this began as a story about competing love claims, from which we might have concluded that Abraham's love for God eclipsed his love for Isaac, love as a term has now disappeared from the narrative. Instead, Abraham is lauded by God's angel for being a *yir'e elohim*, a fearer rather than a lover of God (Gen. 22:12). It is the God of Awe that Abraham discovers on Mount Moriah, not the God of Love.

The end of the *Akedah* story thus situates Abraham in a condition of precarious detachment. He now stands in awe and terror before God, to whom he has devoted his life. He has become estranged from his son, as evidenced by Isaac's complete absence from this part of the story. He has become distanced from his wife Sarah as well, as indicated by his decision to dwell in Beersheba, while Sarah lives out her last days in Kiryat Arba, that is, Hebron (see Chapter 23). The *Akedah* has traditionally been applauded as a great spiritual moment, in which Abraham was willing to sacrifice his most precious attachment for the sake of demonstrating his faithfulness to God, and God promised Abraham great reward and familial continuity in return for his act of faith. Yet this sacrificial act appears to threaten that very continuity and connection. While the *Akedah* remains a powerful text about religious dedication and awe, about the role of "fear and trembling" (to recall Kierkegaard's famous words) in religious life and the sometimes violent nature of religious energies, it seems to fail as a recipe for passing on religious convictions to living children whom we love. Many Jews throughout history viewed the persecution they had to endure through the lens of the *Akedah*, and some, as Israel Yuval demonstrated in his work on Jewish responses to the Crusades,<sup>19</sup> even acted on its model and martyred their children. For those of us who want to live and love God *with* our children, however, another theological model needs to be uncovered.

That is why Sarah's absence from the *Akedah* narrative is so important. Contrary to Tribble, I do not want Sarah to be the protagonist of the *Akedah*, because I need her to endure as an alternative to the Abrahamic model of God-encounter through interpersonal detachment. I need her to serve as a model of love rather than of awe/fear. It is no accident, I would argue, that the next

Wendy Zierler

time the verb *a.h.v* appears in the Bible, it is with reference to Sarah, for even after her death, Sarah is the one who keeps the notion of love alive in the text. In Gen. 24, Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to Aram Naharayim to bring home a wife for his son. At this point in his life story, Abraham does everything from a detached remove, through servants rather than through personal involvement. At the beginning of the *Akedah* story, love disrupted Abraham's regular routine, as the wealthy master saddled his donkey by himself. Now detached routine rules, even as this father initiates a search for a (love)mate for his son.

At the end of this very long chapter, when Eliezer returns to Canaan with Isaac's fiancée, Rebecca, we read the following:

ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו ויקח את רבקה ותהי לו לאשה ויאהבה וינחם  
יצחק אחרי אמו.

And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah as wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was consoled after his mother's death. (Gen. 24:77)<sup>20</sup>

At this very important juncture, when Isaac sets out to create a family of his own, the text invokes not father Abraham but mother Sarah, and her legacy of love.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Akedah and Deuteronomy 6*

I return now to my observation at the beginning of this essay about the hermeneutical necessity of providing countertexts to central but disturbing biblical narratives. The *Akedah* story pits love of family against love of God. It does so in a transcendent context, on a mountain, a high place, removed from everyday life. Abraham has a peak spiritual experience on Mount Moriah, replete with angelic intercession and divine revelation. Isaac, the would-be inheritor of Abraham's spiritual legacy, is the casualty of this peak experience, as is Sarah, and even God! The concluding verse of Genesis 24, with its reference to love and its mention of Sarah's tent, is a crucial countertext insofar as it provides a domestic, mundane, everyday framework of love, in both a familial and a theological sense.

But what about the *Akedah* text itself? How can this text remain relevant? How can it serve as a spiritual model for any of us, especially the parents among us? Is there a way to inject the lesson of Sarah back into our understanding of this narrative? Is there a way to recast the story so as to imagine a loving God Who stands not in competition with our love for our children, but rather enlists our parental love to God's cause and allows us, within our mundane parental context, to discover little instances of transcendence?

Against all textual evidence to the contrary, a number of the classical exegetes, in their responses to the stark presence of the expression *yir'e elohim* in Gen. 22:12, insist upon Abraham's great love for God. In several cases, they do so in language resonant with that of Deut. 6:5–9. According to R. David Kimhi (Radak, 1160–1235), “the truth is that this whole test is meant to show the people of the world Abraham's complete love for God . . . so that they will all learn from him how to love God *with all their hearts and all their souls*” (commentary on Gen. 22:1). Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) echoes this point, adjuring: “we are obligated to learn from him [Abraham], and emulate him, and worship God *with all of our hearts and all of our souls*, like Abraham did (Commentary on Genesis, p. 277).

I, too, believe that Deuteronomy 6:5–9 is a crucial intertext, but for different reasons. Rather than viewing Abraham as the primal exponent of the Deuteronomic commandment to love God, I suggest that we read Deut. 6:5–9 as a text that recapitulates the *Akedah*, but in “Saraitic,” home-based terms:

ואהבת את ידוד אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך. (ו) והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך. ושננתם לבניך ודברת בם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך. וקשרתם לאות על ידך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך. וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you on this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

A number of elements in the above passage, both stylistic and thematic, recall the *Akedah*. Both passages begin with references to love. Like God's four-part instruction to Abraham to "Take, pray, your son (1), your only one (2), whom you love (3), Isaac (4)," the Deuteronomic commandment to love God has a four-part structure: "And you shall love God (1) . . . with all your heart (2) and all your soul (3) and all your might (3)." However, in contrast to the *Akedah* narrative, where love for one's children competes with love of God, the Deuteronomy passage renders parental interaction and teaching of one's children a necessary component of love and devotion to the Eternal. The story of the binding of Isaac is replete with images of sight and of hands: "On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw" (vv. 4, 8, 13); "God will see to the sheep" (v. 8); "And Abraham raised his eyes" (v. 13); "On the Mount of the Lord there is sight" (v. 14); "He took in his hand the wood and the cleaver" (v. 6); "And Abraham reached out his hand" (v. 10); "Do not reach out your hand" (v. 12). The Deuteronomy passage also includes sight and hand imagery, within the context of tying or binding: "Bind them as sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes." Here, however, the verb is the common, prosaic *ukeshartem* (and you shall bind / tie), as opposed to the much more uncommon verb used in the *Akedah* (from which derives the name of the story), *vaya'akod*. In Deuteronomy, professions of love for God are mandated within everyday, domestic space, where one goes to sleep and rises in the morning. While the commandment to love God also applies when one is away from home, the greatest stress is laid on the ways in which one builds a home—a Saraitic tent, if you will—of love. Deut. 6:5–9 can thus be seen as a revision of the message of the *Akedah*, a ritual domestication of its spiritual aspirations, providing a model for how a feminist reader and believer might engage and carry on its spiritual project.

In proposing this intertextual connection between Deut. 6:5–9 and Genesis 22, I do not mean to deny the patriarchal basis of the Bible or to ignore the sound critique of Genesis 22 presented by Ostriker and Tribble. I also do not mean to suggest that this reading of the *Akedah* corrects Genesis 22, offering the "true," unsexist reading of this episode. On the contrary: To borrow the words of Ilana Pardes, this reading is based on a consideration of the "heterogeneity of the Hebrew canon, [on] an appreciation of the variety of the socio-ideological horizons evident in this composite text."<sup>22</sup> If the Bible is a composite, that means that as a whole, it is the sum of its parts, and that these parts necessarily differ from but also relate and speak to one another. In drawing



on two very different elements of the composite, then, I have endeavored to bring the shadowy presence of Sarah in Genesis 22 into the light, to dig her out of her textual burial plot and show how, despite her absence on Mount Moriah and in the specific verses of Genesis 22, she lives and loves on.

*Notes*

1. Athalya Brenner, "Introduction to the Series," *A Feminist Companion to Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1993), p. 13.
2. Tikva Frymer Kensky, "Akeda: A View From the Bible," in Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holidays* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 144.
3. Brenner, "Introduction" (above, note 1), pp. 13–14.
4. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in idem, *Mimesis* (English transl. by Willard Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 12.
5. *Tanhuma*, Vayera 22 (also in *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayera 98).
6. See also BT *Kiddushin* 80b.
7. Mark Zbrowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1952), p. 88.
8. Alicia Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1993), p. 41.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39. For an earlier commentary that anticipates Ostriker's argument by some twenty years, see Carol Ochs, "The Sacrifice of Isaac," in *Behind the Sex of God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 31–46. Ochs argues that what is at stake in the *Akedah* is Abraham's dedication to the patriarchal religious cult as opposed to the prior matriarchal cult:  
In order to prove that Abraham is not rooted in the older tradition, God demands that he renounce the most fundamental tenet of matriarchal religion and kill his own child. Abraham's choice is between the matriarchal principle of protecting his child and the patriarchal principle of following an abstract ethic, obedience to God. (pp. 45–46)
10. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
11. For a similar argument, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).
12. Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (New York–London: Routledge, 1999), p. 278.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
14. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), p. 167.

15. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 35.
16. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves," in Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 40. Feminist theorists are not unique in championing the relational mode. Martin Buber makes this a cornerstone of his theology, writing that "[e]xtended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic world addresses the eternal You." See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (English transl. by Walter Kaufmann; New York: Charles Scribner's, 1970), p. 123. Thanks go out to my colleague Eugene Borowitz for making this observation.
17. See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990). In these remarks, Plaskow relies on the work of Catherine Keller in *The Broken Web* (1986).
18. Translation from Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 103–104.
19. See Israel Yuval, *Shenei goyim bevitnekh* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), pp. 159–175.
20. Translation from Alter, *Genesis* (above, note 18), p. 123.
21. For some readers, a discussion of Sarah in relation to a legacy of love may be difficult to accept, given her harsh treatment of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21. To be sure, Sarah's love for and attachment to Isaac has a troubling aspect, insofar as it excludes attachments and kindness to others who might make a claim on her or on Abraham. For a positive, recuperative reading of the relationship between Hagar and Sarah, see Savina J. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah* (Athens, OJ: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1990).
22. See Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3.