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Sacrificial Space: The Hebrew Imagination “Comes Home”

1 The *akeda* in the Jewish Tradition

Attached to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem are the four most powerful stories that have driven the Jewish imagination since its inception in the dark mythological past: the *creation* story, the *sacrifice* story, the *Temple* story and the *redemption* story. In a series of Biblical and post-Biblical redactions and projections, the place where Isaac was brought to be sacrificed came to be identified with the Foundation Stone from which the world was created, and with the Temple of Solomon and its successors – meant to culminate in the building of the “Third Temple” that will usher in the messianic age. Still, it was only in the twentieth century – with the addition of geopolitics to the midrashic and mystical imagination – that the place took on an urgency it had not had since the first century of the Common Era.

While all these stories converge on a site that, therefore, exercises an enormous gravitational pull, I want to focus here on the “sacrifice story”, based on the narrative of the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22), which is encoded in Hebrew memory as the *akeda* (lit. “binding”). This literary *topos* has fed the imagination *and behavior* of Jews for two millennia. In what might be called its “realized” form, it reflects not only an instance of religious mimicry in the ongoing exchanges with Christendom – fuelled perhaps by crucifixion-envy on the part of Isaac’s Jewish descendants – but also, as we shall see, the most radical reenactment of the archetypes of memory.

The larger challenge I wish to address in this essay is the possibility of achieving a defensibly ethical poetic – and political – stance by imagining a non-hermetic model of the *akeda* and a non-sacrificial, non-exclusive approach to the sacred. To understand the enormity of the challenge, we must briefly recapitulate the ways in which history and story intersect and undermine each other in the shadow of the Temple Mount.

Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, in his groundbreaking book on Jewish memory (*Zakhor* 2005 [1982]), defined the recycling of Biblical *topoi* as characteristic of collective Jewish memory throughout two thousand years of exile. However, if we look closely, we can see that in the case of the *akeda*, this recycling is an *inversion* of the usual mimetic process by which artistic representation imitates reality: already in the *Talmud*, and most egregiously during the time of the Crusades, there

are abundant recorded instances of *life imitating literature*, as filicides avowedly patterned their actions after their understanding of Abraham's "behavior".¹

Yet the "realized form" of the *akeda* was actually a very early misreading of Gen. 22 that persists to this day. Readers from all three monotheistic traditions, whose memory is invariably inflected by different exegetical approaches and theological appropriations, can benefit from a close rereading of this passage from the Hebrew Bible:

And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham. And He said to him, "Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering [*olah*] on one of the mountains which I shall say to you." And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him, and Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering [*olah*], and rose and went to the place that God had said to him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his lads, "Sit you here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead and let us worship and return to you." And Abraham took the wood for the offering [*olah*] and put it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the cleaver, and the two of them went together. And Isaac said to Abraham his father, "Father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering [*olah*]?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the offering [*olah*], my son." And the two of them went together. And they came to the place that God had said to him, and Abraham built there an altar and laid out the wood and bound [*va-ya'akod*] Isaac his son and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and took the cleaver to slaughter his son. And the Lord's messenger called out to him from the heavens and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not reach out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me." And Abraham raised his eyes and saw and, look, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up as a burnt offering [*olah*] instead of his son. (Gen. 22:1–13)²

The Hebrew word *olah*, which appears six times in this short passage, signifies a burnt offering connected with sacrificial rites. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, with the crematory chimneys still warm from the ashes of millions of incinerated Jews, the temptation to view the decimation of the Jewish race as

1 In the myriad commentaries and discussions of the *akeda*, the most influential for modern thinkers and writers has been that of Kierkegaard (1985 [1843]), who argued in 1843 that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac was a primordial act of faith that ushered in the dawn of monotheism and not an act to be emulated. The persistence of the story as template for behavior has nevertheless continued unabated, as we will see below.

2 All quotes from the Torah are from the translation of *The Five Books of Moses* (Alter 2004). Key Hebrew words have been cited in brackets.

theologically inflected was almost irresistible, and can explain, for example, the widespread use of the term *Holocaust*, derived from the Latin word for *olah* in the Vulgate translation of Gen. 22:2: “Tolle filium tuum unigenitum, quem diligis, Isaac, et vade in terram visionis, atque ibi offeres eum *in holocaustum* super unum montium quem monstravero tibi”³. In 1950, Shalom Spiegel was a lone voice reminding his co-religionists that the Biblical text carries an explicit interdiction *against* the sacrifice of sons, both in the narrative frame – “And God tested Abraham” – and in the actual resolution of the story, Isaac’s rescue through God’s final intervention (Spiegel 2000).

Still, when we talk of the *akeda* as *topos* in the Jewish literary imagination, we are referring to the continuous post-Biblical legacy that actually *kills off* Isaac, embalming him as the prototype of Jewish martyrdom. One could even argue that the term “Sacrifice of Isaac”, as it is called in Christian iconography, would fit most Hebrew retellings, ancient and contemporary, better than “*akeda*”, which refers only to the *binding* or aborted sacrifice.

But if we take the trouble to trace the evolution of this story within the confines of the Hebrew Bible itself, we will see how a constitutive mythical moment also became territorialized. The language of Gen. 22 is laconic and, when it comes to the place itself, rather imprecise: “Take [...] Isaac, 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*”⁴. In later Biblical texts, with the addition of geography and power to the mix, the *akeda* moves from a literary to a geographical *topos*. The mythical site of the original crucible – “one of the mountains” in the “land of Moriah”, vaguely connected earlier in *Genesis* to a town called Shalem (Gen. 15:18) – acquires specificity and *gravitas* as it travels through the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*, becoming the center of David’s passion and Solomon’s concrete deeds. Through a conflation of promise, conquest, purchase and consecration, Jerusalem is taken from the Jebusites (II Sam. 5:6–9), the City of David is founded, the ark of the covenant relocated (II Sam. 6), Arauna’s threshing floor acquired (II Sam. 24), and the Temple constructed (I Kgs. 5) – all converging in *II Chronicles* 3 on a site now designated and fixed as “Mt. Moriah” (II Chr. 3:1).⁵

This centripetal theo-geo-political process is, nonetheless, reversed after the destruction of the First Temple and again in the long aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple and the millennial dispersion that Jews call *Galut* [exile]. In

³ My emphasis.

⁴ My emphasis.

⁵ For an elaboration of the process by which the story and place of sacrifice congeal in the Hebrew Bible, see Ezrahi (2007).

exile, that mountain, like everything else in Zion, becomes, once again as in Gen. 22, a mobile projection of the Jewish imagination. Several scholars have traced the unresolved tension in Jewish hermeneutic literature between what Amir Eshel (2003, p. 122) calls “concrete, material places” and the idea of “*makom*” as portable site of the divine-human encounter (in Talmudic Hebrew, *Ha-makom*, *the place*, is also one of the many circumlocutions for God).⁶ Even the solid rock on which Isaac was “bound”, identified, as we have seen, in rabbinic fantasy with the foundational rock of creation, strains heavenward, requiring David’s – and, in due time, Muhammad’s – physical strength to hold it down.⁷ The *story*, however, easily manages to detach itself from the place and to cling to every subsequent act of sacrifice in the lands of Jewish dispersal and persecution.

As with so many other floating Jewish myths, this one was re-grounded in the Zionist century, in a way reversing the story once again, and reprising the Biblical acts of consolidation that culminated in *II Chronicles*. Before 1948 and after 1967, physical access to the Temple Mount added a new/old dimension to the Hebrew negotiation with the sources of holiness. Between 1948 and 1967, with the Old City and the Temple Mount in Jordanian hands, a sense of distant proximity prevailed in Israel, maintaining a kind of exilic praxis and mindset in poetry and politics. In his “Poem for the Sabbath Eve”, published several years before the 1967 war, Yehuda Amichai (2002, p. 111) writes, “Will you come to me tonight? / The laundry has already dried in the courtyard. / The insatiable war / Is now in some other place / [...] We know well that the border / is close, and we are forbidden there. / But my father prayed ‘*va-yakhulu*’ – / the earth and all their hosts”⁸. The word “*va-yakhulu*” is shorthand for the passage from *Genesis* 2:1 that begins the recitation of the Kiddush, the blessing over the wine on Friday night, marking the end of the six days of creation and ushering in the Sabbath: “Then the heavens and the earth were completed (*va-yakhulu*), and all their array [alt. hosts]”. In Amichai’s poem, the connection between the beloved who is beckoned to a tryst, the father who intones the Sabbath liturgy, and the divided city, is clear only to a reader sensitive to the diasporic practice of substitution and distance: prayer that substitutes for the Temple rites of sacrifice and distance from the sacred center that allows holiness (and love) to permeate the entire universe.⁹

⁶ For a larger discussion of the place of “place” in the Jewish imagination, see Ezrahi (2000); Eisen (1986); Gurevitch and Aran (1997). In GenR/BerR (68:9) it is stated that God “is the place of the universe though the universe is not His place.”

⁷ See mYom (5:2); ySan (10:29); for the Muslim reference, see Makiya (2001, p. 182, p. 322–325).

⁸ My translation.

⁹ For a more extensive discussion of distance as a critical ingredient in the diasporic imagination, see Ezrahi (2000, especially p. 3–31).

2 Modern Retellings

The three most prominent writers of Jerusalem – Uri Zvi Greenberg, S. Y. Agnon and Yehuda Amichai, whose work, collectively, spans the entire twentieth century – engaged the temptations and the dangers of the *akeda* as a form of proximity to the sacred. As I will argue, the tensions they exposed between centripetal, exclusive, and centrifugal, inclusive, forms of the religious imagination reflect active forces shaping Israel’s religious life and political profile. Of the three, only Amichai lived to fully articulate a post-’67 poetic response, culminating in his last book, *Open Closed Open* (2000). And only he embodies, throughout his *œuvre*, a porous, inclusive idea of holiness through an insistence on mediated and multiple forms of access to the sacred.

Why these three? Most modern Hebrew writers, like their predecessors, invoke the *akeda* in the context of Jewish suffering. The list is endless, stretching from the poems of “national poet” H. N. Bialik at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the work of A. B. Yehoshua at the turn of the twenty-first – and beyond.¹⁰ Though the historical referents vary – moving from the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, to the *shoah* at mid-century, to the wars of modern Israel from 1948 until today – they all allude to suffering in which Jews are either victims or (reluctant) agents – but in which, due to the hermetic nature of the *topos*, the moral discourse on human agency and the exercise of power is missing or limited to a debate between fathers and sons. In modern Israel, where generations of fathers have been sending generations of sons to kill and be killed, every reworking of the *akeda* reflects, perforce, the internal discourse between Israel and its God – or its fate, or its state government, or whatever paternal authority is invoked.

The major difference between the ancient or medieval writers and the modern ones is that the modern ones hardly accept the *akeda* as a religious *norm*; they express their protest through some form of deconstructive irony – usually by removing one piece of the picture (God or the angel is the one commonly missing in modern retellings, but often it is the ram). Nevertheless, what nearly all of these writers *do* seem to accept is that Isaac (or some stand-in, even Abraham himself) actually dies – and they accept the *adequacy* of the *akeda* as literary trope of the Jewish passion. The contemporary Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua, who wrote a

¹⁰ See among others, poems by the following Hebrew poets: Bialik, “Al ha-shehitah” [On the Slaughter]; Yitzhak Lamdan, “Al ha-mizbeah” [On the Altar], Amir Gilboa, “Yitzhak”; Haim Guri, “Yerusha” [Heritage]; A. B. Yehoshua, “Be-kayitz 1970” [In the Summer of 1970] and *Mr. Mani*; see also the work of Tuvia Rubner, Avot Yeshurun and T. Carmi.

novella and a long dynastic novel on the subject, claimed in an essay that in his novel, *Mr. Mani*, he tried to “rid [...] the collective self [...] of this terrifying myth [by] actualizing it” (Yehoshua 2001, p. 61, 64).¹¹ Yet here he seems strangely oblivious to the fact that this is precisely what every post-Biblical evocation of the *akeda* has done.

Each of the writers, from the early centuries of the Common Era to the present, seems, then, to be playing his role in perpetuating the floating signifiers of Jewish memory as they attach themselves to moving historical targets. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, there is hardly a Hebrew writer who has not tried his hand at tweaking this *topos*.¹² So much so, that we are tempted to ask: who *has not* written an *akeda*? Well, the women are largely absent, for one. Where their writing does incorporate this story, it is more often as a passing allusion or conceit, or an attempt to distance the poetic self altogether from participating in this passion.¹³

One of the male poets, Dan Pagis (1930–1986), who might be most expected to invoke this well-worn figure of Jewish suffering, given the death he barely escaped under the sign of the swastika, refuses this option altogether. Rather, through his substitution of the narrative of Cain and Abel for the *akeda*, he seems to be insisting on a universalist discourse on power and fratricide over the covenantal-sacrificial discourse. The *shoah* is connected in Pagis’s poetry with the wars of Israel in such a way as to deprive Jews of their special status as victims or martyrs of a higher authority or of a hermetic covenantal lexicon. His poetry is an implicit challenge to the consensus on the centrality of the *akeda* to Jewish/Israeli consciousness and collective meaning. Here, for example, is “Brothers”:

¹¹ For a more extensive discussion of *Mr. Mani* and of the repercussions of a culture of sacrifice in modern Israel, see Ezrahi (2012).

¹² Numerous poetic and fictional reworkings of the *akeda* in modern Hebrew literature are considered in Feldman (2010); see also Kartun-Blum (1999).

¹³ See, for example, the case of the poet Raya Harnik, who wrote, “I will not sacrifice / my first born as a burnt offering. / Not me” – twelve years before her son Guni was killed in the Beaufort Castle just preceding the Israeli pullout from Lebanon in 2000 (quoted in Feldman 2010, p. 277). See also Grossman’s powerful novel (2010). While the story of a woman running away from the anticipated announcement of her soldier-son’s death in many ways calls for the *akeda*, only briefly and fleetingly does the main character, Ora, consider this *topos* and its “comforts” before rejecting them. Hanokh Levin and David Avidan also “joined the women” by rejecting the adequacy of the *akeda* in the 1960s and 1970s.

1

Abel was blond and wooly
and looked as humble
as the softest of his little goats
and curled like the smoke of the offering
that he sent up to the nose of his lord.
Cain was straight: like a knife.

2

Cain is dumbstruck. His large hand
gropes in the slaughtered throat in front of him:
where has this silence burst from?

3

Abel remains in the field. Cain remains Cain. And since it was decreed
that he is to be a wanderer,
he wanders diligently [...]

4

On an evening of mercy he happens upon
A convenient haystack.
He sinks in, is swallowed, rests.
Shhh, Cain is asleep.
Smiling, he dreams that he is his brother.

5

Do not be afraid.
It has been decreed that whoever kills you
Shall be punished sevenfold.
Your brother Abel guards you from all harm. (Pagis 1981)¹⁴

Cain dreams that he is his brother. In this symbolic universe, where the equality of brothers replaces the hierarchy of fathers and sons, the murderer and his victim are interchangeable and the world a level playing field for human drama. Now we can take up our initial question: is it possible to achieve a similar effect through a non-hermetic model of the *akeda* and a non-sacrificial, non-exclusive approach to the sacred? I will try to respond to this question by shifting the entire frame of reference from that of war to that of holiness. In a way, this brings us back to the original framing in the *Genesis* narrative of the story of sacrifice as an act of sanctification independent of the social framework. What I mean by this is not that a specific social or political framework is not factored into the writing – or the read-

14 For an elaboration of this subject and of Pagis' poetic achievement, see Ezrahi (1990).

ing – of the text; rather, that the text is not a typological response to a historical event but an expression of value in itself.

3 Greenberg's and Agnon's “Aesthetics of the Whole”

I will argue that both Uri Zvi Greenberg and S. Y. Agnon represent, in their poetry and prose, respectively, the temptations of what I call the “aesthetics of the whole” – an enactment of total harmony between material and spirit, promise and redemption, word and act, text and territory. And further, that the sacrificial lexicon is crucial to this process. Consider first U. Z. Greenberg's “Night of Rain in Jerusalem”:

The few trees in the yard moan like a
forest. The thunderous clouds are
heavy with rivers.
The Angels of Peace
stand at the head of my sleeping
children, as the trees moan and the
heavy rains pour down.
Outside: Jerusalem, city of the Father's
glorious trial, where he bound his son
on one of the hills. That fire, kindled
at dawn, still burns on the hill, the
rains have not put it out: it is the fire
between the sacrificial pieces.

‘If God were to command me now, as
once He did my ancient Father, I
would surely obey’, sing my heart and
my flesh on this night of rain, as the
Angels of Peace stand at the head of
my sleeping children!

What can equal this glory, this
wondrous zeal – alive since that ancient
dawn to this very moment – for the
Mount of Moriah? The blood of the

covenant sings on in the father's
 fervent body. He is prepared to offer
 his sacrifice on the Temple Mount at
 dawn.

Outside: Jerusalem, and the moaning
 of the Lord's trees, cut down by her
 enemies in every generation; clouds
 heavy with rain, lightnings in them and
 thunders which, for me, on this night
 of rain, are tidings from the mouth
 of the God of Might to endless
 generations. (Greenberg 1981)¹⁵

The setting of this poem, which dates from 1953, is explicitly resonant with its Biblical prototype; and, unlike virtually every reenactment or representation of the *akeda* that I am familiar with in modern Hebrew literature, nothing is subtracted from or added to the foundational text – except the presumption that, as I have said, is common to all post-Biblical accounts, that the deed will in fact be *performed* if, and when, the time is right. What is striking here, and what makes this text singular among the myriad versions of the *akeda* in modern Hebrew literature, is that it is not only the *topos* that is presented as adequate and acceptable, but the *act itself*. There is no way to read this ironically as a poem of protest against the power that sends sons to be slaughtered – quite the contrary. Seen, however, in the context of the poet's own situation as a father of young children, and of the poetic sequence in which it was first published in one of the Israeli dailies for the High Holidays (when the Biblical narrative of the *akeda* would have been read as part of the synagogue liturgy), this unyielding nighttime portrait is mitigated by what one young scholar calls Greenberg's “morning” consciousness. In the next poem in the sequence, “*Shir yeled ha-shahar*” [Song of the Child of Dawn], the son appears with the dawn to confirm to the poet-father that, like Abraham, he too was offered a substitute and would not have to slaughter his son – not just yet, anyway (Corb 2006). Taken together, both poems nevertheless constitute a statement of absolute faith in the hermetic geographical and theological landscape of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The original, “Be-layl geshem bi-yirushalayim”, appeared in a cycle of poems entitled “Masa va-nevel” [Journey with a Harp], published in the Rosh Hashana issue of *Luah ha-aretz*, September, 1953. This poem never appeared in any of Greenberg's published collections. Posthumously it was published in one Greenberg collection (1995).

Although there are no topical references in this poem, no delimited social or political context, which is, in itself, well within the poetic tradition Greenberg inherited, anyone familiar with his poetic and polemical writing would bring to this text knowledge of the poet's explicit endorsement of the violence with which the Temple Mount is meant to be retaken – the violence of proximity to the sacred – which is, essentially, isomorphic with the violence of the *realized akeda*. As early as 1949, Greenberg, referring to the 1948 War, which resulted in the division of Jerusalem, declared in the Knesset: "We could have reclaimed Jerusalem with the Temple Mount and all the holiness that is between its walls – for ourselves and for our children – in one fell swoop: heroically".¹⁶ The mimetic desire¹⁷ that drives the father toward the altar of sacrifice is also, clearly, a form of *political* desire¹⁸ – and desire for unification with the sources of the sacred will bring about the inevitable destruction of everything in its wake. As Hebrew scholar Hannan Hever argues persuasively in his book on Greenberg's politics and aesthetics, it is impossible to distinguish between the two (Hever 2004, p. 154). In the manner of fascist poets in Europe between the two World Wars, Greenberg politicizes the aesthetic and aestheticizes the political. Applying Giorgio Agamben's definition of politics as "the display of the act of mediation", the realm in which the *means* become visible – not as ends in themselves and not as means to an end (quoted in: Hever 2004, p. 15) – Hever shows how, precisely by ridding politics of its mediating status, Greenberg enlists the State as the instrument of redemption.¹⁹ But at the same time, one can argue that Greenberg is ridding language itself of its mediating status – specifically the status of metaphor as mediation. Having moved from the radical left to the radical right in Israeli politics, Greenberg came to believe that he had inherited the mantle of Biblical prophecy and even regarded the War of Independence as the "literalization of his own metaphors" (Miron 1992, p. 127). What I call the "aesthetics of the whole", epitomized in this poem, is the absolute expression of the logic by which access to territory and power and the elimination of all mediating forces – of poetry itself as a realm of mediation – can enable the aestheticization and sacralization of politics and the literalization or reenactment of the tropes of the imagination.

¹⁶ "Yakholnu le-hahzir et yerushalayim 'im har ha-bayit ve-kol ha-kodesh she-bein ha-homot lanu u-le-vaneinu – be-mehi ahat: begevurah". Quoted from *Divrei ha-knesset* [Protocols of the Knesset], 1949, in Hever (2004, p. 153).

¹⁷ See Girard's work on "mimetic desire" (1965).

¹⁸ "*Kisuf politi*" in Greenberg's words. Hever (2004, p. 153) glosses this term, which means political yearning, as the more psychoanalytically resonant "*teshuka politi*" [political desire].

¹⁹ One of the most fascinating sections in this book is Hever's discussion of the complex relationship between Greenberg and David Ben-Gurion, the leader he invested with messianic status.

This text collapses the distance between the desiring subject and the object of desire that had characterized diasporic aesthetics at least since the first centuries of the Common Era. Greenberg’s *akeda* poem was composed, as I have noted, five years after the War of Independence, when the distance that had been a factor in the Jewish imagination of Zion – and within Zion, of Jerusalem, and within Jerusalem, of the Temple Mount – for thousands of years, had been reinstated by the division of the city after 1948. In my interrogation of this subject, Greenberg becomes the signpost of the most extreme submission to the desire for mingling with the dust of the holy shrine since the Middle Ages. But unlike the so-called “*avalei Tzion*” [mourners of Zion] of the ninth-tenth centuries, whose entire earthly task was to mourn the destruction of the Temple,²⁰ Greenberg was living in a time when an act of heroism could – and, fourteen years later, did – reclaim the Temple Mount and efface the distance that was the formaldehyde in which the Jewish imagination had been both preserved and protected. Menashe Kadishman, one of those contemporary artists who has represented the *akeda* in different visual media, attests to the power – or aura, if you will – of the place itself. “If I stand on Mount Moriah and look towards the Mount of Olives [...] there pass before me scenes from the events of the past – love and sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac [...]. The Binding of Isaac occurs in our time, in every place we send our children to wars, but its emblem remains one: Jerusalem – the place where it really happened” (Omer 1988, p. 127; Kartun-Blum 1999, p. 92).

Really happened? Events of the past? Such is the way myth and history mingle in the gravitational field of *akeda*. Such is the way life imitates art.

But whereas Greenberg can abide in the place where all the “loose ends” of the Hebrew imagination are tied up, most of his contemporaries approached the subject with some form of mediation (“politics”), of aesthetic or ironic distance (“poetics”). S. Y. Agnon’s dilemma was slightly different from that of Greenberg; although he was writing within that same gravitational field, Agnon’s negotiations with the sacred center did not explicitly revolve around the opportunities presented by Jewish empowerment. One of the major manifestations of what might be called Agnon’s “bipolar” suspension between “tradition” and “the modern” focuses on the persona of the writer himself.²¹ In the “traditional” mode, he traces his genealogy back to the medieval poets and traditional scribes – and even farther back to the Levites reciting Psalms on the steps of the Temple in Je-

²⁰ See the “*avalei tzion*” [the mourners of Zion] of the ninth century or the aborted journey of Yehuda Halevi to the Holy Land in the twelfth century (Ezrahi 2000, p. 33–51).

²¹ In *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, Band (1968) was among the first to indicate the dialectical swings between the poles I prefer to call “tradition” and “the modern.”

Jerusalem; for this persona, poetic fulfillment is within sight, as language, text and territory are reunited in the twentieth century Land of Israel.

And, indeed, a number of Agnon's most canonic stories enact the allure of the aesthetics of Return to the Sacred Center as total, exclusive, and internally coherent. As ultimate object of messianic desire, Jerusalem need admit of no negotiable borders. So in pious folk tales like "Tehila", this is how that poetic premise works its way into the public rhetoric: the eponymous 104-year-old character chastises the narrator for not really living in the Holy City because he does not live within the walls of the Old City. But never mind, she adds: "May the day come when Jerusalem extends as far as Damascus, and in every direction" (Agnon 1973, p. 70).²² Tehila thus reveals that she herself is still living in the messianic geography of the mind. This story was written in 1949 but set during the Mandate period, around 1925, when the Temple Mount was accessible, though not without obstacles and not under Jewish sovereignty. But what Agnon is really enacting is the poetics of a city still suspended in the imagination. Jerusalem, with her shrines and burial sites, is a protean woman perennially waiting to be redeemed through the ingathering of her exiles. In the redemptive mode, Jerusalem – and Zion – are infinitely expandable. Needless to say, when imported into the political realm, this mindset has, since 1967, proved disastrous. And I believe we can find that knowledge hidden in the deepest recesses of Agnon's imagination.

As the storyteller most associated with Jerusalem, and Hebrew literature's only Nobel laureate, Agnon may have been more tempted than any other modern Hebrew writer by the promise of proximity to sacred space, and by perfection and wholeness as its aesthetic correlates – while being fully cognizant of its dangers. He explored the seductions of such proximity over a lifetime of writing. But Agnon cannot abide long in the place where Greenberg is comfortable, where, as I have suggested, all the "loose ends" of the Hebrew imagination are tied up. Agnon's characters do not remain unscathed when they enter utopian or sacred space.

The only one who actually enters the Holy of Holies and exits in safety is the character whose lowly, compromised status in Agnon's pantheon protects him from seeking total harmony between his imagination and the world. It is in Yitzhak (Isaac), *l'homme moyen sensuel*, the Everyman, the anti-hero of the epic novel *Tmol shilshom* [Only Yesterday] that I find the answer to the challenge of these messengers of perfection and wholeness. While exploring the terrain of the *akeda* to its limit, *Only Yesterday* also presents the possibility of a different resolution to the sacralization of space, the intoxicating merger of text and territory.

²² On this, see Ezrahi (2000, p. 101).

The novel as a whole exposes the tension between Agnon’s own mimetic desire and the mediating acts that undermine it.

Because he is not a “real artist”, Isaac is, I have argued at length elsewhere, the very embodiment of metaphoric – diasporic, if you will – distance from the temptations of the “real” (Ezrahi 2004, p. 105–135).²³ In a novel where there are other examples of true artists, Isaac is a craftsman, a housepainter, a “smeared”. He is one who always lives at a distance from the ideal of saintliness or art, or even the agrarian dream of his fellow pioneers. And, as it turns out, he is the only one who can enter the site identified as Mt. Moriah by the Jews and as *Haram al Sherif* by the Muslims. Maybe this access is because he is the only one in this novel – or for that matter, in Agnon’s *oeuvre* as a whole – who is not in danger of bringing “strange fire”²⁴, not in danger of realizing the violence attendant upon proximity to the sacred.

The novel’s center, is, I believe, Isaac’s entry into the Holy of Holies. Using the materials of his trade, his paints and brushes, he executes an act not of representation – which, in such a space, could border on the idolatrous, or worse – but of decoration. Isaac’s reputation as housepainter has reached the foreign consuls and gone as far as the Pasha himself, who invites this Jewish craftsman to repair “their” house of worship (Dome of the Rock) on “our” Temple Mount. “Isaac may have been the only one to enter the Holy of Holies and to practice his craft in the place of our Temple”, the narrator tells us, and then adds, slyly implying that even *he* cannot go where Isaac trod: “*Too bad* our comrade Isaac isn’t much of a storyteller and can’t tell what his eyes saw there” (Agnon 2000, p. 227–228).²⁵

This slight passage that *cannot be related* underscores the ethics of the non-literal, the unarticulated, the mediated, a truth brought back to the sites of holiness from two thousand years of negotiating distance: neither shape nor word can give form to the experience of proximity to holiness without endangering the life, the sanity or the moral integrity of the pilgrim. But equally important is the acknowledgment of more than one holy shrine on the same mountain – “their” house of worship on “our” Temple Mount.

Particularly in light of the resonances of the *akeda* in this passage, the potential of realignment with the *axis mundi* recalls the power invoked in Greenberg’s poem; it is, then, I believe, explicitly replaced by the alternative model of dis-

²³ The following discussion contains a brief version of some of the arguments I make in that much longer essay on this novel.

²⁴ The reference here is to Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron the Priest, who brought their burning censers before the Lord, unauthorized and unbidden, and paid for it with their lives. See Lev. 10:1.

²⁵ My emphasis.

tance, muteness and mediation – the poetic equivalent of the “act of mediation” that Agamben identifies in the political realm.

Although it is as painter of walls that Isaac preserves his distance from iconographic temptations, Agnon cannot leave the story there. Isaac is also a sign-painter, and as such he will eventually succumb to the seduction of letters. Ostensibly less dangerous than graven images, letters can be lethal when subjected to certain iconic readings. It is not as “smearer” but as sign-maker that Isaac, in a moment of pique, paints “crazy dog” [*kelev meshuga*] on the stray dog Balak’s back and enters into the dangerously literal place that will eventuate in his own hideous death by rabies.²⁶

This latter-day Isaac becomes, finally, the victim of a grotesque *akeda* – “bound” by ropes to keep him from flailing around, and then, like all the Isaacs before him *except for the first one*, dying as a perverse sacrifice: his death is followed by a kind of cosmic redemption as torrential rains fall on the parched soil of the Holy Land. Through this terrifying conclusion, the narrative serves, again, the apocalyptic misreading of the *akeda* that we have traced from the most ancient post-Biblical sources.

It turns out that at the level of character and moral discourse, Agnon did indeed create an alternative poetics of mediation, and that Isaac was at first protected by his craft and his humility from the dangers of access to the sacred center. And yet, at the level of the *plot*, the *akeda* must be enacted, the inexorable Jewish “master narrative” served, the insatiable primitive god who demands the sacrifice of children, fed.

Once again we learn that when text and territory are reunited, when word becomes flesh and the paradigm of aesthetic wholeness realized through sacrifice, it spells human disaster. The alternative that Agnon provides is often well camouflaged, though hidden in plain sight, but it can never fully or finally put mimetic desire to rest.

4 Amichai’s Alternative Rewriting

The one who keeps that alternative always in full view is Yehuda Amichai. All of his *akeda* poems – most of them dating from his last volume – are written, like the rest of his poetic *œuvre*, under the sign of “*hesed*” or “grace”. The first such

²⁶ Eshel (2003, p. 131) sees in Balak the exilic alternative to a centripetal Zionist vision. I see it in Isaac. But Isaac’s painting on the dog’s back, and Balak’s subsequent sinking his teeth into Isaac’s flesh, both violate the principles that governed their own natures.

poem, “The Real Hero of the Akedah”²⁷, was originally published, appropriately enough, in a volume called “She’at ha-hesed” (“An Hour of Grace”) in 1983 (Amichai 1983). The date itself is significant, as it coincides with the First Lebanese War that triggered both a breakdown in Israeli consensus on necessary war, and the emergence of a vibrant protest culture led by poets, writers and dramatists as well as politicians and citizens from all walks of life.

The real hero of the *akeda* was the ram
 Who had no idea about the conspiracy of the others.
 He apparently volunteered to die in place of Isaac.
 I want to sing a memorial song about the ram,
 His curly wool and human eyes,
 The horns, so calm in his living head.
 When he was slaughtered, they made *shofars* of them
 To sound the blast for their war
 Or the blast of their coarse joy.

I want to remember the last picture
 Like a beautiful photo in an exquisite fashion magazine:
 The tanned, spoiled youngster all spiffed up,
 And beside him the angel, clad in a long silk gown
 For a formal reception.
 Both with hollow eyes
 Observe two hollow places,

And behind them, as a colored background, the ram
 Grasping the thicket before the slaughter.
 And the thicket was his last friend.

The angel went home
 Isaac went home
 And Abraham and God left much earlier.

But the real hero of the sacrifice
 Is the ram.

27 “The Real Hero of the Sacrifice of Isaac” (Amichai 1994). I have changed this translation slightly, introducing the Hebrew word “akeda” in the first line instead of the word “sacrifice” in the English translation; and reintroducing the last line in the third verse – “And the thicket was his last friend” – which the translators deleted.

Here, as in the Greenberg poem, nothing is missing from the story – not the son or the father or the angel or God or the ram. But unlike the earlier poem, by focusing on the poor ram the poet is, I believe, calling into question the very admissibility of the *topos* of sacrifice itself, which is the principle of “substitution”, the principle that someone must be killed so that someone else can live.²⁸ The poem demonstrates that the culture of sacrifice is a moveable feast: transfer of identity to the ram with his “curly wool and human eyes” ambiguates the status of the other. Is the ram an Israeli soldier? An Arab? Or just a dumb animal who stands for nobody but himself? The process could, in principle, go on forever, but, alas, there is no substitute for the ram – which is what turns him into the ultimate martyr or “hero”. Menashe Kadishman’s many sculptures and drawings of the *akeda* feature the ram in its many poses.²⁹

Amichai’s final book of poems, *Open Closed Open*, has a number of *akeda* poems or “meditations”. One begins with the quote “Take your son [...]” continues with a reverie on fatherhood and Abraham’s fitness after the *akeda* for the role of “Our Father Abraham”, and concludes by revealing the God of Mt. Moriah as a kind of pagan:

One more thing, God did not know love for sons
but He did have a love of mountains
and of all the mountains he loved Mt. Moriah.
His only mountain, which he loved, and therefore they enacted on it
the *akeda* and the Temples. (Amichai 2004)³⁰

The Hebrew articulations of the *akeda* are revealed as the *love of place* that threatens the *place of love* in its human dimension. And, it turns out, in another of the *akeda* poems in his last book, what is sacrificed for love of place is the “third son”, whose very name signals *compassion*:

Three sons had Abraham, not just two.
Three sons had Abraham: Yishma-El, Yitzhak and Yifkeh.

28 In this, the Biblical story is one of the earliest evidences in western literature of sacrifice as an act of substitution – elaborated in a comparative framework in the work of Girard (1977) and others, including Giorgio Agamben. But the important thing to note about the Biblical text is that sacrifice itself is valorized, even as human sacrifice is eschewed.

29 On Kadishman and the theme of the *akeda*, see http://www.kadishman.com/works/Sacrifice_of_Isaac/.

30 “Tanakh, tanakh, itakh itakh u-midrashim aherim” [The Bible and You, the Bible and You [f.], and Other Midrashim], #20. My translation.

First came Yishma-El, ‘God will hear,’
 next came Yitzhak, ‘he will laugh’,
 and the last was Yivkeh, ‘he will cry’.
 No one has ever heard of Yivkeh, for he was the youngest,
 the son that Father loved best,
 the son who was offered up on Mount Moriah.
 Yishma-El was saved by his mother, Hagar,
 Yitzhak was saved by the angel,
 but Yivkeh no one saved.
 When he was just a little boy, his father
 would call him tenderly, Yivkeh,
 Yivkeleh, my sweet little Yivkie –
 but he sacrificed him all the same.
 The Torah says the ram, but it was Yivkeh.
 Yishma-El never heard from God again,
 Yitzhak never laughed again,
 Sarah laughed only once, then laughed no more.
 Three sons had Abraham,
 Yishma, ‘will hear,’ Yitzhak, ‘will laugh,’ Yivkeh, ‘will cry’.
 Yishma-El, Yitzhak-El, Yivkeh-El,
 God will hear, God will laugh, God will cry. (Amichai 2000)³¹

Sara, who “laughed no more”, died immediately thereafter – of a broken heart, say the rabbis. Isaac, who “never laughed again”, is still suffering from a case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that is passed on from generation to generation. And the whole story, which started out as a comedy of survival, ends up as a tragedy whose victim is compassion itself.³²

Amichai’s legacy is enshrined in this poem. With his usual poetic profligacy, the poet insists on adding to, rather than subtracting from, the foundational subtext. But in so doing, he continues his project of transforming an internal, hermetic discourse between Israel and its God or its fate into a porous, morally and politically accountable discourse that must, in the first instance, embrace the discarded other, Ishmael – and, in the final instance, embrace the principle of compassion that has always been sacrificed to the visions of the uncompromising father and his competing sons.

31 “The Bible and You, the Bible and You, and Other Midrashim,” #5.

32 On the *akeda* as comedy, see Ezrahi (2012, p. 305–308).

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