
EIKEV

TO SPONSOR THE LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS FOR A WEEK OR MONTH,
WHETHER IN HONOR OF A SPECIAL OCCASION OR IN SUPPORT OF OUR
CONTENT, VISIT THELEHRHAUS.COM/SPONSOR-LEHRHAUS-SHABBOS/

PHILOSOPHY AND EXEGESIS: WHICH
LEADS? A REVIEW OF AARON KOLLER'S
*UNBINDING ISAAC: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE AKEDAH FOR MODERN JEWISH
THOUGHT*

ZVI GRUMET teaches at Yeshivat Eretz HaTzvi and other university-level programs in Israel.

A number of years ago, a question was floated on the LookJED educators' listserv, which generated a considerable and anxious discussion. Imagine that your son had just finished learning the Akedah in school. When he came home, he asked: "Abba, if Hashem told you to sacrifice me, would you?" What would you answer?

The question raised a number of essential points. There is, of course, the immediate question at hand, which cuts to the heart of the story of the Akedah. Does God want us to listen to Him when it violates every fiber of what we believe to be true? There are the associated questions as well. Is our situation different from that of Abraham, since we have the story of the Akedah to teach us that this is not what God wants? There are also educational questions: at what age (or ages) should we be teaching the Akedah, and toward what end (or ends) should we be teaching it? Then, of course, there is the question of what to say to the boy.

The Akedah looms large among our Biblical stories, is incorporated into the daily liturgy, is one of the central narratives of Rosh Hashanah, and has served as a paradigm for Jews throughout history. Despite its centrality, there is little consensus on what it means, has meant, or should mean for Jews. Aaron Koller's [*Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought*](#) (Jewish Publication Society/University of Nebraska Press, 2020) tackles the meaning of the Akedah head on.

Koller does an admirable job of collecting and organizing the way the Akedah has been spun amongst Jews for the last two thousand years. He articulates an understanding of *zekhut avot* and explores Akedah literature as a response to Christianity, as a model of martyrdom, as faithfulness to God, as a model for grappling with the Shoah, and as a Zionist inspiration all the way through the Yom Kippur War. He shares how Jews have embraced and struggled with the Akedah at the same time, criticizing it or even laughing at it.

I.

The bulk of his book, however, focuses on Kierkegaard's grappling with the Akedah. He begins with Kierkegaard in his historical and philosophical context and continues to flesh out Kierkegaard's presentation of Abraham as "the knight of faith," including an explication of what that means and, just as importantly, what it does not mean. Kierkegaard's Abraham, the knight of faith, maintains his ethics but suspends them in the face of a Divine command. He knows that what he is doing violates his core principles, but he "does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith" (Koller, pp. 35-36). The historical context is important as he demonstrates that Kierkegaard was not writing in a vacuum. Koller suggests that certain Jewish luminaries even earlier than Kierkegaard, specifically Hatam Sofer and Malbim, expounded similar ideas, though not in a manner nearly as fleshed out. In later chapters, he examines how Kierkegaard influenced two of the key Modern Orthodox thinkers of the twentieth century: Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.

Kierkegaard's influence on 150 years of Jewish thought does not deter Koller from a serious critique of him. First, he demonstrates that Kierkegaard's thinking reflects Christian thinking quite well but does not reflect historical Jewish thinking. Aside from that, he devotes an entire chapter to four separate critiques, which, for him, render Kierkegaard's reading of the story untenable. One of those critiques is that Kierkegaard's reading of the story focuses exclusively on Abraham, erasing Isaac from the story; a second critique challenges imposing the modern idea of a clash between faith and morality on a text written in a culture when such a clash was unknown. This leads Koller to present his own understanding of the Akedah at the end of the book.

II.

Before I address Koller's take on the story, there are two issues the book raised for me. I am an educator and a reader of Tanakh, not a philosopher. I tried many times to read Rav Soloveitchik's [*Halakhic Mind*](#), but to no avail. I just couldn't follow what he was trying to say. Although Koller's writing is much more accessible, there were entire sections where I found myself struggling to follow what he was arguing or the multiple nuances he was introducing. These included some of the extensive passages on Kierkegaard as well as the wide-ranging pieces on Leibowitz and Soloveitchik.

A second issue was the centrality Koller ascribes to the Akedah. For Kierkegaard, his understanding of the Akedah was central to his

personal philosophy. Koller also presents the Akedah as central to the religious philosophies of Leibowitz and Soloveitchik. Yet aside from the writing of Elie Wiesel, I don't know many (or any) people for whom the Akedah is a core of their religious perspective. It is an important story, but one of many important stories. I know many people, like the LookJED contributor, for whom the story generates personal, educational, parental, and religious challenges, but for none of them is it a defining pillar of their religious life or orientation. That meant that for the lion's share of this book, I felt like I was in the audience of a great debate, but one in which I would never be a participant because I too do not experience the Akedah as a central core of my religious life.

III.

And now for Koller's novel interpretation: Koller breaks the story into two halves, each with its own central question. For the first half, which is the command to bind Isaac, the core question is why God commanded Abraham to do this. Does God want child sacrifice? For the second half, the core question is why God chose to annul the command to sacrifice Isaac.

Koller carefully constructs his answers to these two questions based on his knowledge of the scholarship about the ancient world, his analysis of a number of passages in Rambam, and the writings of Emanuel Levinas. I will leave the details of his careful construction for the reader to explore, but I will summarize and discuss what he says.

Koller's response to the first question—why God would command the sacrifice of Isaac—is surprising. Many readers, especially Orthodox ones and even more so those with a Maimonidean leaning, will find it difficult to read, much less swallow. Koller argues that God, at least in theory, desires child sacrifice. After all, many of the other religions in that time demanded it or desired it, so it was considered the highest form of worship. Should the God of Abraham be denied what all other gods receive? Koller's formulation (pp. 121, 125) is jarring:

One can imagine an Israelite preacher thundering: It is inconceivable that the Phoenicians, who worship a fictional deity, could be more devoted to him than we are to the Creator of Heaven and Earth! Can it be that our encounter with the One True God does not provoke the devotion that the idolatrous Phoenicians have? How can the Phoenicians sacrifice their precious children, while we suffice with mere sheep?

... there is a part of the biblical God that does desire that worshipers offer their children in sacrifice. After all, God, too, is not immune to the sense of jealousy when other worshipers offer their children to their deities.

Regarding the second question, the annulment of the sacrifice, Koller builds on a comparison of Biblical laws with ancient Mesopotamian law codes, an analysis of Rambam's philosophy of prophecy, and Levinas, arguing that God chose to stop Abraham because God is trying to demonstrate that children are not the property of their parents; rather, children are independent beings with lives that belong to them. Earlier, Koller had critiqued Kierkegaard for ignoring Isaac; for him, the entire story was about Abraham, the knight of faith. Koller insists that not only must Isaac be brought back into the story, but that he must be central in the second half. One cannot talk about Abraham's sacrifice without talking about Isaac's, and it is

precisely because Isaac is a person in his own right that God must reject his sacrifice.

The combination of the two questions and their answers tries to grapple with the paradox of why God would both want and not want child sacrifice. Koller uses an image which, again, made me uncomfortable in its radical humanizing of God (p. 139):

It is certainly a psychological commonplace for a person to want something but to not want it even more. Consider a health-conscious person looking at a piece of cake. He may want the cake, although in the end he won't eat it. The rejection of the cake is a statement not of its despicability or fundamental abhorrence, but of a desire for health that is even more powerful than the desire for the confection.

The human example is understood, but its application to God is troubling.

IV.

The relationship between exegesis and philosophy is far from simple: which leads, and which follows? The *pashtanim* believe that exegesis leads, though philosophers would disagree. Rambam's reading of the visit of the three guests to Abraham or of Jacob's nocturnal wrestling match (he considers the incidents to have [occurred in a prophetic dream](#)) likely did not emerge from a close reading of the text but from his philosophy. Rationalists will work hard to reinterpret portions of the Torah which seem to suggest that magic or sorcery have any validity.

As a reader of Tanakh with a leaning toward literary readings, regardless of how good a philosophical reading is, I will remain unsatisfied unless the reading is somehow grounded in the text and its literary context. This brings me to my central discomfort with Koller's thesis.

Based on my familiarity with and understanding of Tanakh, there is little to lead me to believe that God wants human/child sacrifice. In fact, there is little to lead me to believe that God wants sacrifice at all—and I mean that both in the cultic and the broader sense of the word. Genesis features the building of many altars but few sacrifices. While Noah ([Gen. 8:20](#)), Abraham after the Akedah ([22:13](#)), and Jacob on his way down to Egypt ([46:1](#)) each bring sacrifices, not a single one of them was commanded to do so. Exodus, with all of its focus on the *Mishkan*, has almost no sacrifices—and the ones it does have are communal. There are no personal sacrifices until Leviticus, and even there those might be prescribed as part of a reconstruction of the function of the *Mishkan* in response to the Golden Calf. Later in Tanakh, God's ambivalence toward sacrifices is well documented ([Is. 1:11](#), [Jer. 6:20](#), [Jer. 7:22](#), [Hos. 6:6](#)).

Even regarding sacrifice in its broader sense and the common usage of the word—the personal kind not involving slaughtering an animal—there is little evidence that Biblical religion wants us to give things up as part of our worship of God. God wants us to perform mitzvot, heed the covenant, serve Him with joy, do justice, be modest. The prophets don't demand that we give up lots of things, only that we adhere to the letter and spirit of what we committed to. In that sense, Koller's understanding of what God wants from us seems to lack context in the Biblical arc.

Similarly, although Koller notes a Biblical leaning away from seeing children as property, that does not seem to be a major theme in Tanakh. The Torah matches children not dying for their parents' sins with parents not dying for those of their child ([Deut. 24:16](#), one of his prooftexts), yet there is no implicit understanding that this is a polemic against the reigning notion that parents belong to their children.

Even more, given that the Akedah is at the close of the arc of the Abrahamic narratives, it would make sense that it would be connected to them in some way. The text of the Akedah opens with, "It happened, after these things, that God tested Abraham" ([Gen. 22:1](#)), explicitly linking the Akedah to something which happened before. Identifying that something is subject to debate, but [Rashbam](#) links it to the covenant Abraham established with Avimelekh, textual cues link it to Abraham's first encounter with Avimelekh, and elsewhere [I have argued](#) that it is to be read as the climax or near culmination of half a lifetime of interaction with God. Before Koller presents his own analysis, he suggests that the Akedah needs to be read in the context of the expulsion of Ishmael, which opens the preceding chapter, yet when he presents his own philosophical analysis of the story, he offers little in terms of reading the story in the context of the larger narrative.

All of this is in the realm of context. In the realm of the text, I struggle to find any evidence that the text even hints that God truly desires the sacrifice or that in preventing the sacrifice, God is emphasizing that children are independent people. The one thing the text does say is that this is a test—something that both God and the reader know but of which Abraham is unaware. One could argue that God wants Abraham to believe that He wants child sacrifice, but that is a far cry from suggesting that God actually wants that sacrifice.

V.

Koller's work is a great contribution for those who want to understand what the Akedah has meant to Jews throughout history. It is also a readable introduction to Kierkegaard, Soloveitchik, and Leibowitz for non-philosophers. His analysis is insightful, and he puts ideas together in really interesting ways: in one breathtaking section, he demonstrates how Hasidut, the Vilna Gaon, and Mendelssohn were reacting to the same philosophical currents as Kierkegaard—they were all focusing religious life inward toward the individual's relationship with God rather than seeing religion as a product of belonging to a community. Furthermore, he offers a novel reading of the Akedah, which is no simple feat given the volume of literature written on it already. That his reading is valuable for philosophers, for philosophically oriented exegesis, and for people seeking a meaningful interpretation in the twenty-first century, is also no simple feat. The book's great weakness, however, is its lack of fidelity to both the text of the story and its context.

LEHRHAUS EDITORS:

Yehuda Fogel
David Fried
David Kollmar
Yosef Lindell
Tzvi Sinensky
Mindy Schwartz Zolty

THE TEFILLIN STRAP MARK: IN SEARCH OF AN OBSCURE MINHAG

JEFFREY SAKS is the founding director of ATID – The Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jewish Education and editor of *Tradition Journal*.

For my son, Yair Aviezer, on his Bar Mitzvah

On the recent day that my son began wearing *tefillin*, one month prior to his thirteenth birthday, we reviewed the *halakhot*, as is customary. That day we also read "*Shnei Zugot*," the charming Hebrew short story written in 1926 by Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon (in his volume *Elu ve-Elu*; in English as "[Two Pairs](#)"). The semi-autobiographical story depicts a young boy coming to the age of mitzvot and receiving his own pair of *tefillin*, including the memories of that day as well as the fate of that pair of *tefillin* consumed by fire years later. It is also one of the most explicit depictions of Agnon distancing himself from observance, followed by his mid-life road back. Agnon is hardly the only Jewish author to use *tefillin* as a symbol for being bound to, or untethered from, the tradition, but he does so with his distinct tone of nostalgia tinged with irony and artistry.

The adult narrator recalls his youthful enthusiasm for his new *tefillin*:

Mornings I would run to the synagogue. Sometimes I would arrive before the appointed hour for prayer and I would stare out the window at the sky to spot the sunlight when it would first appear so that I could then put on my *tefillin*. When prayer time arrived I would take out my *tefillin*, and a fragrance of prayer would emanate from them. As I lay the *tefillah* on my arm I could feel my heart pounding alongside them and I would then wind the warm straps around my arm until they pressed into my skin. And then I would circle my head with the other *tefillah*. When the cantor recites the prayer that thanks God for "girding Israel with strength and crowning Israel with splendor," I stand astonished that I myself am "girding" and "crowning" like a man of Israel and I am overjoyed. [...] Sometimes my praying would be soulful and plaintive, sometimes melodious and joyful. In either event, I would continually touch my *tefillin*—something like a shepherd making music out in the field who periodically remembers his charges and looks around to see if any of them have wandered off—until I completed my praying, removed my *tefillin*, and saw pressed in my arm's flesh the remaining evidence of the straps ("[Two Pairs](#)," 78-79).

Sitting with my son that morning, I hoped these would be sentiments which would bind themselves to his heart and mind as he began what we expect will be a lifelong relationship with this precious mitzvah. I also pointed out a special connection with Agnon's story. The author always claimed to have been born in his Galician hometown of Buczacz on Tisha B'Av 1888, which fell out on August 8 of that year (the numerically lyrical 8/8/88). This is not actually true, but it is part of the mythologizing of his own biography that he conducted throughout his literary career. In fact, the Ninth of Av did not occur on 8/8/88, and, in fact, we now know that he was born a year earlier, on 18 Av 1887. That means that young Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (Agnon being a pen name) became a bar mitzvah on *Parashat Ekev*

1900—exactly 120 years before my own son, who will read from the Torah this coming Shabbat.

What aroused my son's curiosity while reading the story was a particular line that I must confess had been lost on me, despite the very many times I had read and taught this story. The narrator continues: "I wouldn't eat or drink until the indentations on my arm had completely disappeared." With the fresh *tefillin* marks still on his own arm from his initial wrapping, and with thoughts of breakfast in mind, he asked if this was the actual halakhah. No, I replied, it is certainly not normative practice, nor is it a custom I had ever encountered or heard of (outside this story).

Perusal of the usual halakhic codes and guides to *minhagim* resulted in a dead end. Was this just an idea the author invented to add some color to his story? That would be possible, but highly unlikely. Although a writer of fiction, Agnon very carefully documented religious life as depicted in his works, particularly nineteenth-century Galicia and early-twentieth-century life in *Eretz Yisrael*. His use of halakhic sources and portrayal of the lived *minhagim* has itself been analyzed by some as a type of "literary-halakhic" literature. I could not believe that his recording of this unfamiliar practice was not authentic, although I failed to find a source.

Turning to the brain trust of friends and teachers, I became aware of two other mentions of this obscure practice. The [hive mind](#) pointed me to the memoirs of [Dr. Avraham Yaakov Brawer](#), *Zikhronot Av u-Venu (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1966)*. Brawer (1884-1975) was born in Stryj, near Lvov. He was a rav and academic with specialties in history and geography, and had a distinguished career as an educator in Jerusalem after his arrival in 1911. (From middle age onward, he and Agnon maintained a warm friendship.) In a chapter of his memoir recalling his youth in *kheyder*, he writes:

I was careful to be "crowned" with tefillin for at least an hour a day. Some of the boys would not eat as long as the impression of the tefillin strap was still visible on their arms. It is possible this custom is recorded somewhere in some book; I have not found it in writing ([241](#)).

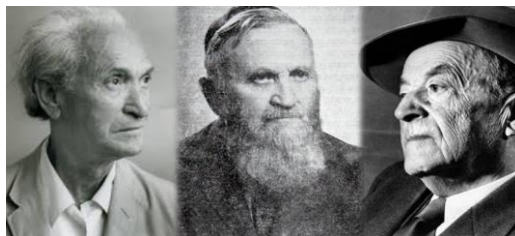
On the one hand, I was comforted to be in the company of such a noteworthy scholar—if Brawer knew of no source, then my own inability to find one might be forgiven. At the same time, here was a second anecdote, which, as everyone knows, is often itself considered data.

Rabbi J. David Bleich, despite his encyclopedic knowledge of, well, just about everything, similarly knew of no halakhic source, but drew my attention to a novel by [Soma Morgenstern](#) (1890-1976). Morgenstern, a novelist, critic, journalist, and close friend of the more famous writer Joseph Roth, was born in Budaniv, in the Ternopol district (today part of western Ukraine). In his novel, [The Son of the Lost Son](#) (JPS, 1946; trans. from German by J. Leftwich and P. Gross), we encounter the protagonist, Velvel, standing at morning prayer. Morgenstern compares the leather straps to a horse's reins. This is no sacrilege; Velvel, girded in his *tefillin*, is described as "God's steed, harnessed for prayer." Upon completing his prayers, he enters the farmhouse kitchen.

On the table stood jugs and little jugs, cups and saucers, coffee, milk, cream, butter, eggs, rye bread, rolls of rye flour with buttermilk and poppyseed, and rolls of white flour with whipped

white of egg. There was honey cake and a big bottle of brandy. Velvel sat motionless for a while. He was still far away from the mundane world, no longer a worshipper, but not yet an eater. The awe of the prayers had given him an appetite, but he still held back. For though the law does not prohibit it, the really pious man shrinks from taking food as long as the marks of the phylactery straps are still visible on his left arm. Then he took a little brandy, sipping it slowly, poured coffee and milk and cream into a cup, added sugar, stirred it, and hardly noticed how his thoughts, unguarded by his will, moved aimlessly [...]. Velvel sighed a deep sigh of forced relief and turned back to the breakfast table. There were no longer any marks of the phylactery straps on his left arm. He could now take his breakfast. He helped himself, with the calm, slow, heavy movements of a peasant, yet generously, like a rich landowner (11).

So here we have three records of our mysterious *minhag*. Morgenstern makes clear what we may have understood intuitively from Agnon and Brawer: this is not a strict law but a mark of piety. Two of the records, Agnon and Brawer, depict the practice among young boys around the age of bar mitzvah and initiation into the practice of wearing *tefillin*. Morgenstern's protagonist is an adult, and the story is set in 1924, but Velvel would have become a bar mitzvah at around the same time as those in the other sources. Only Agnon mentions neither drinking nor eating; the others seem to limit the practice only to food, and, in fact, Velvel takes a little brandy and coffee while he awaits the fading of the strap marks which will enable him to eat.



L. to r.: Morgenstern, Brawer, Agnon

What is significant is that all three were near contemporaries and hailed from the same general region of eastern Galicia, that former area of southern Poland, which since the 1772 partition of Poland had been the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All three were young men of Hasidic stock raised in religious homes. Was this a little-practiced, regional *minhag* even then, preserved not in halakhic codes but in works of memoir and autobiographical fiction? It is very likely. If so, these three texts are testament to how the world of *minhag* is often preserved more in actual lived religious experience, fleeting as that may be for researchers and historians, than in the codices of the Beit Midrash.

In all cases, this has been a felicitous scavenger hunt for sources, brought about by my son's entering the yoke of mitzvot and the straps of *tefillin*. His mother and I pray that Agnon's description of his own bar mitzvah, now 120 years later, will be true for our boy as well: "Tefillin ... have been dear to me every single day from the very first time that I wore them" (80).