

Alexander Nemser - Excerpts from *The Sacrifice of Abraham*

Summary:

The Sacrifice of Abraham is a series of fifty short pieces composed in poetic prose, centering on the story of Isaac and Abraham from the Bible, the story of a father commanded by God to sacrifice his only son.

In the sequence, a group of rabbis meets over and over again to retell and interpret the story, to meditate on its meaning, chew over it, obsess over its details, and try to make sense of its mysterious clarity and brutality. With each retelling, the story is transformed, until it grows to encompass primitive rituals, drug cartels, Greek and Hindu gods and goddesses, love affairs, revolutionaries, pornographic visions of the ancient world, destroyed cities, and new births. Finally, with the universe flipped, Isaac sacrifices his father, and, pursued by furies with unmatching eyes and explosives around their waists, falls to his knees to watch a vision of all humanity passing in an endless procession on the edge of the horizon. The rabbis, too, undergo metamorphoses, beginning their conversation in an Old World synagogue, discussing after their evening prayers as women wave their hands in blessing over candelabra, and ending up arguing over the story on the island of garbage growing always larger in the Pacific.

The Rabbis

As the purple light of evening descended, women waved their hands in blessing over silver candelabra, and a group of rabbis gathered in the shul to discuss the story of Abraham and Isaac.

One rabbi, in a shirt with a blackened collar, began a commentary: As Abraham led Isaac up to Mt Moriah for the sacrifice, the rabbi contended, the two of them suddenly heard a sound. Neither could identify the sound or its source, if it were high or low, soft or shrill, coming from beneath the ground, or up in the sky.

Isaac asked his father, What is this sound? And Abraham replied, That is the sound of God's justice unfolding across the earth. Lo, the Lord himself infuses it with His blessing as he sits beneath a pomegranate tree.

Isaac disagreed, but kept silent. Later, the rabbi continued, he spoke of his own interpretation of the sound, founded on an alternative view of God's judgment as the proliferation of chaos, an animal howl, a disturbance beneath the street, and the grinding of the spheres, rattling past on unequal tracks. And in fact, as Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk suggested, the rabbi continued, it is not the Lord, but the mortal King Saul, Israel's first king, who sits beneath the pomegranate tree, weeping into his hands for the kingdom he ruled so briefly and jealously, with so much confusion.

In Isaac's old age, the rabbi concluded, King David came to him to sing the psalms, which he had just composed. Isaac had gone blind, but when David sang to him, he saw suddenly an image of his own son Jacob wrestling an angel in a parking lot. Isaac had had, in his lifetime, dozens of wives, and had fathered hundreds of children, but he dreamed of only one woman, and behind his eyes he swam again between her thighs like a fluorescent eel weaving between the pink coral, breathing in again the smell of seaweed, the emanation of life.

It is true I am heartbroken, Rabbi Isaac of Tarnopol used to say, and my consciousness is more than anyone can bear.

The Sinner's Dialog with God

A group of rabbis convened in Lvov to pore over dreams of illumination, with which they struggled, as with a trapdoor their ancestors had been trying to open for centuries, rejoicing to get the hold of even a single finger. A fool had once jammed his fingers in the trapdoor, and it had taken the sayings of ten wise men to pry him loose. One rabbi, wearing a new coat with a beaver collar, lisped a commentary on the story of Abraham and Isaac.

At the top of Mt Moriah, the rabbi proposed, Abraham and Isaac encountered a giant idol in the form of a Coca Cola machine, which they mistook for the tabernacle of the Lord. And the Lord, as we read, the rabbi continued, said, Put a coin in the slot. And Abraham put a quarter-dollar into the machine, and received a bottle made of bright green glass.

When he had drunk thereof, he passed it to his son Isaac, who drank of it and spat on the ground when his father turned his back to prepare the sacrifice. Years later, Jacob, Isaac's son, stumbled on the same bottle as he was trolling in a landfill with his brother Esau during a weekend in the country.

This same incident, the rabbi noted, appears in distorted form in the visions of the prophet Jeremiah, who preferred to appear in a black leather jacket with silver studs and braided tassles, which he inherited from the wonder rabbi Cuahutemoc. Cuahutemoc, the wonder rabbi, adorned his jacket with symbols drawn from the lunar calendar, beasts composed of fish fins and human limbs, and charms to ward off the evil eye. On the sleeves he wrote inscriptions of such power describing the aircraft carrier where Isis reconstructed the dismembered body of her lover and brother Osiris as it pulled into port at Alexandria, that they caused those who heard them, whispered over the ashes of a fire, to cover their faces

and cry out their sins to God.

O Lord, the sinner calls out, I trip in my haste to the Temple. And God responds, the true form of the Temple remains even to be built. You provided me with a garden, the sinner continues, and I planted it with trash, and parceled it out to usurpers for nothing. I chipped my teeth on their hollow coins. My soul withers; my voice hesitates. So shall you learn on a path of pain, God responds. My birth *hurt*, the sinner protests. It hurt me, too, God responds.

The Peacock

A group of rabbis sat in the vacant room behind a store specializing in previously-owned camera equipment and imported ladders of infinite height from Addis Ababa, which the rabbis called “The Mother Country.” The rabbis were allowed, at the minimum of rent, to gather in the room on Wednesday afternoons following the ritual slaughter of a peacock on the steps of the synagogue.

As the rabbis argued over God’s command to Abraham, the slaughterer spread newspaper beneath the peacock and slit its throat with a jackknife, whispering, in a tune known only to him and his predecessors, a prayer of thanksgiving which traveled in a spiral on a current of air up to the ears of the gods who, shipwrecked on a celestial island and living in the rusted hull of a cruise liner, were boiling honey over the embers of the Great Bonfire, set by the one-eyed hero Polyphemos from a mound of sacred grasses. The fire, it was contended, burned the entire time it took for the world to be created from the graveyard of solar systems, where Mohammed Ali once buried the sun.

The ritual slaughterer, observed the prophet Elisha from a fire escape, passed the bird to a

group of old women dressed in coarse brown cloth to pluck its feathers and roast it over a fire burning in an oil-drum. The old women leaned over the drum in the alley-way between the synagogue and a store selling memorabilia to the religious pilgrims who had come to see the famous graffiti Madonna, which each year cried a different color, the tears appearing without warning to the inhabitants of the city who passed it every day.

The first thigh of the bird was set aside for the false messiah, hungering in his error for centuries. The second thigh was set aside for the first-born-son on the eve of the birth of his first child. The rest was distributed among the needy, the hysterical women who heard ominous double meanings in each of God's commands, and the one-eyed or one-armed exiles from the community, sitting in disgrace in the park in ratty overcoats, cursing the laws by which they themselves had forfeited their places at the banquet. The exiles lurched back and forth and talked over a plan to kidnap the rabbi's sister and hold her for ransom in a warehouse in the middle of the desert, laughing until they coughed up blood and became silent watching dusk fall softly on the city, where each is an exile unto himself.

At that time, Cain and Abel became involved in an argument which, although it began as a disagreement over a minor point of scholarship, somehow escalated into an irreparable rift in the entire congregation, half of which sided with the bewildered Abel, and half with the furious and embittered Cain, who, although he was not a man of great personal charm, nonetheless attracted the skeptics and the bereaved to himself, giving speeches composed of warped proverbs in an out-dated vernacular, and displaying a tattoo showing a baby being born out of the center of a Star of David, which, it was implied, was King David himself, author of a version of the bible in which all the animals in God's creation sing the Psalms in unforgettable melodies, and the tyrannical god Saturn attempts to devour his own children but is tricked by his wife into swallowing a hydrogen bomb, and an atomic bomb, and a roadside bomb, and an improvised explosive device, and a rocket-propelled grenade,

and a cluster bomb, and a heat-seeking missile, and a Mayan soccer ball which experts identified as a human head.

The Admonisher

A group of rabbis was sitting on wooden benches beneath the peeling dome of a defunct train station, discussing the story of Isaac and Abraham.

One rabbi began telling the story of a minor desert king who captures for his queen a sheep's fleece trimmed with silver thread and fishscales, but could not finish, and broke off in tears. The rabbi at his left laid his hand on the first man's shoulder, and recounted the parable of the demon Artaxerxes, the lover of a snake priestess who lived in an unmarked basement apartment, always in a trance from the fumes emanating from a cleft in the ground. Did the demon, asked the rabbi, not fall in love with a sea-nymph, and sing to her a song of love in which he foresaw the entire course of their romance unfold as if he were sitting with his legs hanging over the side of a distant planet, watching the events on earth?

In his song of love, the demon told the story of how, many years after Abraham and Isaac's journey to Mt Moriah, a congregation was visited by an admonisher. The rabbi of the congregation recognized him by his unkempt beard, hulking gait, rotting white sneakers, yellow teeth, worn Nike t-shirt, and matted hair as, after hearing the singing of prayers, he came in off the street, seeking redemption for his own troubled spirit.

The admonisher tore at his clothes, and covered his head with dirt which he dug up with his hands from beneath the floorboards of the synagogue. Weeping at his own sins, the sins of the rabbi, and the sins of all those gathered to observe the High Holidays, he drew

complex diagrams on the walls which mourned the difficulty of remaining in the presence of God for more than a few seconds, dazzled by the light at the depths of one's own being. How is it possible, questioned the admonisher, citing Rabbi Solomon Parhon, to set out willingly on a path of life, when one has witnessed the collapse of the path which once seemed to promise the entire happiness of the future? Will not a new path only repeat what we have seen already, but with different characters, or even the same characters with faces only briefly obscured by new masks?

The admonisher began telling the story of Isaac and Abraham. At the top of Mt Moriah, the admonisher contended, was the source of a river of garbage, and the sacrifice was to take place on the banks of the river. When Abraham fashioned the altar from tin cans and plastic sandals, he covered Isaac's face with mud from the bank. He put his hand over Isaac's eyes and mouth, and raised his knife. When the angel descended to intervene, the admonisher continued, he did not stop Abraham's hand, but pushed both Abraham and Isaac, causing them to fall into the river, whose rapid current carried them, wrestling, downstream. Engulfed by the tide of waste, plastic, and human excrement, they wrestled, now trying to pull the other deeper down, now trying to break free from the other's hold and swim to the bank. The river bore them until it washed them up, exhausted and entwined, on a ragged beach lined with white and black stones, where a crowd was already gathered to watch the Leviathan, beached helplessly and gasping like one of the world's lungs, draw its last breath.

Life plods by like an ancient horse, the Leviathan murmured as life drained from its body, no one can focus on the work at hand, and each soul longs for a past circling out of reach, trying again and again to reach back into that past to pull some memory out of oblivion, as one pulls a drowning figure out of the water and onto a lifeboat, to join the survivors.

The admonisher concluded with an anecdote:

Years later, Isaac returned to the mountain, and ascended to the site to which he had been led by his father.

By that time, the altar was hardly visible beneath vines and dust. Part of the path was paved over. The sun beat down on his neck.

He rested his head on the last remaining stone, but no ram appeared.

Prayer

We read, the rabbis began, in a tractate on Isaac and Abraham:

And God descended in the form of a cobra wearing silver sneakers, and entered the house of Abraham to deliver a terrible command. You must sacrifice your father at the top of the Chrysler Building, the angel commanded Isaac, in the heart of darkness at the center of Mexico City, where streetlights burn an incandescent orange, televisions elect a prophet amongst themselves and shatter its screen with aluminum baseball bats, diviners reveal prophecies in handfuls of ash, and leopards spotted purple and crimson leap out of the jungle to steal melons and mummified cats.

Lord, we call out on the Sabbath, allow the longing heart of every animal to unify in its own solitude, if only for an instant. Let every eagle be the guide for the blind and wounded figures who ride the burnt-out shells of abandoned cars through a slowly flowing river of tears and trash.

In short, Lord have mercy on human beings. Let us live to eat the fat. Let us live.

