

There's a song about this parsha.

G-d said to Abraham "Kill Me a son."

Abe said "Man, you must be putting me on."

G-d said "No."

Abe said "What?"

G-d said "You can do what you wanna but... the next time you see me coming you better run."

Abe said "Where do you want this killing done?"

G-d said "Out on Highway 61."

This is one of dozens of songs about Highway 61. The first was by Roosevelt Sykes in 1930. Highway 61 is now called the Blues Highway but it used to be called The Mama Road. Back when it was the Mama Road, it started in New Orleans, a city every bit as mystical as Jerusalem and Tzfat. The road went up to Baton Rouge, over to Mississippi and up through Natchez, Vicksburg, Clarksdale and north to Memphis. Then over the Mason Dixon Line to St. Louis and on all the way up to the Canadian Border. It went north. It was the way out. Away from Jim Crow, away from oppression and poverty. For many people, Highway 61 was the road to destiny.

So I'm kind of testing out this analogy to see if it really does give any insight to one of the roughest parshas in the Torah. Let's follow it for a while.

You know, we always want to look for characters and situations we can empathize with, but this story of the Akedah will not let us off that easy.

We know that Abraham didn't really kill Isaac and that G-d never intended for it to happen. And yet... legend has it that Isaac's ashes exist in a pile on Mt. Moriah just as if he had been sacrificed as an olah – a burnt offering. When we were wondering where to build the Temple, we were told "Over there – on the ashes of Isaac." So these virtual ashes led us to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to G-d and our future (to do with as we would).

How's that?

No? Not there yet?

Okay, one of my favorite things that Howard Hoffman used to say is that G-d exists in the space between extremes... The space in this story has a name: khallal panui, which the Kabbalists say describes the desolate quiet that characterized the last bit of the climb that Abraham and Isaac took together – a space as empty and barren as the world before creation. It is the empty space evacuated by G-d, who retrenched His presence in order to make it possible for a new kind of world to emerge. It is a place where all is possible, and what happens will likely be one extreme or the other.

You know, we see these huge changes in the stories of Genesis – they're like Paul Bunyan stories. But when you view them as a progression, they show a valued and holy (but dependent) people gradually learning lessons, sometimes horrible lessons, as we evolve into a nation capable of holding up the Torah and championing it. People read many things into the Akedah – that it shows a protest against the model of human sacrifice that was still popular in some parts of the world, or that it was an extreme version of passing the torch from Abraham to Isaac, reminding Abraham himself and the world that our future and the future of all our teachings about one G-d would now depend on Isaac.

So in these Genesis stories people do and say huge things like “I’m going to name all the animals on the earth today,” or “I’m going to wrestle an angel and change my name to Israel.” But not Isaac. He’s the loner, the quiet kid. He has very little in common with any other character in the Genesis stories.

He is born in improbable circumstances. Right after we hear he is weaned, we see he’s a victim – strapped to an altar, with his father above him holding a knife about to sacrifice him. The angels see this and weep. In my favorite metaphor of all time, their tears fall in his eyes and make him blind, and he is blind on and off again throughout his life. After the Akedah, Isaac embraces his father, they split up and he doesn’t go home again for years. He doesn’t go to his mother’s funeral, and for a couple of years he just wanders back and forth near the town where his stepbrother Ishmael lives until he marries Rebecca and moves her into his late mother’s tent, in a strange oedipal moment.

I’ve mentioned this before but Elie Wiesel once said Isaac was the first survivor. And that when Mr. Wiesel coined the term “holocaust,” he was studying the Akedah and the word “olah” or “burnt offering” weighed heavily on his mind. He sees many parallels between his life and Isaac’s, including their respective relationships with their fathers. Elie Wiesel and his father were together in Auschwitz. Indeed, it is hard for survivors to go home, to fit back into normal life and many never do. Is the Akedah then foreshadowing the desperately vicious murders and persecution of the Jews of the future, with blind old Isaac providing our role model? Because Elie Wiesel suggests that there are role reversals there and that Isaac saved Abraham’s life as much as Abraham did his. He describes when your life has been stripped of all ostensible meaning and purpose, it is your very existence itself that gives you purpose and that is a lesson that is best taught by children to parents.

Maybe it’s foreshadowing with great lessons to be drawn, but maybe not because it’s awfully hard to empathize with any of these people.

And Sarah, Isaac’s mother, the one who laughs – Sarah may be the true victim of the Akedah. When she hears what Abraham went off to do to Isaac she lets out a King Lear-like howl and her soul flies away and she dies.

Our travels through Israel are marked on one end by the grave of Sarah at Machpelach and to the east by the grave of Rachel whose weeping can still be heard as people approach Israel.

The Mama Road, that Highway 61, in the United States of America, is paved with tears and pain. At the end of Isaac & Abraham’s journey up Mt. Moriah are the doppelganger-like ashes of Isaac, who in real life is now destined to be blind. And Isaac, like his father and his son – *this loner, this outsider* – is destined to lead a great nation.

So the story of the Akedah with its knives and its binding and its subterfuge, with its grief and relief and songs of the angels, is maybe just another journey. A journey out, a journey forward, a journey fraught with tears and worry, just like on the Mama Road.

Yeah, it’s corny, I know. So sue me, I’ve had a lot of journeys this year.