

A Modern Take on The Akedah  
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Genesis 22:1–19

In modern intellectual culture the word *myth* usually conjures a pejorative image of fantastic unfounded belief. So it is unsurprising that the Akedah is frequently skewered in the harsh light of this view in recent commentary, characterized as a chilling tale of fanatic devotion to a vision that trumps all moral reason. But great myths are very much more than that. They are profound explorations of our inner being. Like amazing caves, Carlsberg Caverns of the subconscious, they demand relentless re-exploration of their themes with the possibility of an unanticipated chamber opening to reveal profound insights at any time but yet possessing ever present spiritual risk. Each chamber and level is there to be explored as in a physical cave. And like the many chambered cave the path runs deep-it is as much about the future as it is about the past. The Akedah is one of the greatest myths in the Torah. So, it is somewhat ironic that today I want to take you to a little explored region of this myth that is a decidedly modern interpretation but which nevertheless casts The Akedah in a more **positive** light.

The ancient Hebrews were fiercely agrarian in their worldview. Moses's oft repeated blessings are rigidly centered around fecundity of womb and land: the grace of an abundant, peaceful and pastoral existence. While here and there we find a casual acknowledgement of the value of creative genius, as in the construction of the Mishkan, there is none of the conviction of the Greeks that the evolution of human society is firmly founded on the exploration of abstract ideas, philosophy. For the ancient Jews the struggle to improve humankind was all about attaining justice, cooperation and humility. So, in contrast to the Greeks, the third commandment warns us not create things we subsequently worship. Of course the Torah is referring to literal idols, but the generalization to the worship of abstract ideas is long established in Jewish moral discourse and, most particularly with the Akedah. Notably, the idea that Abraham was facing a choice between worshipping the Divine and worshipping the vision of his son as the seed of a new world order is a well known theme and its extension to the sacrifice of children as soldiers in war is most famously examined in Wilfred Owen's poem *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*. And that is the segue into what I want us to focus on today. For many modern people, most especially educated Jews, the ideal personal blessing is the attainment of mental mastery in a major field of human endeavor: law, medicine, fine art, science, architecture, engineering, etc. In fact, for many the most precious children are the children of the mind. So, the Akedah can be viewed at one level, quite appropriately for our times, as a call to be willing to sacrifice our precious abstract babies on behalf of a more profound devotion to God-and a promise that if we do so unlikely blessings will arise from such courageous acts, a ram caught in a thicket. In essence, I am saying that the Akedah is challenging us think about what actions really make us secure.

I want to examine a few concrete examples of what this means. A number of weeks ago I was talking to good friend in our Congregation who is an expert on the legal issues associated with renewable energy generation. At one point he said that he favored direct generation of electrical energy from solar systems as opposed to wind generation because the latter is too expensive. In fundamental ways he was spot on-I will get back to that in a moment-but I responded by saying that it depends on what you think makes you secure. We spend 600 billion dollars a year on the military and 100 billion dollars a year on prisons. What if we cut those budgets in half by not buying so many of the newest super weapons or by greatly reducing the number of non violent offenders we incarcerate? 350 billion dollars buys a lot of windmills. He conceded that would shift the argument a bit. But we should return to my friend's point. To replace all of our electrical production-coal, gas, oil and renewable would take 160,000 square miles

of windmills. That's an awful large piece of real estate. For comparison, paved roads and parking lots cover about 50,000 square miles of the surface of the United States. But it turns out that only 4000 square miles of modern solar plants is just about what we would need to replace all other forms of electrical generation combined. So maybe we have to sacrifice the widespread notion that renewables can't do the job. Remember this the next time you see one of those Chevron Ads saying that we just have to use all forms of energy, and ask yourself what, in the long run, will make us secure.

Nowadays when you get to the register in the Giant or Safeway line you have a decent chance of being solicited for a seemingly noteworthy cause like the American Cancer Society. When we give to these organizations, especially through personally health promoting races and walks, we are likely to feel all warm and fuzzy for helping to find cures for cancer or heart disease. I never give. Instead, in my shy and retiring way, I point out that perhaps 3% of the nation's 100 billion dollar biomedical research funding comes from private charity and much of that from massively wealthy donors like the Gates. Two thirds of the funding is from industry, but relatively little of that is basic science. Industrial R&D expenditures have been falling for years and every year they fire additional thousands of researchers. It falls to NIH, with its 35 billion dollar budget, to carry the lion's share of the burden. And how well is that working? Well, at this time about 9 out of every 10 research grants are rejected by NIH. The fact is that brilliant young people looking at careers in basic biomedical research are figuratively looking down the barrel of a gun. At the same time the government is pouring 70 billion dollars a year into military research. So, I am asserting that the most notable effect these charities have on research is helping people feel like they are making an important contribution to research, and thereby letting Congress off the hook. Instead of races for the cure, they should be promoting marches on Congress for the cure. Again I ask, what really makes us secure?

I have the unusual distinction in this audience of being the son and grandson of Jewish farmers, although our little congregation does count a very skilled practicing organic farmer as an active member, the man who provides the wonderful apples at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. As a direct result of my upbringing my life has always had a serious involvement with agriculture and agricultural research. So I want to conclude by combining elements of both of the previous themes to address another prevailing shibboleth of this civilization: that agrarian culture is now of marginal importance in our modern technological society. I'll begin with a quote from the most important of American agrarians, Thomas Jefferson, from a letter to John Jay in 1785: *"Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independant, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it's liberty & interests by the most lasting bonds."* If you are still with me you are very likely now brimming with a justifiable skepticism. You know that for another four score years beyond 1785 that a large number of the landowners Jefferson was referring to, including, of course, himself, were slaveholders and Jim Crow followed for yet another century. You know that more recently much of our most antisocial politics has found its base in rural America. So, here's another quote from my favorite modern writer, Wendell Berry, poet, novelist, rural philosopher and organic farmer in Kentucky: *"The concentration of the farmland into larger and larger holdings and fewer and fewer hands— with the consequent increase of overhead, debt, and dependence on machines— is thus a matter of complex significance, and its agricultural significance cannot be disentangled from its cultural significance. It forces a profound revolution of the farmer's mind: once his investment in land and machines is large enough, he must forsake the values of husbandry and assume those of finance and technology. Thenceforth his thinking is not determined by agricultural responsibility, but by financial accountability and the capacities of his machines. Where his money comes from becomes less important to him than where it is going. He is caught up in the drift of energy and interest away from the land. Production*

*begins to override maintenance. The economy of money has infiltrated and subverted the economies of nature, energy, and the human spirit. The man himself has become a consumptive machine.*" Substitute slave for the word machine in the foregoing passage and you connect Jefferson and Berry. Whether a person uses machines and chemicals or slaves or underpaid undocumented immigrants to farm land far beyond his personal ability to care for as a calling, it is a deadly loss of connection to the land. What we are actually facing is a collapse of rural culture. We have bought the modern *false* myth that the cultivation of food is no longer the most important occupation in civilization, but a dreary drudgery not fit for enlightened people, best left to chemicals, machines and the illiterate poor. This myth says we will starve if we don't drive the land and its people like a beaten animal. We see the teeming millions of desperate men and women in our cities but our worship of the "information civilization" prevents us from facing the fact that these people would be better off on the land, trained in the husbandry of soil, plants and animals. And we would be better off too, if many more millions of our fellow citizens were independent farmers cultivating land in a sustainable way. I am emphatically not saying that kind of life is easy, but no life committed to excellence in the service of society is easy. Such a life is fulfilling, sustaining and given to generating a veneration for good work and nature that can validate Jefferson's assertions. We would do well to sacrifice our myths about agriculture. The Akedah calls out: what will make us secure?