JEWISH CULTURAL STUDIES

VOLUME FIVE

Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination

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The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
in association with Liverpool University Press
2017

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
in association with Liverpool University Press
4 Cambridge Street, Liverpool L69 7ZU, UK
www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/littman

Managing Editor: Connie Webber

Distributed in North America by
Oxford University Press Inc, 198 Madison Avenue,
New York, NY 10016, USA

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Catalogue records for this book are available from
the British Library and the Library of Congress

ISBN 978–1–906764–66–1

Publishing co-ordinator: Janet Moth
Copy-editing: Ezra Margulies and Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz
Proof-reading: Agnes Erdos
Index: Caroline Diepeveen
Production, design, and typesetting by Pete Russell, Faringdon, Oxon.
Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by
TJ International Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall

TWELVE

'Where Was Sarah?' Depictions of Mothers and Motherhood in Modern Israeli Poetry on the Binding of Isaac

DALIA MARX

The Binding of Isaac, known as *akedat yitsḥak* or the Akedah (Gen. 22: 1–19), is one of the most influential and controversial stories in the history of religion, playing a central role in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[1] Countless commentators, philosophers, theologians, poets, and now visual artists have examined and reflected upon it throughout the centuries. Scholars and readers have speculated about the mindset of the story's protagonists: God, Abraham, and Isaac. However, Sarah, who surely had her son's welfare at heart, is completely absent from the narrative, and therefore from the majority of exegetical material relating to Genesis 22. In classical as well as in modern literature, the story of the Akedah serves as a core source for examining either the relationship between God and the believer, or male-oriented father–child relationships. Isaac's mother, in both cases, is left by the wayside. Indeed, her absence from far too many arguments and analyses of the Akedah limits its potential meaning.

But what if we suggested that the main character in the biblical story of the Akedah was not Abraham, who accepted the divine command to sacrifice his beloved son? And what if we did not follow later traditional interpretations that emphasize the role of Isaac, the son, who lay down willingly upon the altar to be saved only at the last moment by the same God who, in order to test his father, decreed his death?

In addition to these three protagonists, some scholars and artists have also focused on the two servants who were asked by Abraham to stay with the donkey while he and his son Isaac continued to the mountain on which the Akedah was to take place (22: 5). Others have considered the role of the angel who ordered Abraham to spare Isaac. All these characters are masculine, which raises a challenging question: where was Sarah during the course of these events? Although she was neither the one God tested nor the one God redeemed, how can we

explain that Sarah, whose name can be translated as 'noble woman' and who is perhaps the main protagonist in the story of the announcement of Isaac's birth in Genesis 17–18, is not even mentioned in the Akedah narrative? In fact, Ruth Kartun-Blum highlights this point when she writes, 'Sarah, the main protagonist of [the Genesis] annunciation story, disappears completely when the child she has borne is about to be sacrificed' (1999b: 43). One cannot help but wonder why Isaac's loving mother, who yearned for a child for so long, is not mentioned at all in the context of her son's near-death at his father's hand.

Many commentators, poets, and theologians have grappled with Sarah's 'presence of absence' (for a survey, see Zierler 2005: 10). At times, these struggles are deliberately polemical, calling attention to a body of literature that remains too mute, too reserved, or too male-oriented. There are, however, those who are not only willing but who consciously choose to diverge from traditional biblical views, to probe for another perspective and introduce fresh ideas into a millennial conversation. Israeli poets are one such group: as artisans of language, poets expand the boundaries of our literary world, revealing insights yet to be heard.

This essay examines modern Israeli poetic depictions of Sarah, the first matriarch. My aim is to fill the deafening biblical silence surrounding Sarah's response to the Akedah using contemporary Israeli voices. While classical and medieval midrashic references give us some insight into the silent Sarah, as I will show, contemporary Israeli poetry is a central instrument used by poets to give themselves a voice by revealing the presence of Sarah in the Akedah narrative. The diversity of imagery in the poems I refer to draws attention to the wider range of insights regarding the treatment of Sarah in the context of present-day Jewish Israeli mothers and motherhood. In my conclusions, I discuss how these depictions bring aspects of a changing, developing Israeli culture to the foreground of political discourse.

Sarah in the Akedah in Classical Jewish Literature

Classical accounts of the Akedah vary widely in action, motivation, and outcome, with the exception of the sparing of Isaac. In a fifth-century *midrash*, the fact that the passage following the Akedah speaks about the death of Sarah prompted the Sages to consider a meaningful connection between the two events. *Genesis Rabbah* states:

'וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה' [בראשית כג, ב] . . . א"ל ר' יוסי: . . . מהיכן בא? מהר המוריה ומתה שרה מאותו צער לפיכך נסמכה עקידה ל'וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה' [שם, כג ,א].

'And Abraham came to mourn Sarah.' [Gen. 23: 2] . . . Rabbi Yosi said: . . . where did he come from? He came from Mount Moriah, and Sarah died from that anguish, therefore the binding comes just before, 'And the life of Sarah was' [Gen. 23: 1]. (*Genesis Rabbah* 58: 5)

A later medieval *midrash* elaborates upon the actual circumstances of Sarah's death following the Akedah:

וכשבא אל אמו, אמרה לו: היכן היית בני? אמר לה: נטלני אבא והעלני הרים והורידני גבעות והעלני להר אחד ובנה מזבח וסדר מערכה ועקדני עליו ונטל מאכלת לשוחטני. אלו לא בא מלאך אחד מן השמים, ואמר לו אברהם, אברהם אל תשלח ידך אל הנער! כבר הייתי שחוט. כיון ששמעה שרה אמו כך, צווחה, ולא הספיקה לגמור את הדבר, עד שיצתה נשמתה.

And when [Isaac] returned to his mother, she said to him: Where have you been, my son? He told her: Father took me and made me climb mountains and descend hills, and he took me to a certain mountain and built an altar and laid the wood upon it, and bound me and took the knife to slaughter me. Had an angel not came from heaven and called him: 'Abraham, Abraham, lay not your hand upon the boy!' I would have been slaughtered. When Sarah his mother heard it, she cried out and during her cry, her soul departed. (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 9)[2]

A different medieval midrashic tradition explains Sarah's passivity and lack of response by stating that she was deceived by Abraham (who was worried about her reaction). Instead of telling her about God's command, he asks her to prepare a feast for Isaac, and tells her that he plans to take him to a place 'where they educate [or initiate] boys'. Sarah gives her blessing, but Abraham sneaks away from the house early in the morning before Sarah can change her mind (*Tanḥuma*, 'Vayera' 22). This midrashic tradition thus reveals a hidden criticism of Abraham's blind obedience to God, and maybe even of God's decision to test Abraham.[3]

Some early Christian depictions of the Akedah contain interesting traditions regarding Sarah's role in the story. Ephrem the Syrian (d.373), for example, says in his commentary on Genesis that Abraham did not tell his wife about God's command 'because he had not been commanded to inform her. She would have persuaded him to let her go and participate in his sacrifice' (McVey 1994: 168; see also Brock 1974; Harvey 2001). Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2001) surveys Syriac texts, most of which are liturgical poems depicting Sarah as a full-fledged partner in Abraham's deadly mission.[4] In some of these texts, she is even portrayed as a more devout believer than her husband: they expand on her love for her son, her grief for his imminent death, and her devotion to God in greater detail than for Abraham (Brock 1974). At the end of one of these poems, Abraham essentially disappears, allowing for a greater focus on Sarah's merits (Harvey 2001: 116). The motivation to enhance Sarah's presence in these texts is theological. Functionally, it generates a typological affinity between her and the Virgin Mary, since the latter also mourns the death of her son, not knowing that he will return to her (Harvey 2001: 116). Since they understood the Akedah as foreshadowing the Passion of Christ, some Christian commentators emphasized Sarah's role in the narrative, and conversely felt little need to include a prominent male figure by her side.

Jews, on the other hand, had no theological and educational motive to stress the role of the matriarch in the story.

The Akedah is also a recurring theme in medieval *piyutim* (liturgical hymns). Not only is it read as part of the yearly Torah cycle, but it also appears as the special reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah (New Year). Additionally, it became part of the daily preliminary morning prayers in late medieval times.[5] In fact, there is a specific sub-genre of Akedah *piyutim* recited in various penitential contexts as well as in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy (Elizur 1997). A typical example is 'Et sha'arei ratson', the central *piyut* for Rosh Hashanah in Sephardi communities. Composed by Judah Ibn Abbas in the twelfth century, it incorporates many midrashic accounts of the story of the Akedah, giving voice to the various characters and elaborating on their motivations. Towards the end, it puts words of grief into Isaac's mouth, expressing love and concern for his mother, who is not present and is unaware of the unfolding tragedy:

שִׂיחוּ לְאִמִּי כִּי שְׂשׂוֹנָהּ פָּנָה	Tell my mother that her rejoicing is gone.
הַבֵּן אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְתִשְׁעִים שָׁנָה	The one whom she bore at ninety years
הָיָה לְאֵשׁ וּלְמַאֲכֶלֶת מָנָה	Has become victim to the fire and a choice portion for the knife;
אָנָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ לָהּ מְנַחֵם אָנָה	Where shall I find someone to comfort her?
צַר לִי לְאֵם תִּבְכֶּה וְתִתְיַפֵּחַ	It grieves me that [my] mother shall weep and wail;
עוֹקֵד וְהַנֶּעֱקָד וְהַמִּזְבֵּחַ	The binder, the bound, and the altar.

While Sarah is absent here and we are not given any insight into her thoughts and feelings, it is clear that Isaac is worried for his mother in a way that his father was not. This is a touching depiction of Isaac's love for her, as it concentrates on his worries about her response to his death. Interestingly, the theme of Isaac's concern for his mother before the Akedah is found in Jewish as well as in Samaritan and Christian poems from late antiquity (Münz-Manor 2009: 151–61). In many Ashkenazi liturgical hymns, the suffering of Isaac becomes emblematic of the fate of Jews in Europe who suffered extreme violence during the Crusades. Isaac's own willingness to die epitomized the figure of the Jew who chose martyrdom over apostasy (Elizur 1997).

That said, classical Jewish writings and visual depictions of the Akedah rarely include Sarah.[6] If she appears at all, it is in the aftermath of the event or in Isaac's thoughts. This silence is significant when compared with some early Christian writings, which, as noted above, give Sarah an important role as a prefiguration of Mary. This state of affairs has changed radically in recent decades, as many contemporary Israeli scholars, thinkers, and poets, most (but not all) of whom are women, began examining gaps in the biblical texts, speculating on Sarah's position and feelings before, during, and as a result of the dramatic events of Israel's wars and bloody conflicts. For them Sarah becomes the mother who witnesses

these events; she is the prism through which Israeli poets deal with the challenges of Israeli statehood.

Whereas ancient commentators and medieval liturgists mentioned Sarah in the context of the Akedah but without assigning much importance to her presence, for modern Israeli poets she has become a vital and provocative figure through which they can express their views about the conflicts they confront living in the modern State of Israel. I now wish to ponder how an ancient narrative that is silent about Sarah has granted poets the space to introduce her into the conversation about contemporary Israeli culture.

'The Nation's Womb'—Israeli Jewish Motherhood

A recent statement by Smadar Shiffman—'When nations are born, women are expected to give birth' (2003: 142)—contains an age-old paradox regarding the role of women: on the one hand, they are expected to give life, nurture, and carefully protect their children; on the other hand, they are expected to sacrifice those children willingly for the sake of the nation. This situation is obviously not unique to Israel, though the circumstances there are unique in many ways. Shiffman points to a special dynamic created as a result of the tension between two strong female stereotypes: the 'well known Jewish Mother, nurturing, caring, self-effacing and adoring; on the other hand, Israeli Jewish Mothers are harnessed to the national effort' (Shiffman 2003: 139). These conflicting roles stand at the core of Israeli motherhood, and Sarah is a perfect model to represent this tension.

Of course, fathers also suffer greatly due to the consequences of wars and violent conflicts, and some poems on the Akedah attest to this (Kartun-Blum 1999b). That being said, it seems that women are almost always identified with the attributes of grief and loss (Sperber and Chen 2002: 11)—which is why Sarah is so essential when unravelling the paradoxical struggle in modern Israeli society. Before the establishment of the State of Israel and during its early years, women were depicted as 'mothers of the nation', an expression used in relation to Sarah in Genesis 17: 16. Examining medical manuals from these years, Sachlav Stoler-Liss maintains that this image of the Israeli mother was 'managed' and brought about in a conscious manner through 'an unremitting program of education, indoctrination and regulation' (Stoler-Liss 2003: 104). Mothers required a proper education in order to be adequate 'mothers of the nation'.

The notion that mothers are inextricably linked to Israel's survival appears in areas beyond those of literature or education. Nitza Berkovitch, who examines Israeli Jewish women's legal status (rights and duties as citizens), argues that in Israeli society women are characterized primarily as wives and mothers, and not as individuals or citizens; Israeli motherhood is defined as a national role that

belongs to the public sphere (Berkovitch 1997). Despite social and legislative changes regarding women's rights in recent decades, 'the primary definition of women as "the nation's womb" . . . remains part of the public discourse' (Guilat 2012: 290). It is not surprising, therefore, to find women protesting against the role of the mother as the enabler of what seems to them illegitimate national causes. The slogan *lo yorah velo yoledet, bakibush ani moredet* ('I'm not shooting nor having babies—I'm rebelling against the occupation') is used in demonstrations and painted on public walls. It does not necessarily mean that these women would refrain from having children; rather, it is a statement against the recruitment of their bodies for an unjustified military effort.

To the best of my knowledge, the first time that the Akedah appears in the context of modern Israeli motherhood is in an autobiography by Devorah Dayan (1890–1956), a writer, Zionist leader, and the mother of Moshe Dayan. She writes about the terrible duty, not only to sacrifice a son, but also to do it with *hashlamah ilemet* (silent—or silenced—acceptance):

ייתכן שהטרגדיה של עקידת יצחק חמורה וקרובה לנו יותר מאשר לאמהות בדורות הקודמים. מתוך השלמה עליך להביא את הבן על המזבח, מתוך השלמה אילמת, ורק באין רואה–לתלוש את שערות ראשך.

Maybe the tragic nature of the Akedah is harsher and nearer to us than to mothers of generations past. Out of acceptance you have to bring the son to the altar, out of silent [or silenced] acceptance, and only when no one sees—to tear your hair. (Dayan 1952: 247)

Public outcries and mourning are thus unacceptable. One must face the sacrifice and the potential loss stoically. Only when no one is there to witness may the mother bitterly mourn.

The Akedah in Modern Israeli Hebrew Poetry

Israeli poets use the Akedah to bring acute tensions of recent history to the fore. Interestingly, these artists relate to the biblical text in a manner similar to that of classical Midrash and commentary, though they use different literary tools (Feldman 2010; Forti 2007; Sagi 1998). The composers of classical Midrash sought to prove that everything they created, including bold and subversive images, was already present in the Bible. Their innovations, as a result, appeared as profound ancient truths because of their rootedness in the authoritative biblical text (Stern 1996: 38). In contrast, modern-day Israeli poets very often re-imagine biblical language, imagery, and motifs in order to distance themselves from and even show disapproval of the values reflected in Scripture. More specifically, Israeli poets turn the Bible into a battlefield of ideas, often expressing anger against or total negation of biblical events and traditional ideas. One might even say that they 'exercise literary violence upon the biblical text through misreading and

rewriting' (Kartun-Blum 1999b: 4). They may use canonical texts subversively to reject the values embedded within those very sources and make room for their own ideas. This attack on the Bible is also its triumph; it is ultimate proof of its ever-increasing centrality for contemporary Jews. It remains a major lens through which they consider and analyse their own reality. Writers dare to grapple with the Bible because of their sense of ownership of the sacred text. In spite of, and maybe because of, the subversive nature of so-called 'secular' Israeli poetry, it is linked at its core to these sacred sources and cannot be understood without paying close attention to the intertextual methods it applies (Hirschfeld 2002).

In his introduction to an anthology of modern poetry on the Akedah, the Israeli author Haim Be'er writes: 'The Akedah has a manifest, violent, and sinister presence in modern Hebrew literature—exactly like the storm-loaded thickening clouds that El Greco hung as an inevitable verdict over the skies of Toledo' (Be'er 2002: 9). Indeed, the Akedah is arguably the biblical theme which appears most prominently in modern Israeli poetry. It serves as a lens to reflect on current situations in relation to the past and is a foil for examining the major questions of human, Jewish, and Israeli concerns (Feldman 2010; Forti 2007; Jacobson 1997: 93–5, 121–31). Sarah therefore becomes the archetypal mother, functioning as a reflective lens (Aharony 2007).

Just as the Akedah became a metaphor for martyrdom in medieval Europe, modern Israeli poets use it as a powerful symbol for the devastation caused by the Holocaust and, later, artists look to it as a lens through which they can grapple with their feelings of grief, anger, or acceptance in relation to the death of young soldiers (Feldman 2010; Kartun-Blum 1996b: 15–62). Raya Harnik (b. 1933), for example, makes a bold statement in the poem below, transitioning from Holocaust imagery to a reflection on the human price demanded in order to establish and ensure the survival of the State of Israel:

'Poems of Attrition [b]', by Raya Harnik

לֹא עוֹד שְׁנַת אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁתַּיִם	No longer 1942
לֹא עוֹד טְרֶבְּלִינְקָה.	No longer Treblinka
לֹא כְּצֹאן לַטִּבְחָה.	No longer sheep led to slaughter
עַכְשָׁו בְּגָאוֹן	Now proudly
עַכְשָׁו כִּמְצָדָה	Now like Masada
עַכְשָׁו, כָּצֹאן לָעוֹלָה.	Now, sheep for sacrifice.
	(Harnick 1983: 9; trans. in Kartun-Blum 1999a: 18)

The post-Holocaust 'never again' rhetoric in the opening lines of the poem is deliberately misleading. We realize upon reaching its conclusion that death cannot be prevented; only the circumstances and causes change. Harnik cites the idiom: 'sheep [led] to slaughter', a common phrase in Israeli discourse alluding to the Jews marching passively to their deaths in the Nazi extermination camps. She

draws a negative comparison between the victims of the Holocaust and the soldiers by referring to the latter as sheep brought as an *olah* (burnt offering), invoking the image of whole, holy, and pure sacrifices. This parallel is an example of what Suskin-Ostriker terms 'stealing the language', using it in ways that contradict its initial function—such as when poets take up linguistic mechanisms and dismantle them. In other words, the unexpected juxtaposition of common and unrelated (but linguistically similar) idioms creates new understandings for both (Suskin-Ostriker 1987). In the tragedy of the Second World War and the difficult reality of the State of Israel, the so-called submissive victims of the Holocaust as well as the heroic Israeli soldiers both meet their violent deaths (Kartun-Blum 1999a, 1999b).

The motif of a parent 'offering' a son was a prominent one in the early years of the State of Israel, and connected perfectly with the Akedah, which therefore came to epitomize the death of so many young men of present conflicts (Feldman 2010). The Akedah was their fate: the descendants of Isaac were 'born with a knife in their hearts', in Haim Gouri's words (Kartun-Blum 1999b: 23–4). Gradually, this attitude changed; Avi Sagi, a scholar of philosophy, writes: 'It is precisely after two heroic wars—'the War of Liberation' [1948] and the 'Six Day War' [1967] —that the trend towards 'normalization' gained strength. Victory has been achieved . . . Sacrifices and *Akedot* are no longer justified.' Sagi goes so far as to document earlier doubts regarding the validity of the Akedah allegory dating from the 1950s onwards (Sagi 1998: 46–52). But protests against accepting the Akedah as fate increased most prominently following the Yom Kippur War (1973). The loss of so many men and the sacrifice of young lives prompted dissent, which intensified after the first Lebanon War (1982). By this time, poets used the Akedah in their poetry as a symbol for an arbitrary father and absent God, rather than as a sign of heroic and holy sacrifice. Examining poetry that makes use of Akedah imagery reveals a transformation in Israeli society, from a nation willing to offer up her sons for a heroic cause to one reluctant to do so.

Sarah in Israeli Poems Dealing with the Akedah

During the early years of the State of Israel and even before 1948, poets used the Akedah to reflect on the personal lives of the 'bound'—those destined to be killed in the Holocaust or in the wars of the State of Israel. But these poems often dealt with father–son relationships (Shaked 2005: 109–59); mother figures hardly appeared in any of them. In later decades, mothers ultimately emerged more prominently in the literary context of the Akedah.[7] More specifically, Kartun-Blum writes: 'Up until the eighties it seems the *Akedah* remained an almost exclusively male *topos* . . . From the eighties onwards the rewriting of the *Akedah* grows more dominant in various sections of women's poetry, both secular and

religious, and affords rich pickings in different kinds of approaches as well as in poetic achievement’ (Kartun-Blum 1999a: 13–14).

Kartun-Blum’s call for new interpretations of Genesis 22 in line with the growing dissent documented above is answered by those poems which ‘take up Sarah’, the matriarch, to carry a new banner of protest through which mothers could speak out to repudiate the Akedah. The ten poems I analyse in this section are examples of such dissenting voices, illuminating the character of Sarah in the context of the Akedah. My selection represents a larger literary phenomenon, and my intention is to provide as diverse a picture as possible of poets who speak through the biblical mother figure of Sarah in order to contest Israeli cultural norms.[8] The discussion focuses on different ways in which she is depicted in relation to the biblical narrative, by looking at four dimensions of motherhood: anguished mothers; resisting mothers; blameworthy mothers; and praying mothers.[9] Most, but not all, of the poets discussed below are women. They use Sarah to reflect their feelings and fears regarding Jewish-Israeli motherhood in a situation of ongoing conflict.[10]

Anguished Mothers

In 1968, shortly after the Six Day War, Binyamin Galai (1921–95) published a poem entitled ‘And the Life of Sarah Was’. Galai, who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and fought in the early wars of the State of Israel, witnessed the horrors of battle and realized that the tragedy of the death of Israeli sons was virtually lethal for their mothers as well, who were themselves unaccounted for or not considered as war casualties. He reflected these thoughts in his poetry, by alluding to the paradox which underlies the fact that the Torah portion entitled ‘The Life of Sarah’ (Gen. 23: 1) actually begins with her death. The explanation for Sarah’s death in Galai’s poem remains in line with the *midrash* cited above, according to which she died when she found out about the Akedah. The poem’s symbolism therefore suggests that the death of sons inevitably leads to the ‘death’ of their mothers:

בנימין גלאי, ויהיו חיי שרה	**‘And the Life of Sarah Was’, by Binyamin Galai**
וַיִּהְיוּ	And the life of Sarah
חַיֵּי שָׂרָה	was
מֵאָה שָׁנָה, עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה, שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים.	a hundred years, twenty years, seven years.
וַתָּמָת–	And she died—
הִיא נִסְתַּלְּקָה מִן הָעוֹלָם בְּהַר חֶבְרוֹן,	She departed from the world on Mount Hebron.
לְקוֹל טְפִיפַת רַגְלֵי הַמְשָׁרְתִים,	To the pattering of the feet of servants
שֶׁשָּׁכְחָה אֲפִלּוּ אֶת שְׁמוֹתָם.	Whose names she even forgot.
כָּל יְדִידֵי הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה לִוּוּ, כִּתְּפוּ אֶת אֲרוֹנָהּ,	All the friends of the family came to the funeral.
לִמְקוֹם מְנוּחָתוֹ הָאַחֲרוֹן.	Shouldered her coffin. To its last place of rest.

קְרָשָׁיו, נָפְלָה שָׁם הֲבָרָה, הָיוּ דַּקִּים-מִן-הַדַּקִּים,	Its planks, it was said, were the thinnest of thin
קַלִּים-קַלִּים.	The lightest of light.
וַיִּהְיוּ	And the life of Sarah
חַיֵּי שָׂרָה	was
מֵאָה שָׁנָה, עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה, שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים.	a hundred years, twenty years, seven years.
שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה.	The years of Sarah's life.
וַתָּמָת–	And she died—
אַךְ בֶּאֱמֶת	But really,
כָּבָה נֵרָהּ יָמִים רַבִּים, רַבִּים לִפְנֵי	Her candle had gone out many days, many before
שֶׁמִּשְׁכָּנָהּ הָאַחֲרוֹן הָיָה עָפָר.	Her rest place was dust.
וְהָאָרוֹן שֶׁבּוֹ שָׁכְבָה הָיָה עָשׂוּי כָּל-הַשָּׁנִים	And the coffin she lay in was made of all the years,
זִכְרוֹן עֵצִים מְבֻקָּעִים עַל הַר אַחֵר,	The memory of wood cleft on another mount,
עַל הַר אַחֵר, בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹרִיָּה.	On another mount, in the Land of Moriah.
	(Galai 1968: 46; trans. in Kartun-Blum 1999a: 44–5)

The poem is divided into two almost equal parts, each of which begins with the biblical verse from Genesis, yet portrays Sarah's death very differently. In the first part, Sarah is a respectable member of the community, and she dies at a ripe old age surrounded by her loving family and household. The second half of the poem tells another story: 'But really, | her candle had gone out many days, many before | Her rest place was dust.' The reader suddenly understands that the coffin's planks were 'lightest of light', first dying emotionally because she was actually not there and dying physically only later (Shaked 2005: 551–6; Kartun-Blum 1999b: 45). The 'shouldering' of the coffin also takes on a new meaning since it alludes to the way soldiers' coffins are carried, thereby connecting Sarah's death to the death of sons.[11] The planks of Sarah's coffin bring to mind the wood Abraham chopped for the sacrificial altar on Mount Moriah and therefore conjure the image of a father sacrificing his son in war, which ultimately prompts the death of his mother. According to a midrashic tradition, Isaac carried the wood on his back 'as one carries his own cross [!]', as if leading himself to his own death (*Genesis Rabbah* 56: 3). This brings to mind the danger attached to the wood that Isaac transported. Isaac did not die on that wood, but his mother, the mother who, in fact, also took part, or at least did not prevent her son's sacrifice, was buried in it.

The transition from the depiction of Sarah as the respectable woman in the first part of the poem to the broken and symbolically long dead woman in the second also reflects the transition from an apparent reality to the profoundly troubling state of affairs in Israeli society, in which mothers bury their own children. The poem expresses grief and profound empathy with modern-day Sarahs, but at the same time does not express defiance of or resistance to the situation in which people fight for their nation or country. In a certain way, it continues the tradi-

tional midrashic reading of Sarah, who dies as a result of the Akedah. As a matter of fact, the writer embraces Sarah precisely because of her acceptance of the sacrifice. His reading of the story, however, also leaves room for subversive questions regarding the human costs of war.

Resisting Mothers

Israeli poetry changed greatly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War and even more so after the 1982 Lebanon War. Both were considered potentially avoidable conflicts, and therefore generated much debate. Resistance and defiance, rather than mournful acceptance, characterized their aftermath, because of the heavy price paid to stop the Egyptian-Syrian invasion and re-secure Israel’s borders. Following the Yom Kippur War, the voice of mothers became especially loud. Female authors began to use Sarah as a vehicle to express their innermost fears and objections to putting their children in danger. The four poems presented below bring to the fore these mothers who resist the Akedah, refusing to see it as a divine decree. Each deals with the story from a different perspective and views the tension between the biblical narrative and the contemporary Israeli situation in a unique way. The first, by Esther Ettinger (b. 1941 in Jerusalem), frantically addresses (in the first person and in the feminine voice) the angels who protect sons:

	By Esther Ettinger
מְשַׁחֶדֶת מַלְאָכִים	Bribing angels
מְשַׁדֶּלֶת מַלְאָכִים	Tempting angels
מִתְמַקַּחַת עִם מַלְאָכִים	Bargaining with angels
מְפַיֶּסֶת מַלְאָכִים	Appeasing angels
מִתְחַנְחֶנֶת, עוֹשָׂה עֵינַיִם	Flirting with angels
קוֹרַעַת אֶת הַלֵּב עִם מַלְאָכִים	Tearing the heart with angels
מַשְׁגִּיחָה, לֹא עוֹצֶמֶת עַיִן	Watchful, not closing an eye
עוֹשָׂה עִסְקָה עִם מַלְאָכִים	Making a deal with angels
מְנַשֶּׁקֶת כְּנַף מַלְאָכִים	Kissing the angels’ wings[12]
גּוֹעֶרֶת בַּמַּלְאָכִים	Scolding angels
מְעִזָּה פָּנִים בַּמַּלְאָכִים	Being insolent with angels
שָׁרָה עִם מַלְאָכִים,	Singing with angels
יוֹקֶדֶת, צוֹרַחַת אֶל מַלְאָכִים	Burning, screaming at angels
שֶׁיִּתְפְּסוּ אֶת הַיָּד	So that they may hold the hand
יַמְצִיאוּ אַיִל.	Invent a ram.

(Ettinger 1998: 68; trans. Dalia Marx)

The poem is written using the gerund (*beinoni*) and thus can be read in the first, second, or third person singular feminine. The frantic and constant appeal to the angels is the rhetoric of the powerless. The mother is trying to save her ‘Isaac’, knowing that she has no actual power or authority, since, in keeping with

the biblical account, she did not receive a divine call as Abraham did and does not have a direct channel of communication with God. She has no choice but to use every possible means at her disposal to prevent the ordeal. The mother in this poem is depicted as weak, but not as passive (in contrast to the biblical narrative). She is resourceful, refuses to be silent, and does anything she possibly can, uses every possible word and gesture, to avert the impending decree. She pleads, scolds, tempts, and bargains, devices that are stereotypically associated with women, all of which are used by Ettinger to offer ammunition to the weak.

Significantly, the speaker does not address God but his emissaries, the angels. This Sarah is not part of God's covenant with Abraham, and she does not trust the One who ordered him to offer her son. This is a fierce statement regarding the current relationship of Jews (or Jewish mothers?) with God. Maybe this particular Sarah even believes that God has no authority over life and death, since it was his angel that prevented her son's sacrifice. She pleads for Abraham's or God's 'hand', which is portrayed as the ultimate enemy, to be held back, and for a ram to be offered instead of her son.[13] The angels do not respond and the poem ends abruptly. A ram will have to be provided somehow, since God will not perform the miraculous rescue described in the biblical narrative for the Israeli mother.[14]

The second poem in this section is written by Hava Jacober, who makes a bold argument about an essential difference between men and women, between fathers and mothers. She maintains that God would never have tested Sarah in the same way as he tested Abraham because 'the essence of the woman's merit' is her refusal to abandon her child, in contrast to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac:

שרי, חוה יעקובר	**'Sarai', by Hava Jacober**
אֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם	God tested Abraham
לֹא אֶת שָׂרַי.	—not Sarai.
וְאוּלַי זֹאת תַּמְצִית זְכוּתָהּ	And maybe this is the essence
שֶׁל הָאִשָּׁה:	of the woman's merit:
מִי שֶׁבָּרָא אֶת רַחְמָהּ	He who created her womb
וְנָתַן בָּהּ אֶת הַכְּאֵב וְאֶת הַלֵּדָה	And placed in her the pain and the birth
לֹא הֵעֵז לְנַסּוֹת אֶת מִדַּת רַחֲמָיו,	Did not dare to test his mercy,
הַאִם יוּכַל	Would he be able to bear
לַעֲמֹד בִּפְנֵי יִסּוּרֶיהָ.	Her suffering.
	(Zion 2002: 325; trans. Dalia Marx)

The poet here explains the absence of Sarah from the Akedah. She is not part of the story because God would not put a mother through such a test. The Almighty would not dare to be tested against such suffering. The poem alludes to the birth pains afflicted upon women (Gen. 3: 16). God would not endure a greater agony on their behalf. Sarah becomes then the model of the mother, any mother.

It is not coincidental that in this poem Sarah is called Sarai, which was her name before the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen. 17: 15). God promised that Sarai would bear a son, and he changed her name from Sarai to Sarah in assurance of this promise, as commentators duly note (see for example *Lamentations Rabbah* 5: 1). By returning to her old pre-covenantal name, the poet resists the kind of relationship with God that would require a mother to sacrifice her only son.

The third poem, by Raya Harnik, who was born in Berlin and lives in Jerusalem, is the best known of all Israeli poems that relate to the Akedah with refusal and defiance:

‘Poems of Attrition [a]’, by Raya Harnik

אֲנִי לֹא אַקְרִיב	I will not sacrifice
בְּכוֹרִי לְעוֹלָה.	My firstborn as burnt offering.
לֹא אֲנִי.	Not me.
בְּלֵילוֹת אֱלֹהִים וַאֲנִי	Night after night God and I
עוֹרְכִים חֶשְׁבּוֹנוֹת	barter
מַה מַּגִּיעַ לְמִי.	Who ought to have what.
אֲנִי יוֹדַעַת וּמַכִּירָה	I know and am
תּוֹדָה.	Grateful.
אֲבָל לֹא אֶת בְּנִי	But not my son
וְלֹא	And not
לְעוֹלָה.	As a burnt offering.

(Harnik 1983: 9; trans. in Raizen 2013: 140)

The Akedah is not mentioned explicitly here but the reference is clear. As opposed to Abraham’s *hineni* (‘Here I am!’ Gen. 22: 1, 7, 11), the poet makes her refusal to sacrifice her son very evident—*lo ani* (‘not I’ or ‘I shall not’). The short poem is an amalgam of lofty biblical Hebrew and colloquial Israeli idioms. Sarah and God are described as two individuals who argue like neighbours holding a grudge against each other, discussing their petty matters and clarifying ‘Who ought to have what’. Sarah acknowledges her debt to God but declares her total objection to her son’s inclusion in this equation, saying, ‘But not my son’. This act of refusal should be read in opposition to the Zionist rhetoric according to which Israelis must sacrifice young men to support the establishment and survival of the State of Israel.

In an act of ‘pre-and counter-commemoration’ (Guilat 2012), the speaker in this poem refuses to assume the role assigned to mothers as mourners for lost young lives. The poem also reflects her life ‘with the certainty of [impending] death’ (Raizen 2013); it functions as a ‘[c]ollective cultural memory turned into personal memory’ (Kartun-Blum 1999b: 6). Harnik employs national slogans, empties them, and rejects their content, placing the focus instead on the individual and personal experience to heighten its gravity. At the same time, this poem

deals with a universal theme that applies to every culture and era, namely a mother's anxiety about the survival of her children. Her exclamation *lo ani!* contrasts the reaction of the biblical Sarah, who so desired a son yet remained silent in the story of the Akedah.

This poem by Harnik and the one cited above are part of a series called *Shirei hatashah* (Poems of Attrition, 1969–70), written in the course of or shortly after the War of Attrition. They were not published, however, until much later, in Harnick's *Poems for Guni* (1983), after her son Guni, the commander of the Golani Brigade elite commando unit, was killed on 6 June 1982 during the first Lebanon War (Raizen 2013: 136–7). The poem acquired an additional troubling meaning, as Guni's death was indeed an 'offering'. He was killed fighting in a politically and strategically controversial battle. In a recent interview, Harnik, who considers herself a completely secular Jew, told of a dark premonition about her son's fate that she had felt since his childhood, which was powerful enough to shape her poetry long before his death (Raizen 2013).

The final poem in the category of resisting mothers is by Shifra Shifman-Shmuelovich (known as Shin Shifra, 1931–2012). A poet and scholar, she wrote several poems relating to the Akedah. This one focuses on the aftermath of 'her' Akedah:

יצחק, ש. שפרה	**'Isaac', by Shin Shifra**
לִי לֹא נֶאֱחַז אַיִל בַּסְּבַךְ.	No ram was caught in the thicket for me.
עָקַדְתִּי	I bound
וָאֶשְׁחַט.	And I slaughtered.
אֱלֹהִים לֹא שָׁעָה	God did not accept
הוּא צָחַק.	He laughed.
	(Ben-Gurion 2002: 110; trans. Dalia Marx)

This brief poem presents the poet's personal reaction to the Akedah. While she makes no reference to the context, she makes personal use of the story. Alluding to phrases that mirror the Akedah, such as 'a ram caught in the thicket', the poet creates an opposing set of images of an offering and God's rejection of it. The poem stresses that *this* Akedah did not merit a revelation; no *deus ex machina* appears here to save a life at the last moment, pointing to the fact that one cannot depend on divine intervention for salvation. God does not respond; instead, he laughs at the suffering of the individual. A chilling reversal of roles occurs in Shifra's poem. In the biblical story, Sarah laughs when she learns that she will give birth to a son in her old age (Gen. 18: 12–13). Here, God laughs instead. Sarah's laugh is a sign of disbelief, arguably also a symbol of joy, in light of the promise of an unexpected life, that of Isaac; God's laugh, in contrast, heralds death.

This complicated type of revelation is a common theme in Israeli poetry.[15] God is not thought of as absent (this is not a lament on the Nietzschean 'death of

God'), God appears—but he is an indifferent and even a hurtful entity. From this perspective, it is not only that God ignores the offering of the ram; he mocks the effort and the loss. In a world that was created with a very few carefully chosen words, humans are left to operate with no divine providence; they dwell in the world with a powerful mocking enemy.

These four poems, by Ettinger, Jacober, Harnik, and Shifra, differ from each other, but all depict mothers who resist the central presumptions of the Akedah. They refuse to offer their dear ones and, therefore, must deny the sacred nature of their offering.

Blameworthy Mothers: Social, Familial, and Political Woes

Countless jokes reflect on the theme of Jewish mothers and guilt. Tasteless as many of them can be, they reveal profound sentiments. Discussing motherhood in the context of the Akedah often brings to the fore, sometimes by accusing others, sometimes via self-accusation, the most fundamental sin of a mother: failing to protect her children. This sentiment is not culturally specific but probably universal. It lives, on the one hand, in the shadow of the Holocaust and the continued wars in Israel, and on the other, in the humorous stereotype of the protective Jewish mother. Indeed, it is especially present in the minds of Israeli poets, who depict mothers as collaborators with an aggressor or as indirect enablers of tragic circumstances (Raizen 2013). Below I discuss five poems in this category. One is filled with a feeling of indirect self-blame, the second contains a blunt accusation against Sarah, and the third tells of Sarah's acknowledgment of her own iniquity, which brought the Akedah as a punishment. Following these are two additional poems embracing the perspective of the Akedah as punishment for Sarah's wrongdoing against Hagar and Ishmael.

אני העקדה, ציפי שחרור	**'I am the Akedah', by Tsipi Shahrur**
אֲנִי קְרוּם הֶחָלָב	I am the crust of the milk
וּנְשִׁיקַת אֱמוּנָה	And the kiss of faith
אֲנִי הָאַהֲבָה	I am the love
מִפְגַּשׁ הַיָּרֵךְ הַחַמָּה	The junction of the warm thigh
אֲנִי הָאֵשׁ	I am the fire
וּמַיִם עֲצוּרִים	and constricted water
אֲנִי מְזוּזַת הַשַּׁעַר	I am the gate's doorpost[16]
וְהַנְּשִׁימָה	And the breathing
וְהַמִּדְרוֹן.	And the slope.
אֲנִי הָעֲקֵדָה	I am the Akedah
וְהָאֶשְׁנָב	and the [little] hole[17]
הַיְּרִי	of shooting
הֶעָשָׁן	The smoke
וְהַקִּינָה.	and the lament.
	(Ben-Gurion 2002: 121; trans. Dalia Marx)

In this poem by Tsipi Shahrur, the mother is the 'site' of the Akedah; she not only embodies it, she is held accountable for it. The poet begins with a description of small tokens of tranquil motherhood: she is the serenity and faithfulness of the home, the personification of daily routine—its embodiment. She then describes the mother as the gateway through which everything passes before exiting, as in a perpetual birth—and the gateway to the dangers outside. She becomes so present and identified with her son that she becomes one with the rapid rhythm of his breathing—a symbiosis reflective of their oneness in pregnancy. Now we also understand that the fire is not just warm domestic heating. It symbolizes a deadly weapon heating the air as well as alluding to the fire Abraham brought to the Akedah. The mother is a hole through which the bullet is shot; she is the personification both of the act of killing on the battlefield and the act of mourning. The mother maintains the home, but with the same impulse allows for its destruction. The text is a (self-)criticism of mothers who, instead of using their protective instincts to promote peace, accept war and death and, therefore, allow them to occur.[18]

Ruchama Weiss (b. 1966), a poet, artist, and scholar, departs from the national understanding and the collective memory of the Akedah and brings its destructive potential to the fore in the realm of the family. She moves from the political to the personal and from the public sphere to the private. More to the point, the poem's accusatory voice is directed to an abused mother. The threat to Isaac's life therefore comes from an abusive father who has a dark history of hurting members of his family.

רוחמה וייס	**Untitled, by Ruchama Weiss**
עֲלוּבָה זְקֵנָה, מֶה עָלָה בְּדַעְתֵּךְ וְלָמָּה לֹא עָלָה בַּזְּמַן	You poor old thing. What were you thinking? and why so late in the game?
מָתַי תָּבִינִי שֶׁלְּגֶבֶר שֶׁעוֹקֵד	And when will you understand that any man who would bind
וַאֲפִלּוּ אִם בִּרְצוֹנֵךְ, וַאֲפִלּוּ אִם זוֹ צָרָתֵךְ	even if you have insisted on it, and even if it was about your enemies
לֹא נוֹתְנִים לִשְׁמוֹר עַל יֶלֶד שָׂרָה-עִוֶּרֶת.	Well, you cannot entrust a child to such a man, *Sarah Iveret*.
	(Weiss: 2004: 27; trans. in Cutter 2014: 114)

Using the Akedah imagery and the paradigmatic character of the mother figure who 'does not know', Weiss condemns the mother for being unaware of the abuse taking place in her family. A father who has abused once is surely going to continue abusing, and he who binds is bound to bind again if the opportunity presents itself. Weiss is referring here to Abraham sending his firstborn, Ishmael, to meet certain death in the wilderness in Genesis 21, the chapter that precedes the Akedah. Sarah is addressed as *aluvah zekenah* ('You poor old thing'), a phrase taken from the words of Satan to Sarah in a *midrash* on the Akedah (Eisenstein 1915: 146).

The poem ends with a coarse insult, *sarah iveret* (‘blind Sarah’), which alludes to the children’s game *parah iveret* (‘blind cow’), the Hebrew version of ‘blind man’s buff’ (Cutter 2014: 114). Weiss speaks for the increasing number of voices in Israeli society that protest against the victimization of those who cannot defend themselves. In this case, she talks about actual children as victims of domestic abuse.

A similar charge is made in Yehudit Kafri’s poem *Bareshiyot* (‘In the Beginnings’):

בראשיות, יהודית כפרי	**‘In the Beginnings’, by Yehudit Kafri**
. . .	. . .
אֵיךְ זֶה קָרָה?	How could it have happened?
וְאֵיפֹה הָיְתָה שָׂרַי?	And where was Sarai?
אֵיךְ הִיא יָכְלָה לִסְמֹךְ	How could she trust
עַל אֵל כָּל כָּךְ עָרִיץ	such a tyrannical God
שֶׁיָּגֵן בָּרֶגַע הָאַחֲרוֹן?	to defend in the last moment?
לָמָּה הִיא לֹא צָעֲקָה	Why didn’t she cry out
עוֹד קֹדֶם,	Beforehand,
כְּשֶׁרַק רָתַם אֶת הַחֲמוֹר	When he saddled the ass
וְהֶעֱמִיס אֶת הָעֵצִים;	And loaded the wood;
אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ	Don’t raise your hand
אֶל הַיֶּלֶד?!	against the child?!
לָמָּה הִיא לֹא נֶעֶמְדָה	Why didn’t she stand
בְּאֶמְצַע הַדֶּרֶךְ	in his way
וְלָחֲשָׁה מִבַּעַד לִשְׂפָתַיִם חֲשׁוּקוֹת:	whispering through pursed lips:
לֹא תַּעֲבֹר בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזּוֹ	You shall not pass this way
כָּל עוֹד אֲנִי חַיָּה!	as long as I live!
לֹא אֶת הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה	Not this child
שֶׁחִכִּינוּ לוֹ מֵאָה שָׁנָה,	For whom we waited a hundred years!
לֹא אֶת הַיֶּלֶד	Not the child
שֶׁבְּנַפְשֵׁנוּ.	of our very soul.
	(Kafri 1988: 4; trans. Dalia Marx)[19]

Kafri uses colloquial language, asking those same questions, crying out those same exclamations, whispering those same regrets that people do when the media reveal a case of child abuse or we learn of a case close to our home: ‘How could it have happened? And where was Sarai?’ The charge is not directed against God, maybe because God is ‘tyrannical’ by nature, nor against Abraham, whose name is not even mentioned. The indictment is against the mother, who failed to protect her long-desired child, born miraculously in her old age. The poem puts maternal (or perhaps parental) silence on trial in the face of the harsh reality of abuse that occurs within families (Feldman 2010: 277–8).

The mother here is the only one who can save the child by speaking the words of God’s angel, ‘Don’t raise your hand’ (Gen. 22: 12). The poet criticizes her for

not doing so in a way that explains why Sarah is identified once again by her pre-covenant name Sarai (Jacobson 1997: 217–18). And when she does not receive her covenantal name, she is indirectly excluded from the Covenant with God, in marked contrast to Jacober's poem, where her use of the pre-covenant name is an act of conscious defiance by Sarah herself.

A surprising insight into God's motivation in the Akedah appears in *Poems of the Akedah* by Shalom Yosef Shapira (more often referred to by his pen name, Shin Shalom, 1904–1990). After describing the exile of Hagar and Ishmael, the poem continues as follows:

***Poems of the Akedah*, by Shalom Yosef Shapira**

וּפִתְאֹם שָׂרָה יוֹדַעַת:	And suddenly Sarah knows:
זֶה אָשְׁרִי בַּחֵטְא יֻחַם.	My happiness was aroused through sin.
פֶּתַח אֹהֶל הִיא כּוֹרַעַת,	At a tent's entrance she kneels,
הֲמוּמָה מוֹרָא נֶעְלָם–	Bewildered by a furtive fear—
אָב וּבֵן חֲסֹךְ לִי יָהּ,	Father and son spare for me Yah
שָׁם בְּהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה! . . .	There on Mount Moriah! . . .
	(Ben-Gurion 2002: 44; trans. Dalia Marx)

Sarah sees Abraham and Isaac go on their way. She realizes that the Akedah is the consequence of her sinful action against Hagar. She acknowledges the fact that her maternal happiness is based on immoral action and that her suffering is caused by the suffering and misery she had inflicted previously upon Hagar and Ishmael.[20] The poet blames Sarah and her unjust conduct for the dreadful Akedah.

Another poem that dramatically ties the fate of Isaac to that of Ishmael is Orit Gidali's 'Yoresh ha'otser' (Heir to the Curfew). The mother expresses an ambiguous feeling watching her sleeping baby; she is content but is also worried to see him grow. She is aware that in a few years, he will have reached the age of independence and will no longer need her care and guidance:

אורית גידלי, יורש העוצר (חלק ראשון)

גּוּפְךָ נִגָּר עַל הַמִּטָּה. יָמִים טוֹבִים. וְרַק שְׂעָרְךָ הַמִּתְאָרֵךְ עוֹצֵר מִבַּעֲדִי לִשְׂמֹחַ. הַשָּׁבוּעַ לָמַדְתָּ לָלֶכֶת. עוֹד מְעַט כְּבָר תּוּכַל לַעֲלוֹת בְּהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה, אָחִיךָ יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְצִדְּךָ. וּמִי מִכֶּם יוֹסִיף וְיַעֲלֶה עַכְשָׁו כְּשֶׁאֵין אִישׁ זוּלַתְכֶם, לְהַצִּיעַ תַּחְתְּכֶם אֶת הָאַיִל. בְּנִי שֶׁלִּי, אֵיךְ אֵינֶנִּי מְמַלֶּטֶת אוֹתְךָ, נוֹתֶנֶת לַזְּמַן לַעֲבֹר, לַשֵּׂעָר לְהִתְאָרֵךְ, לַיָּד שֶׁלְּךָ לְהִכָּרֵךְ עַל יָדִי מִתּוֹךְ שְׁנָתְךָ. מְגַשֵּׁשׁ עִוֵּר אַחֲרֵי הַפִּטְמָה אֲנִי מַצִּיעָה לְךָ חָלָב, מַזָּה עָלֶיךָ נִסְכֵי חוֹבָה.

'Heir to the Curfew' (pt. 1), by Orit Gidali

Your body spills onto the bed. Good days. And only your hair, which is growing longer, stops me from being happy. This week you learned to walk. Soon you will be able to climb Mount Moriah, your brother Ishmael at your side, and which of you will continue to the ascent, now that there is no one but you to offer a ram in your place. Son of mine, how is it that I do not extricate you, that I let time pass, your hair lengthens; bound by

my hand while you sleep. Blindly groping, you found the nipple, and I offer you milk, anoint you with obligatory libations. (Gidali 2009; trans. in Sulak 2016)

When Isaac is old enough, he will ‘be able to climb Mount Moriah’ with his ‘brother Ishmael’ at his side. What appears to be a dreadful initiation ceremony, the ascent of both boys, is described as an inevitable course of events. The mother, in a premonitory sentiment reminiscent of Greek tragedy, feels that the story will not end well. The image of Isaac and Ishmael, walking together on a deadly path, clearly alludes to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (which is explicitly referred to in the verses that follow, not cited here). The brothers, the ancestors of two nations yet to be born, are walking together to be offered up to an unknown deity for an obscure cause. The poem reflects on the deadly and random nature of the conflict. No one goes up the mountain with the boys ‘to offer a ram’ instead of them; they are left to their fate. Even the mother is paralysed and does not ‘extricate’ her son; instead, she concentrates, horrified, on the sweetness of her young baby. The modern-day Sarah blames herself for the terrible fate awaiting her child, saying: ‘Son of mine, how is it that I do not extricate you?’

Marcela Sulak, Gidali’s translator, offers an empowering interpretation of this difficult poem, saying that it provides a new lens through which to view the mother as a ‘nation builder’:

> [Gidali’s poems] succeed, they sound convincing, because they employ the ancient tropes of woman as mother and nation builder with which Hebrew-language audiences are well acquainted. But this nation builder, this mother, is implying that she is the mother of both children of the conflict. God will not intervene this time. Thus does Gidali liberate the future for a new kind of narrative, one with the possibility of cooperation and coexistence based on the suggestion of an original cooperation and coexistence. (Sulak 2016)

Mothers Who Pray

Prayer is not just an act of piety and subservience; it can also represent an act of defiance—the ammunition of the powerless and voiceless. Chava Pinchas-Cohen (b. 1955), a religious poet who has composed numerous prayer-poems, published ‘Petition’ in the early 1990s:

בקשה, חוה פנחס-כהן	**‘Petition’, Chava Pinchas-Cohen**
כַּאֲשֶׁר תִּינוֹק בְּיָדִי	With a baby in my arms
וְחָלָב אֱנוֹשִׁי רוֹקֵם אֶת חַיָּיו,	And human milk weaves his life,
בָּאִים בַּלֵּילוֹת פְּעִימוֹת וְקוֹלוֹת קְצוּבִים	At night come beats and clipped sounds
רַכָּבוֹת–	Trains—
בְּתַחֲנָה מְסֻיֶּמֶת עַל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת	At a certain station on this earth,
בְּרַגְלַיִם יְחֵפוֹת בְּקֹצֶר-יָד	Barefoot and helpless
פָּשַׂטְתִּי זְרוֹעוֹת	I stretched out arms

כְּמוֹ קַרְנֵי אַיִל מִתּוֹךְ סְבַךְ לְחִישַׁת הָאָרֶץ לַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַע, וַעֲשֵׂה סֻכַּת רַחֲמֶיךָ כְּמוֹ צֵל הַגֶּפֶן וְהַתְּאֵנָה אַל תְּנַסֵּנִי, נָא.	Like ram's horns caught in a thicket The whisper of earth to Heaven Hear, and make Your tabernacle of mercy like the shade of the vine and the fig tree Do not test me, please!
יֵשׁ עֵצִים וְיֵשׁ סְבַךְ רֵיחַ שֶׁל אֵשׁ וּמַרְאֵה עָשָׁן. עִם אִמָּהוֹת לֹא מְשַׂחֲקִים מַחֲבוֹאִים–	There are woods and a thicket, a smell of fire and the sight of smoke. With mothers You don't play hide-and-seek—
בְּקֹצֶר יָדִי מְכַסָּה עַל עֵינַי קוֹלִי אוֹבֵד בִּצְעָקָה אַל-קוֹלִית	In my helplessness I cover my eyes My voice is lost in a voiceless cry
אַיֶּכָּה	Where are You? (Pinchas-Cohen 1994; trans. Dalia Marx)

This prayer-poem does not explicitly address the Akedah; however, its language and metaphors strongly allude to the story. The poem begins with the pleasantness of holding a baby whose life, as rendered in the Hebrew original, is 'woven' through the milk it is sucking (*veḥalav enoshi rokem et ḥayav*).[21] The poet speaks of 'beats' that seem at first to relate to the tender heartbeats of the infant embracing his mother's breast or the rhythm of the child's sucking, but soon the 'clipped sounds' and the startling noise of trains interrupts the sweet scene, arousing dreadful memories of the Holocaust (Kartun-Blum 1999a: 21). Now the 'beats' seem to refer to the voice of marching soldiers (Ofer 2003). The mother, nestling the baby and feeding it in her arms, realizes that she cannot protect him from evil.[22]

The speaker cries out, 'Do not test me, please [*na*]!' This brief but urgent plea brings the Akedah to mind, both in the reference to divine testing and in its literary structure. The word *na* (a form of hastening) is used by God when he addresses Abraham at the beginning of the story (Gen. 22: 2). And the warning 'Do not [*al*]!' reminds us of the angel's call to Abraham not to kill his son (22: 12). These two references together encase the biblical story in a very short 'cry' communicated in the language of prayer to accentuate the mother's request for God's intervention (Ofer 2003).

A sense of danger from an unknown evil is felt throughout the poem: 'There are woods and a thicket, a smell of fire | and the sight of smoke.' The images, taken directly from the Akedah, are combined with the proverb 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.' Throughout the poem, the mother repeatedly calls upon God to reveal himself and save her infant: she 'stretched out arms'; she whispers from 'earth to Heaven', the opposite direction to that of a divine call. She invokes God's mercy: 'Hear, and make Your tabernacle of mercy'. Again there is a reversal of direction—in the Bible (and consequently also in liturgy), Israel is often in-

structed to hearken to God (e.g. Deut. 6: 4); now God is asked to hearken, to listen, to attend to his servants.[23] And the poet continues: 'like the shade of the vine and the fig tree', referring to the consolation prophecy of Micah (4: 4); but here, we hear the perspective of the one who yearns to experience the protective shade of God's 'tabernacle of peace' (a common liturgical phrase), sitting under the vine and the fig tree. The speaker then scolds God as she cries out without a voice: 'With mothers You don't play hide-and-seek'.[24]

The poem ends with a heartfelt invocation—*ayekah* ('Where are you?'). This is yet another reversal of roles. In many places in the Bible, God asks humans where they are—but here the human calls upon God, asking *ayekah*. Indeed, there is a chance that this unanswered call leaves room for hope, since the very act of calling out to him proclaims a fierce belief in God and in his ability to save and protect. The word *ayekah*, when written in unvocalized Hebrew, has the same spelling as the word *eikhah* ('how'), which is also the Hebrew name of the book of Lamentations, 'linking admonition and lamentation' (Kartun-Blum 1999a: 21–2). In a scary and lonely world, as Pinchas-Cohen argues, God is present. Mothers, however, demand God's revelation and intervention, but also fear it, hopeful about and lamenting what is possible on the part of God.

Pinchas-Cohen's 'Petition' resembles Harnik's 'Poems of Attrition' in its refusal to accept reality and in its rejection of the Akedah as an inevitable fate. Still, the tone is very different; Harnik's poem concentrates on her refusal to consent to death, while 'Petition' is a prayer for life. Another major difference is the extra-literary aspect; in the case of Harnik's poem, the reader's foreknowledge of the son's death produces a violent effect, giving the impression that the poem was in vain. Harnik's poems cited in this essay were written in the early 1970s but were published after the Lebanon War (1983). Pinchas-Cohen's 'Petition', in spite of its gloomy feel, leaves room for divine intervention and contains hope that one will behold the redeeming power of a saving God. Her poem leaves the reader with cautious optimism for the renewal of the covenantal relationship with God and the preservation of the life of the child.

Reinterpreting the Akedah

In the Bible, Sarah has no active relationship with God at the time of Abraham's testing; she is the absent mother of the Akedah—silent and silenced. Ironically, centuries later, she acquires a significant presence in relation to the narrative in Genesis and becomes a prominent figure in contemporary literature, that is, in Israeli poetry. Indeed, Sarah emerges as part of a paradigmatic shift expressed by two independent yet related phenomena that stand at the intersection of two Israeli discourses: the figure of Sarah is used to address and challenge Jewish biblical tradition and her persona is invoked to reflect upon reality in modern Israel.

Working to develop the persona of Sarah, modern Israeli poetry adopts a complex stance towards Jewish culture, specifically regarding religion and faith, nationhood and family, collective identity and individual personhood. Abraham is not present in many of these poems as he is not part of the difficult relationship which links the mother, her son, and God. Most poems feature Sarah (or others observing her), and make bold statements not only to reinterpret the biblical text, but also to engage with God, questioning whether there is divine justice and providence in the world. These poems demonstrate multifaceted attitudes towards the biblical narrative; they draw on tradition, reject it, and at the same time pledge allegiance, as it were, to its role in their heritage and their own internal language. It is this sense of ownership that empowers Israeli poets to engage creatively in recasting and moulding their depiction of the Akedah.

At the same time, Israeli poets use Sarah, a mother who must sacrifice her only son, to grapple with broader issues of the contemporary world—the role of mothers and motherhood in the Israeli-Jewish cultural arena. Earlier Israeli poets focus on Abraham or the tragedy of modern-day 'Isaacs' (Feldman 2010; Kartun-Blum 1999b; Shaked 2005). The father–son tension and/or bonding, alluding to a military reality and suitable for the formative years of Israel and its heroic fight for independence, comes to the fore. But changes in perception, emerging from great loss and bereavement, especially with regard to the national need to maintain an active military (Sperber and Chen 2002), drove many poets to turn towards the 'unseeable' in the binding of Isaac; they discovered Sarah and began to focus on her 'absent presence'. With the growing reservation and even opposition to the enormous price exacted by the ongoing military engagement, especially after the Yom Kippur War (1973) and even more so after the first Lebanon War (1982), a change of paradigm occurred. The former willingness to sacrifice one's sons for the national cause gave way to resistance as well as refusal to do so. Artists expressed this shift by placing Sarah, as a mother, at the forefront. Internal familial issues such as abuse, which became better known, led to both the support and attack of the mother, who nurtured her children, but failed to protect them, and herself. She represents the complexities of Israeli culture, underscoring the attributes of longing and pain (Sperber and Chen 2002). The mother figure, whose role is to give life and to nurture, challenges the very concept of an Akedah in order to express the emotions of grief, fear, and guilt.

Yael Guliat, who discusses a subversive kind of memory, calling it 'pre- and counter-commemoration', writes:

> The counter-memory concept evolved from a confrontation with the collective memory, which essentially banishes or represses memory that is personal or that fails to conform with hegemonic group memory. Counter-memory undermines the legitimacy of the historical memory that the collective memory created and strives for symbolic representation in history. (Guilat 2012: 286)

The artistic creativity described here takes part in the larger domain of collective memory and its vicissitudes, mutabilities if you will. A political, ethical, and gendered critique expressed in the poetry I have examined redefines the balance between the characters of the Akedah story, using it to express complex attitudes towards mothers and expectations of motherhood, as influenced by both national and familial concerns. The mother figure, of which Sarah is an archetype, embodies a tremendous paradox. On the one hand, there is the imperative (and impulse) to nurture and preserve life that the ideal mother conjures up. On the other hand, mothers also critique the call to serve and the sacrifice involved in the actualization of a Zionist ideal. Mothers also represent the desire to build a culture that lives by a strong ethic of protecting its children under any circumstances, even from their own parents who might be abusing them.

I have tried in this essay to bring a fresh perspective to an age-old debate about the meaning of the Akedah and the silence of Sarah. The biblical story is a language, a linguistic set of signs, to which each generation applies its own cultural reality and concerns. The Akedah is a salient example of this phenomenon, where the emergence of the role of Sarah illustrates the realignment of these literary 'signs' to construct a useful past for contemporary needs.

Acknowledgements

I thank Professor William Cutter, Rabbi David Arial-Yoel, Rabbi Shelton Donnell, and Rabbi Tamar Duvdevani. I thank the poets too for granting permission to cite their work and for their generous help with the translations.

Notes

1 In the Muslim tradition, the story is told with Ishmael (son of Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's maidservant) as the son to be sacrificed (Qur'an 37: 100–11).

2 In another medieval *midrash*, it is Satan who pretends to be Isaac and it is he who tells Sarah about the binding (*Midrash tanḥuma*, 'Vayera' 23). See also *Sefer hayashar*, 'Vayera'; *Yalkut shimoni*, 98; *Midrash hagadol* 1902: 319.

3 I believe this criticism is intentional. Niehoff (1994) observes that at least in some cases such criticism reflects the subconscious beliefs of the rabbis.

4 There are, however, other presentations of Sarah's response. For example, Romanos, a Christian liturgical poet from the 6th century, composed a hymn on 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', where he reflected on an imaginary objection Sarah would have made, had she been told about the Akedah (Moskhos 1972).

5 This practice is a Lurianic custom dating from the 16th century (Marx 2010: 71–5).

6 An exception to this rule may be the lavish biblical wall-paintings decorating the ancient synagogue of Dura Europos (3rd century, Syria). A tiny figure usually identified as Sarah stands in the doorway of her tent while the Akedah is taking place.

7 Even poems that were composed earlier, such as those by Raya Harnik, were published well after their composition date (see below).

8 For more poems dealing with Sarah in the Akedah, see Aharony 2007: 166–86; Feldman 2010: 277–8; Jacobson 1997: 121–3.

9 Like any possible grouping, this one is somewhat technical, but I believe that it may be helpful. For a different typology, see Aharony 2007.

10 Here, I consider Israeli poetry. However, to understand Sarah's role in the Akedah better in the context of contemporary discourse, one must also address the role and depiction of Sarah in theological writings (e.g. Berman 1997; Suskin-Ostriker 1993; Trible 1999; Zierler 2005); in feminist theory, modern Midrash and prose (e.g. Feldman 2004; Lubitz 2009; McNaughton 1996; Valdan 2009; Yanow 1994); theatre (Elion-Israeli 2009: 159–74); and visual arts (Sperber and Chen 2002).

11 The phrase 'shouldered her coffin' is also reminiscent of the Levites carrying the Ark (Num. 7: 9); in Hebrew, the word for both Ark and coffin is *aron*.

12 The word *kenaf* can also mean the hem of the angels' garment. Kissing the hem of a garment is an act of utmost respect in the Bible (e.g. 1 Sam. 24: 4, 11).

13 The Hebrew word *yamtsi'u* can mean 'they shall find' or 'provide' or 'offer' in rabbinic Hebrew, but in modern Hebrew it means 'invent' or 'fabricate'. The poet seems to play with all of these meanings.

14 Invoking angels is a common practice in Jewish tradition, and is sometimes deemed to be more efficacious than calling upon the Divine. Throughout the ages we encounter rabbinic objections to this practice (e.g. JT *Ber.* 9: 1, 13*a*).

15 The best-known example is Aharon Ze'ev's poem 'We Carry Torches', in which it says, alluding to the miracle of Hanukah: 'A miracle never happened to us | No vessel of oil did we find' (Zion and Spectre 2000: 14). Referring to the Zionist project, it claims that we have done it all by ourselves, without divine intervention.

16 *Mezuzat hasha'ar* can also be translated as *mezuzah*, a talisman or object on the doorpost rather than the doorpost itself.

17 *Eshnav* can also be translated as 'window' but in this context it seems to allude to *eshnav yeri* (a loophole, a small hole through which one shoots a gun).

18 Maintaining that mothers have the ability (and obligation) to struggle effectively for peace and reconciliation is a common argument. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, a Christian theologian, argues in *Motherhood as Metaphor* (2013) that men should adopt maternal instincts in order to make the world more peaceful.

19 The last word in the poem, *benafshenu*, can be translated in more than one way: it can mean that our lives are dependent on the child. I would like to thank the author of the poem for his help with this translation.

20 Nahmanides (13th century, Spain) was the first to argue that Abraham and Sarah's conduct towards Hagar resulted in punishment. According to him, the punishment was enslavement in Egypt (Nahmanides on Gen. 16: 6).

21 Professor of folklore Galit Hasan-Rokem addresses breastfeeding in her analysis of the rabbinic depictions of the destruction of the Temple, stating that the 'direct bodily orality replaces the orality shaped by culture' (Hasan-Rokem 2000: 116–17).

22 The bringing together of the concepts of breastfeeding and sacrifice, of milk and blood, is found in classical Midrash (see *Lamentations Rabbah* 1: 50; BT *Git*. 57*b*).

23 Eliaz Cohen offers a similar interpretation in his poem 'Shema adonai' (Hear O Eternal), in which he turns the biblical call to Israel to listen (Deut. 6: 4), which became the core of the Shema liturgy, into an invocation to God to hearken to his people (Cohen 2004: 7).

24 This can also be read as a warning to the child, but I think that such a reading misses the strong feeling expressed towards God.

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