

There is a midrash that tells about the receiving of the Torah and how the people pledged their children for it. The Torah was a great gift; something had to be given in return. The Jewish people pledged to teach their children Torah so that they could know about and love G-d. The first link of Judaism took place between G-d, Avraham, and his son Isaac.

And it came to pass...that G-d did test Avraham, and said to him, Avraham: and he said, Here I am! And he said, Take now thy son, thy only son Yizhaq, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriyya; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

Genesis 22:1-2

When they arrived at the base of the mountain,

Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Yizhaq his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and the knife; and they went both of them together. And Yizhaq spoke to Avraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here I am, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Avraham said, My son, G-d will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. Genesis 22: 6-8

There is a paradigm that is set up in this passage that is sealed with the story of the Akedah. Isaac speaks to Avraham, his father, and Avraham speaks back to him. No other passage of the Chumash contains this situation where a dialogue takes place between father and son. (Isaac speaks to his son Jacob, and Jacob responds, not as himself, but as his brother Esau.)

Avraham almost sacrificed Isaac out of loyalty to

G-d, but an angel stopped Avraham, and G-d spoke saying:

By myself have I sworn,...because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thy only son: that I will exceedingly bless thee, and I will exceedingly multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore;

Genesis 22:16-17

G-d, here, pledges to look after Avraham and his descendants. The dialogue, the exchange of words that take place between Avraham and Isaac are an indication that something of great significance is about to take place. From the results of this test, the inheritance of the Jewish people took root. Isaac came out of the ordeal alive and became the covenantal link in the continuation of Avraham's offspring. The lack of dialogue between father and son in the bible lets us know that the Chumash supplies our link to G-d. A parent needs to communicate with his child; the bible is, for the Jewish people, that communication.

The short dialogue between Avraham and Isaac, to one who has read the chumash as a whole, precludes the closing details of the covenant between G-d and Avraham. It creates an unseverable bond and fate between the child and the torah. Thus when the torah is rejected by a generation so are its children.

In the book of Maccabees, we see an account of a mother and her seven sons. The Babylonian king, Antiochus, tries to force each son to break a law of the covenant by eating pork; each son gives up his physical existence in order not to break the commandment. They place themselves one after another as if on a voluntary altar to be offered up to G-d.

One son, unafraid, says to the king:

What do you expect to learn from questioning us?  
We are ready to die rather than violate the laws of  
our forefathers.           2 Maccabees 7:2

His upholding of the "laws of our forefathers" gives his brothers further resolution that they too shall not go against the law. Antiochus believes that he can steer them away from covenantal

law through force and violence. But the other sons remain with the covenant. At a time when other peoples were worshipping idols, Antiochus could not see how people would not abandon their god at such a threat of life. But G-d is not carved stone; He is not an image that can be moved or broken as an idol may be. G-d is everlasting and it was to [t]His [everlasting] covenant [with G-d] that the sons bound themselves. They chose an everlasting spiritual existence, thinking nothing of the physical pain they would endure to reach that existence.

The seven sons of the woman may be seen as representing various generations of the people Israel. The youngest son has seen each of his brothers executed before his eyes. He has looked upon their suffering, but does not see it as horrible because each has died with his soul intact. Each has gone out of the world of man to a pure and everlasting existence with Hashem. The mother has brought her sons up in the ways of the Lord according to the covenant of G-d's Torah, and it is proclaiming this covenant that her sons leave the world.

In the Crusade Chronicles, the people are cognizant of the oncoming crusaders and of their intents. Like the mother and her seven sons, they cling to the covenant going so far as to take the lives of their own children rather than have them be lost to the eternal covenant.

Were there ever so many sacrifices like these from the days of Adam? Were there ever a thousand one hundred sacrifices on one day, all of them, like the sacrifice of Isaac the son of Abraham?

For one the world shook, when he was offered up on Mount Moriah, as is said: "Hark! The angels cried aloud!" The heavens darkened. What has been done

[this time]? "Why did the heavens not darken? Why did the stars not withdraw their brightness?"...and light--"why did they not darken in their cloud cover," when one thousand one hundred holy souls were killed and slaughtered on one day, on the third day of Sivan. [The Crusade Chronicle of Solomon Bar Simson; Anth p. 104]

A thousand years before, a mother was martyred with her seven sons. Close to a thousand years after the crusades, one third of the Jewish nation was wiped out in the Holocaust. An entire generation would be cut down not merely one community. Yet, the sense of the Jewish collective forces us to acknowledge the elements of catastrophe and survival in both.

At the time of Czarist Russia, Jewish boys were being taken away to serve in the army. The enlistment period of twenty-five years would frighten any child and his family. After that amount of time, could a Jewish boy who was taken away at five or six be able to retain his Jewish identity?

There were at least two views of Jews concerning the drafting of children. One view mourns the injustice of the draft as well as the injustice perpetrated amongst the Jews themselves. Whose children shall be chosen for the draft is the theme of the song "The Streets Flow with Our Tears" (Songs of the Cantonist Era, Anth p. 153).

The streets flow with our tears  
You can bathe in the blood of children dear.

O what a terrible calamity!  
Will there ever be a remedy

Little children are torn from their lessons  
And pressed into coats with soldiers' buttons.

Our rabbis, our bigshots are in cahoots  
Teaching our children to be recruits.

Zushe Rakover has seven healthy sons  
Not one will be forced to carry a gun.

But widow Leah's only kid will be  
A scapegoat for the kahal's treachery.

It's a mitzvah to round up the simple folk:  
Who cares if they're swaddled in army cloaks.

But lousy little Lord Fauntleroy  
Are never taken as one of the boys!

The other view, presented in "O Merciful Father" centers around G-d and contains an aura of acquiescence to the traditional way of life. [See Uri Zvi Greenberg's work, "The Sidelock Jews" p. 608]

O, merciful Father who dwells in heaven,  
You're the protector of all the orphans!

Better to study Bible and Rashi  
than to eat the soldiers' mush.

Better to lie on a Study House bench  
than to make a friend in a trench.

Better to wear a tallis and kitl  
than to sport a sword around your middle.

Better to eat hard doughy kneydlakh  
than to be beaten in a barracks.

Better to study Gemora for years  
than to shed so many tears.

Better to sweat over talmudic codes  
than to stand guard for hours in the cold.

[ Last stanza censored.]

[Anth p. 155]

During the Holocaust, children are seen as most precious. They represent joy, anguish, and hope. When times look especially bad, we turn to our children as a sort of comfort. For the most part, they have never been exposed to the evils of the world, yet

when we wish to show a dire situation, showing the vanquished condition of the children affects us greatly.

The first to perish were the children, abandoned orphans,  
The world's best, the bleak earth's brightest.  
These children from the orphanages might have been our comfort.  
From these sad, mute, bleak faces our new dawn might have risen.

At the end of the winter of forty-two I was in such a place.  
I saw children just brought in from the street. I hid in a corner  
And saw a two-year-old girl in the lap of a teacher--  
Thin, deathly pale and with such grave eyes.

I watched the two-year-old grandmother,  
The tiny Jewish girl, a hundred years old in her seriousness and  
grief./  
What her grandmother could not dream she had seen in reality.

[Song of the Murdered Jewish People - Yitzhak  
Katznelson, The First Ones; Anth p. 913]

Strangely enough, even during the Holocaust there are signs of  
struggling for faith, and hope, and survival.

1 Silence, and a stary night  
Frost crackling, fine as sand.  
Remember how I taught you  
To hold a gun in your hand"

2 In fur jacket and beret,  
Clutching a hand grenade,  
A girl whose skin is velvet  
Ambushes a cavalcade.

3 Aim, fire, shoot--and hit!  
She, with her pistol small,  
Halts an autoful,  
Arms and all!

4 Morning, emerging from the wood,  
In her hair, a snow carnation.  
Proud of her small victory  
For the new, free generation!

["Silence, and a Starry Night"  
Hirsh Glik, Anth p. 844]

The works cited thus far have contained descriptions of children and their places in the Jewish response to catastrophe. Yet, for portrayls about catastrophe, one may find that the works overly-simplify the destruction that occurred, especially in the Holocaust. In Genesis, (15:5), G-d said to Avraham:

Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if thou be able to number them: and he said to him, So shall thy seed be.

G-d told Avraham to look to the sky, and to try to count the stars. As the stars were infinite in number and i.e. not able to be counted-- so would Avraham's descendants be numerous. Much star imagery appears in Holocaust literature where children are included. Perhaps star imagery was used specifically to denote children.

Zalmen Gradowski, in his "Chronicle of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando," tells about the arrival of a transport of Czechoslovakian Jews and how they are lead from transport trucks to their deaths in the gas chambers. "Mothers passed with small children in arms; others were led by the hands of their little ones. They kissed their children--a mother's heart cannot be bound--kissed them all along the way. Sisters walked arm-in-arm, clinging together, wanting to face death together (Anth 943-4)." Parents and their children, old and young, healthy and sick went to their deaths together in the gas chambers.

One thing bound these people together, this people that was so deviously slaughtered: their Jewishness. In past ages they

had also suffered. Their numbers had also been lessened. But in the concentration camps of the Nazis, they were liquidated. The Nazis' goal was to eliminate a people. Countries of the world did not threaten to take action against Hitler's plan to kill the Jews. In the end, they suffered too.

As the ashes and smoke of the crematoria filled the sky, the stars were blotted out from sight. The souls of the people of Am Yisrael were in the smoke and in the ash. Their souls took away the stars that were in the sky.

And the last of the seven sons watched.

He saw his brothers tortured before him.  
He saw them whipped and flayed.

He saw their tormentor trying to make them forgo the commandments of the holy Hashem  
Trying to make them deny that they were created in G-d's image

He saw the hatred in the eyes of the oppressors and he did not understand them.

But he did understand Hashem  
and he went to him.  
And so the seventh son, went with the rest of his brothers  
to take his position in the stars of the sky.