

10 The hidden God of the Jews: Hegel, Reb Nachman, and the aqedah

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Famously, Georg Hegel judged Judaism badly for worshipping a God hidden for eternity in God's utter transcendence.¹ In his early writings, especially in "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," and in the 1821 version of *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel was wholly negative about Judaism. Later, Hegel was willing at least to see Judaism, with its inherent defects, as a necessary stage to something higher – Christianity. Hegel discredited Judaism for believing in what Hegel defines in his *Science of Logic* as a "bad" or "spurious" infinity, namely an infinity "posited over *against* the finite." This is in contrast to an infinity that "finitizes" itself, one that self-differentiates to make manifest a world that is included within its own self.² The key to understanding Judaism, for Hegel, is its teaching of creation from nothing by a "wholly other" God who stands altogether *above* and has power *over* the natural order. With any of God's doings with the world, always God remains infinitely *disconnected* from it. Thus, Hegel calls Judaism a religion "of sublimity," which believes in a God who is "sublime," but not, by any means, what we might call a "sublime religion."

Because of the transcendent otherness of God for her, the Jew in her finiteness is alienated from God. But that is not all, for since the Jew's true essence is included in the Divine, yet the Jew believes the divine is forever hidden away from her, the Jew is alienated from her own true essence. God is an infinite negativity accompanied by human self-negation. The Jew must perceive herself as infinitely worthless.

Judaism becomes a religion striving for reconciliation with the hidden God. The defining concept of Judaism, then, is *dependence upon God*, and its operational principle is "command," externally imposed by a powerful master upon the slave, who must obey. The Jew, in obeying the commandments, shapes a relationship of *fear* with God from whom she is alienated. For Hegel, a hidden God can be approached only with fear. Thus, the Jews perform useless, meaningless acts without end, in an attempt to do God's will, as slaves, and thereby

¹ My understanding of Hegel on Judaism has benefitted from Yovel (1976).

² See Hegel (1984, vol. 1, 302–8).

aim to achieve reconciliation.³ For Hegel, alas, no amount of obedience to the Divine master or even compensatory self-affirmation as a “chosen people” can succeed in overcoming the essential ontological divide Judaism posits between transcendent creator and finite creature. The unfortunate Jews believe in “an infinite power set over against themselves [that] they could never conquer.”⁴

The result is a persistent pain and unhappiness at the very heart of Jewish religious practice, a pain of frustration and alienation. But the obstinate Jews refuse to acknowledge the true source of their estrangement: their mistaken belief in an eternally hidden God. Judaism survives, according to Hegel, only by Jews self-deceptively blaming the absence of reconciliation on their sinfulness, a sinfulness never to be overcome, rather than on their underdeveloped concept of God.

A God who, in Hegel's words, “validates the moment of finitude within itself” is a “good” or “genuine” infinity. Hegel came to see Protestant Christianity as the absolute religion, a breakthrough from the Jewish God to a genuinely infinite God. Protestant Christianity presents in a pictorial way what Hegel's own philosophy of the Spirit and the genuinely infinite presents in a conceptual way. Christianity is the *consummate* religion because it teaches that the infinite enters into human finitude in the incarnation and suffers death, the ultimate mark of finitude. This synthesis is then sealed with the resurrection, signifying for Hegel the presence of the Divine within the community. Thus does Christianity portray the *genuine* infinite achieving self-consciousness within the finite. And this recognition constitutes, finally, true reconciliation between the person and God. The God of Christianity renders the divine–human incommensurability commensurate. Thus in Christianity fall away the minutiae of Jewish law and come love and the joy of self-reconciliation within the divine substance of reality.

Various Jewish thinkers have been concerned to defend Judaism from Hegel's attacks. These replies have been almost exclusively of two sorts. Some, such as Emile Fackenheim (1918–2003), deny the alleged Hegelian depraved consequences of believing in the Jewish God. So, Fackenheim derided Hegel for presenting a “caricature” of Judaism, for ignoring the massive postbiblical, rabbinic sources in Judaism, and for Hegel's arbitrary use of biblical sources to make the Jewish religion look bad.⁵ Others met Hegel on his own turf, outflanking Hegel's metaphysics. So, Nachman Krochmal (1785–1840), an early Jewish Hegelian, trying to beat Hegel at his own game, denies *ex nihilo* creation to be a dogma of Judaism. Krochmal makes much of the biblical commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), who Krochmal interprets as understanding creation being from preexistent matter. Krochmal proclaims

³ See Hegel (1948a, 68). ⁴ Hegel (1948b, 199).

⁵ Fackenheim (1973, 79–169).

there is no reality other than God and that all is derived from God's essence.⁶ Furthermore, Krochmal rejects Hegel's denouncing the particularity of the Jews, a particularity, Hegel averred, emanating from their defective God concept. The Jews (yes!) are the true carriers of absolute universality. The other nations are the real particularistic ones!⁷

Another metaphysical view that stands in contrast to Hegel is the pantheistic theology of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935). R. Kook rejected the God who is an object over against the world in favor of a God who has two facets, one a static perfection, and one a dynamic perfection. The static perfection is beyond the world, while the world itself exists *within* God, and its evolving to perfection is God's own dynamic "perfecting." Thus is Hegel's attribution to Judaism of a wholly, transcendent, hidden God undercut.⁸

Reb Nachman of Breslov

One Jewish figure who openly and consciously embraced an inaccessible, hidden God of the sort Hegel ascribed to Judaism was Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810), or simply, "Reb Nachman." A contemporary of Hegel who most likely never heard of him, and certainly never read Hegel, Reb Nachman was a great-grandson of the founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal-Shem Tov (1698–1760), and gained a Hasidic following that continues until this day. Reb Nachman was a charismatic teacher whose teachings were uniquely intriguing and novel. Reb Nachman taught explicitly that God was utterly and irrevocably hidden. But rather than react to this in fear and self-deception, as Hegel would have it, Reb Nachman's religious consciousness focuses on *yearning* for God, a yearning Sisyphian in its hopelessness of ever having that for which it yearns.

The hiddenness of God comes to the fore in Reb Nachman's writings,⁹ particularly in a story he once told, "The Humble King and the Wise Man." The story begins as follows:

Once there was a king who had a wise man. The king said to the wise man: "There is a certain king who designates himself 'a mighty hero,' 'a man of truth,' and 'a humble person.' As to his might, I know that he is mighty ... But why he designates himself 'a man of truth' and 'a humble person,' this I do not know. And I want you to fetch me the portrait of that king."

⁶ For Krachmal on Hegel and the Jews, see Harris (1991).

⁷ See Avineri (1984, 60).

⁸ For R. Kook see Mirsky (2014). R. Kook does not present his pantheism as a retort to Hegel, but there is reason to believe that he had Hegel, among others, in mind in his metaphysical writings.

⁹ All the writings we have of Reb Nachman were recorded by his students and followers. "Reb Nachman" refers to those teachings written down in his name.

Ordinarily, the king in Reb Nachman's stories is God. So, the king who sends the wise man is God. But then we must suppose that the king to whom the wise man is sent is also God. So, it must be God who sends the wise man to discover the true nature of God.

The story continues:

Among all countries there is one country that includes all countries, and in that country there is one city that includes all cities of the whole country that includes all countries. In that city is a house that includes all the houses of the city that includes all the cities of the country that includes all countries. And there is a man who includes everybody from the house, etc. And there is someone there who performs all the jests and jokes of the country.

What is this mysterious place to which the wise man is sent? In a gloss to our story we are told that the place to which the wise man is sent is Zion. A disciple of Reb Nachman explains this as follows:

Perhaps this is what is meant in the story: That there is a country containing all countries; this is the encompassing holiness of the Land of Israel. And in that country there is a city that contains all cities in that country, and that is Zion and Jerusalem. And in that city there is a house that contains all houses in the city, and that is the Holy Temple.

We will return to this curious reference. The story now continues:

[The wise man] understood through the jokes that the country was full of lies from beginning to end because he saw how they were making fun, how they deceived and misled people in commerce, and how, when he turned for justice to the magistrate, everyone there lied and accepted bribery. He went to the higher court, and there, too, everything was a lie and in jest they faked all those things.

The wise man understood through that laughter that the whole country was full of lies and deceit, and there was no truth in it. He went and traded in the country and he let himself be cheated in commerce. He went to trial in court and he saw that they were all full of lies and bribery. On this day he bribed them, and on the next they did not recognize him. He went to the higher court, and there, too, everything was a lie, until he reached the senate and they, too, were full of lies and bribery. Finally he came to the king himself.

When he came to the king he stated: "Over whom are you king? For the country is full of lies, all of it, from beginning to end, and there is no truth in it!" He started telling all the lies of the country. The king bent his ears toward the curtain to hear his words, because he was amazed that there was a man who knew all the lies of the country . . .

That wise man concluded: "And one could say that the king, too, is like them, that he loves deceit like the country. But from this I see how you are 'a man of truth.' You are far from them, since you cannot stand the lies of the country." He started praising the king very much. The king was very humble, and his greatness lay in his humility. And this is the way of the humble person: The more one praises and exalts him, the smaller, and humbler he becomes. Because of the greatness of the praise with which the wise man praised and exalted the king, the king became very humble and small, till he became nothing at all.

At this point, when the king had become nothing at all, the moment arrives when the wise man could “see” the king and fulfill his mission:

And the king could not restrain himself, but cast away the curtain, to see the wise man: “Who is it who knows and understands all this?” And his face was revealed. The wise man saw him and painted his portrait and he brought it to his king.¹⁰

The wise man accomplished his mission. He has discovered that the king is “a man of truth.” This was on account of the king’s utter *remoteness* from the corrupt, lying country.

The wise man also discovered the king’s “humility.” The more the wise man praised the king, the “smaller” and “humbler” the king became. This seems to signify a unique interpretation by R. Nachman of the Talmudic saying of Rabbi Yochanan, that wherever we find a reference to God’s mightiness, we find as well a reference to God’s humility (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, 31a). In the Talmud, the sign of God’s humility is that God cares personally for the down-trodden, the widows, the orphans, and the defeated, despite his mighty, exalted position. Here, the king is far from the burning world and all of its evil. For Reb Nachman, the “humility” of the king starts in the fact that our praise of his greatness does not begin to come even close to what God is. So, in thinking our praise appropriate, we make God small. The more a person praises God, the more a person must be made to realize that all of that praise does not even begin to apply to God. No amount of our praising God can bring us any closer to God than we were previously. The more the wise man praised the king, the more “wholly other” was the king, until the king became “nothing at all.” It was then that the wise man was truly able to “see” the king for what he was. The portrait that the wise man brought back to the king was an *empty* portrait.

As we noted, the king has sent the wise man to Jerusalem to the Holy Temple. According to the Talmud, the entire world was created from the site of the Temple in Jerusalem (Yomah 54b). So, every place in the world is included in the Temple site. And Midrash Tanchumah tells us that: “The Land of Israel sits in the center of the world, Jerusalem in the center of the Land of Israel, and the Temple in the center of Jerusalem” (Kedoshim, 10; all translations from rabbinic literature are mine). Thus, the Holy Temple is the place to where the wise man goes. So, the jokester must be the High Priest. Can there be any comedy in the solemn service of sacrificing animals on the altar of the Lord? The Reb Nachman scholar Zvi Mark interprets the intended comedy at the Holy Temple as follows:

In the Temple, people give presents to the sublime Infinite God, atone before Him with a meal offering of fine flour, see in the smell of the incense the smell of His being pleased, and the Levites sing to Him to make his time pass pleasantly. Is there a greater comedy

¹⁰ This translation can be found in Band (1978).

than that? ... The divine comedy describes God, the "Infinite," as changing his mind because of the bribe of a calf!

The comedy played out in the Holy Temple signifies for Reb Nachman at its most intense the futility of *all* religious practice to an eternally hidden God. And so Reb Nachman writes elsewhere:

I do not know who can say that he serves God, because of God's greatness. Someone who knows even a little of His greatness I don't know how he can say that he serves God. However, the important thing is the will, that one's will be strong and unrelenting always to come close to God ... The main thing is the will and yearning, that he shall always yearn for Him. And in this way to pray, study, and perform the commandments. And in truth, according to His greatness all of these services are nothing, but everything is "as though," for it is all just a joke, compared to His greatness.

God is so hidden in His greatness that nothing we do could possibly count as "serving God." As Hegel has told the Jews, the gap between God and us is so vast that to suppose we can bridge the gap between God and us is absurd. And so, for Reb Nachman, the important thing is to yearn for this God, a yearning that we know will never be fulfilled, because God is too hidden for that. So the yearning becomes the sole authentic means of our *living* God's hiddenness.

One of Reb Nachman's disciples wrote this about his master:

Our teacher said that the main thing is the will, to yearn always with a craving and a strong desire to fulfill His commandments. And thereby we study [Torah] *as though* we were studying, and pray *as though* we were praying, and perform the commandments *as though* we were performing the commandments.

The main thing for Reb Nachman is the yearning, the craving for God; to perform the commandments with utter devotion while aware that this has no power to bring us closer to God is *the only way to do justice both to our yearning and to God's utter transcendence*.

The more seriously one performs the ritual, knowing it is futile, the more one attests to the eternal hiddenness of God. This is because one thereby proclaims that no matter *how* seriously and meticulously one performs the minute details of the ritual, *it is all futile!* And that just shows the infinite inaccessibility of God.

We yearn, mind you, not to *show* God how great God is. We yearn for God, because we yearn for God. And, when one's focus is entirely on one's yearning for God with a purity of heart, there is no place and time for self-reflection, and, so, no place and time to observe one's self as without worth. For Reb Nachman, yearning comes in place of Hegel's self-negation.

Reb Nachman yearns for the hidden God knowing well that his yearning can never find realization. Reb Nachman yearns for the impossible over and over again, knowing it is impossible, and so, like Sisyphus, is doomed to never progress. But, again like Sisyphus, progress is not the point. Here, the point is to yearn for God, over and over again.

It is instructive to compare and contrast this impossible yearning to the formation of belief in the Absolute Paradox – the absurd belief that God became man – in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, the Christian, does not believe in the essential hiddenness of God, and also believes that in a Leap of Faith human beings can come to believe that the infinite God became finite. On the one hand, for Kierkegaard the Leap of Faith involves a “passionate decision” of will, a decision made in individual freedom. On the other hand, “Faith is not an act of the will.”¹¹ Faith is a gift of God. Kierkegaard scholars have struggled over how it is that for Kierkegaard it is true *both* that a person gets faith by his decision *and* that it is God who grants that belief in divine grace. How can these two contradictory requirements go together? I have argued elsewhere that understanding the Leap of Faith depends on the distinction between *achievement* and *task* verbs.¹² In using an *achievement* verb one asserts that an appropriate, desired outcome is caused to occur, over and above the undertaken task denoted by the verb. Achievement verbs are for this reason also called “success verbs.” Examples of achievement verbs are “cure,” “win,” “cheat,” “prove,” and “conceal.” Contrasted with achievement or success verbs are task verbs. With a *task* verb there is no implication of success in any aim of the task, only reference to performance of the task denoted by the verb. An example of a task verb is “hunt.” When I hunt, my purpose is to succeed in capturing or killing an animal. Whether or not I succeed in doing that, I will have “hunted” in any case.

Some verbs can be used both as achievement verbs and task verbs. Take the sentence, “At 8:00 I went to work.” “Went to” here can have an achievement sense, in which it will imply not only that I left my home at 8:00, but that I succeeded in arriving to work after leaving home. Such would be the case in a sentence like, “At 8:00 I went to work, and at 6:00 I came home.” “Went to,” however, also can carry a task sense, as when I say, “At 8:00 I went to work, but I never made it to the office because I fell sick on the way and instead went to the doctor.” “I went to work,” here, refers to nothing more than the going in the direction of where I work, not to having gotten to work. In both cases, it is true that I “went to” work at the mentioned time, but the meaning of the verb in each case is different.

My proposal is that for Kierkegaard, without the person willing faith *into existence*, faith would not come into existence. Yet, the existence of faith is entirely due to an act of grace. There is no contradiction between these, because of the two senses, achievement and task senses, possible in the statement, “S wills faith into existence.” In the success sense, “I will faith into existence” implies that I execute an act of will, which act succeeds to bring my faith into

¹¹ Kierkegaard (1972, 77).

¹² See Gellman (2013). For the distinction between achievement and task verbs, see Ryle (1963).

existence. Faith comes into existence, and does so as a result of my willing causing it to exist. In the task sense, on the other hand, "I will faith into existence" implies only that I perform the task in question. For my part I do the willing, but this time without implying success in actually bringing faith into existence. In this sense, my willing faith into existence (not merely my *wanting* to have faith, which is a different matter entirely) is a task term. "I will faith into existence" is like "At 8:00 I went to work," in "At 8:00 I went to work, but never made it to the office." I can will faith into existence, in the task sense, but will never succeed in having Faith come into existence as a result. Nobody can get faith by willing it into existence.

I propose that for Kierkegaard for faith to come into existence, *I must will it into existence*. However, Kierkegaard *knows* that this is impossible, since nobody can succeed in bringing faith into existence by simply willing it into existence. So in what sense must I "will faith into existence"? In the *task* sense only. I perform the task of willing faith into existence, knowing that nobody could possibly succeed in thereby bringing faith to be. The task itself is absurd, because doomed to failure. Nevertheless, I do it in the only way such an absurd act can be done: with great passion.

I do this knowing that my willing will achieve success only if God's grace will bring its success. In willing faith, my hope is that God will acknowledge my absurd willing and because of it will grant me faith as a gift. When the Leap transpires, it is the person who has *willed* it ("taskly") into existence but it is God who has made it to be. This is how it is possible for the Leap of Faith to include human willing it to be, while it is God who brings faith to be by a miracle of divine grace. I take Kierkegaard to be summarizing this position in the following journal entry of 1849: "Thus the absurd, or acting by virtue of the absurd, is acting in faith, trusting in God I ... turn to God in prayer saying: 'This is what I am doing; bless it, then; I cannot do otherwise.'" ¹³

Reb Nachman and Kierkegaard, respectively, perform tasks that each knows in principle can never be successful. Reb Nachman yearns for a God he acknowledges to be forever inaccessible, and Kierkegaard wills faith into existence, knowing that nobody can make faith come into existence by willing it to be. To each, their absurd task lies at the very heart of their religious life. Each says – "I cannot do otherwise."

Yet, there is a deep difference dividing these two. While Kierkegaard hopes that God will complete his task, Reb Nachman has no such hope. The vivid difference between Kierkegaard and Reb Nachman is that Kierkegaard recognizes the possibility of God completing the task, while for Reb Nachman the hidden God will never satisfy the yearning. The leap of Reb Nachman to God – or of God to Reb Nachman – will never take place.

¹³ Cappelørn et al. (2011, 250).

Reb Nachman and the *aqedah*

Reb Nachman's stories have allegorical import, especially pointing to the patriarchs. I believe that our story, perhaps among other themes, is signaling Reb Nachman's understanding of Abraham at the *aqedah* (the binding of Isaac). The wise man is Abraham, and it is to the *aqedah* that Abraham is being sent. Abraham will be the first person in history to learn of the emptiness of the divine portrait; the *aqedah* turns out to be that very moment when it becomes manifest that God is forever a hidden God.

If I am right, then the interpretation I am about to give of the *aqedah* stands out from a background of Jewish and Christian commentaries that endeavor to style the God of the *aqedah* as transparent, rather than hidden, understandable rather than inexplicable. For on the interpretation I am going to present from Reb Nachman, the very purpose of the *aqedah* was to make known the irretrievable hiddenness of God.

God can hide in two ways. One way for God to hide is for God to be inaccessible. God is nowhere to be found. A second way for God to hide is for God to appear right before my eyes, to speak to me, yet be so inscrutable, so indecipherable, that God remains achingly hidden. In the first, I might (contra Reb Nachman) hold out hope that I might yet find God. This hiddenness is a "hiding of the Face," as in Isaiah 8:17, "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him." In the second kind of hiddenness, however, my hope is shattered. For there, after having shown His face, God remains so incomprehensible, so shrouded in obscurity, that God might as well have remained hidden. God's appearing was for naught. It's almost as though God is mocking the very idea of my *ever* having seen or ever *going* to see beyond God's stone face. God appears alright, but what I see is only "Clouds and thick darkness" (Psalms 97:2).

The *aqedah*, on its face, threatens a profound hiddenness of God, of the second type. God, who has promised Abraham that a great nation will proceed from Isaac, now tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God is here painfully unfathomable, His appearance eclipsed by His own words. Can God ever be trusted to be revealing His true self?

In face of such hopeless hiddenness, several Jewish commentators have tried to turn the God of the *aqedah* into a transparent God, a God whose command to Abraham to kill Isaac is comprehensible, understandable, and even reasonable, even moral. God comes out of hiding with these commentators to bring back hope.

The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b (see also Genesis Rabbah, ch. 55), has Satan come to God and complain: "After Isaac was born Abraham did not bring even a bird for a sacrifice. Abraham does everything for his son and nothing for God." God answers "This is not so, and to prove it if I tell him to sacrifice his son, you will see that he will do it."

In *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (ch. 7) the angels come to God complaining that Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech. Abraham is not faithful to the divine promise. He does not believe in God's promise for the land. So he is making deals with human kings. God says to them, "I gave him a son at 100 years. If he will sacrifice him, then I will know that he trusts my promises and you are not right."

In each of these, we are made to understand why God tested Abraham, in such a way that God comes out of hiding. God becomes transparent. In the Middle Ages, Maimonides brings God out of hiding by showing the need of the *aqedah* in teaching truths for the ages, again in ways that uncover God's hiding place.

One of these notions consists in our being informed of the limit of *love* for God, may He be exalted, and *fear* of Him – that is, up to what limit they must reach. In this story Abraham was ordered to do something that bears no comparison either with sacrifice of property or with sacrifice of life. In truth it is the most extraordinary thing that could happen in the world.

The second notion consists in making known to us the fact that the prophets consider as true that which comes to them from God in a prophetic revelation ... Accordingly [scripture] wished to make it known to us that all that is seen by a prophet in a *vision of prophecy* is, in the opinion of the prophet, a certain truth, that the prophet has no doubts in any way concerning anything in it.¹⁴

In Christianity, the construal of the *aqedah* as a prefiguration of the crucifixion makes of the *aqedah* a stage on the way to God *coming out of hiding*. The *aqedah* was a *halted* version of the Christ event, preparing the way for God manifest on earth. Whereas Abraham was only *willing* to sacrifice his son, God really *did* sacrifice his son, on the cross. Among other apparent allusions in the New Testament to the *aqedah* as prefiguration, Jesus is God's "beloved son" (Mark 1:11, Matt. 3:17, Luke 3:22, 2 Peter 1:17). The Greek term for "beloved" is the same word the Septuagint uses in Genesis 22 to refer to Isaac.¹⁵ And John portrays Jesus as "bound" during the Passion (John 18: 12, 24), just as Isaac was bound at his sacrifice.¹⁶

A second theme in the New Testament is of Isaac as a prefiguration of the resurrection of Jesus. The clearest instance of this is Hebrews 11:17–19: "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure." Here, Abraham's faith is his belief that God will bring Isaac back to life after Abraham has

¹⁴ Maimonides (1963, 2:24, pp. 500–1).

¹⁵ See Levenson (1993, 200).

¹⁶ For these and further allusions in the NT to the *aqedah* as a prefiguration of the crucifixion, see Wood (1968) and Vermes (1973).

committed the sacrifice, just as God was to bring Jesus to life after the crucifixion. The “resurrection” of Isaac is to be realized in Jesus. In the words “in a figure,” we might see a reference to Isaac as portending the resurrection of Jesus. In these traditional Christian themes, in retrospect, at the *aqedah* God was starting to come out of hiding, into the light of day. God’s hiddenness in incomprehensibility was a mere facade of the true revealing of God in Jesus.

Eleonore Stump draws God out of hiddenness, once more, at the *aqedah* in her extraordinary book on biblical narratives and suffering.¹⁷ There, Stump presents an interpretation of the *aqedah* she describes as “an apparently similar interpretation” to Hebrews 11:17–19, involving Abraham’s conviction that although he goes through with the deed, God will give him Isaac back. Distinctively, Stump understands the *aqedah* in the context of its setting within Genesis. In particular, Stump sees a close, integral connection between the *aqedah* and Abraham’s previous expulsion of Ishmael to the desert from Abraham’s home. The crucial verses for the *aqedah* for Stump in the Ishmael story are when Sarah asks Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael because of Ishmael’s bad influence on Isaac. Abraham does not like the idea, until God tells Abraham that he should heed Sarah and not worry for Ishmael, because God will save Ishmael and make of him a nation in his own right, just like Isaac. Abraham listens to God and expels Hagar and Ishmael into the desert.

Stump astutely asks what Abraham’s motivation might have been when sending out Ishmael. There were two possibilities. One was that Abraham himself did not want to do this. However, he was trusting in God when God said Ishmael would survive and be the progenitor of an entire nation. So he did the deed in full faith in God’s word. Then Abraham would have had a holy motivation. The other possibility was that Abraham, given God’s command, now had a chance to get rid of a bad kid, as Sarah had sized Ishmael up. Abraham could tell himself that, after all, God had told him to do this. On this alternative Abraham would be using God’s command and promise as a cover for less than noble motives.

For Stump, the Ishmael story is the first *aqedah* for Abraham. Here too Abraham is to act so that his child would die, given the natural conditions in the desert. And here too Abraham is to trust in God’s promise that the son would live to be the father of an entire nation. The second *aqedah*, then, for Stump, is God’s way of having Abraham disambiguate the feelings and motivations he had at the Ishmael *aqedah*. In the first *aqedah*, there was no clash between God’s command to expel Ishmael and Abraham heeding Sarah’s desire to get rid of the kid. Only at the second *aqedah* must Abraham choose between his love and his desire for Isaac, and the divine command to do away with Isaac. Abraham must come to the point where his choice reveals his true motive in

¹⁷ Stump (2010, ch. 11, “The Story of Abraham: The Desires of the Heart,” pp. 258–307).

acting. In going through with the act, Abraham reveals his trust in God's promises, and in stopping the act God reveals that God keeps His promises.

So understanding the *aqedah*, God comes out of hiding. We now have a reasonable, good reason why God should command such a thing, and God ends up being revealed, with no remainder.

In contrast with this tradition on the *aqedah*, for Reb Nachman the teaching of the *aqedah* is precisely that God is forever hidden. While Reb Nachman's interpretation does give a transparent reason for the *aqedah*, namely to convey God's utter hiddenness, this transparency gets swallowed up by the lesson of intrinsic, forever, divine hiddenness.

Here, now, are my reasons for thinking Abraham to be the wise man of our story, and for the story to be implicating the *aqedah*:

- (1) Reb Nachman's stories have allegorical import, especially pointing to the patriarchs. Like the wise man sent by the king, Abraham is the patriarch sent to a different land, by God. ("Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" Genesis 12:1.) Unlike Abraham, our wise man must return to the "king." But since God is everywhere, this does not imply Abraham having actually to go back to where he had set out.
- (2) Jewish tradition speaks of Abraham as a wise man. A rabbinic Midrash comments on Proverbs 10:18, "The Wise in heart will accept commands," by saying that this refers to Abraham, who accepted God's commands (*Genesis Rabbah*, 52:3). More to the point here, another Midrash, commenting on Ecclesiastes 7:19, "Wisdom makes one wise," says that God commanded Abraham to go to the land of Canaan *because* he was a wise man (*Genesis Rabbah*, 39:4). Reb Nachman himself refers to Abraham as a wise man (Likutei Moharan I:30.) As far as I can tell, he does not so refer to any of the other patriarchs.
- (3) A rabbinic Midrash says: "When a king and his beloved are together in a room with a curtain between them, when the king wishes to speak with his beloved, he folds the curtain and speaks with his beloved" (*Genesis Rabbah*, 74:7). In our story, the king is behind a curtain, and when the king wants to see the beloved, he folds the curtain away. Consistently in Jewish tradition, as in Isaiah 41:8, it is Abraham, among the patriarchs, who is called God's "beloved."
- (4) A Midrash reads as follows: "And God said to Abram: Get thee out of thy country" (Genesis 12:1). Rabbi Isaac said: It is like a parable of a person who was wandering from place to place, and saw a mansion *doleket*. He said, "Can it be that the mansion has no master?" So the master of the mansion then peeked out on him, and said to him, "I am the master of the mansion." Similarly, Abraham said, "Can the world not have a master?"

So the Holy Blessed One looked out on him and said, “I am the master of the world” (*Genesis Rabbah*, 39:1).

The word *doleket* in the Midrash can have two meanings. On one, Abraham would have seen the world as a mansion that was “lit up.” This might refer to the wondrous provision of sun, moon, and stars in the sky, providing light by day and guidance by night. Then Abraham would have been making a kind of inference from design, that there must be a designer of all of this.¹⁸ The wondrous light of the world leads Abraham to tell himself there must be a “master” of this world. This interpretation, though, fails to account for the idea that Abraham was wandering from place to place, and does not explain why God must look out at Abraham to reveal that He is the master of the world. Abraham was figuring that out himself.

Another interpretation given for *doleket*, and certainly what Reb Nachman had in mind, is that when going from place to place Abraham sees the world “burning.” The world is “on fire.” In the words of one commentator, Abraham sees that “the wicked rule the world, and, seeing that, Abraham wondered – Can it be that the world has no master? – God looked out on him to reveal Himself.”¹⁹ Abraham goes from place to place and sees the world “on fire,” a world of corruption and deceit. In bewilderment, Abraham cries out: “Is there no master to this forlorn world?” God then looks out “on him,” not “at him.” God looks out to see who it is that understands the world is ablaze with lies and corruption.

In Reb Nachman’s story, the wise man has gone from place to place and found corruption up to the highest levels. He is at first displeased that God is nowhere to be seen in all of this. The king is impressed that there is someone who knows that everything is so corrupt and is bothered by it. The king peeks out *on* the wise man, to see who it is who knows the world is utterly ablaze. The wise man is Abraham, and Abraham learns of God’s utter “otherness” to the world, being far from the fires of human finitude, corruption, lying, and evil. In our story, the king’s speech to Abraham is the only kind that God can “speak” to Abraham: “I, the master of the world, am hidden from you forever.”

- (5) The wise man, we have noted, was sent to the Holy Temple. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God sent him to the land of Moriah: And He said: “Take now thy son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah” (Genesis 22:2). In Jewish tradition, Moriah is to be the location of the Temple. Jewish tradition also sees the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son as the culmination of God’s earlier command to him to go to Canaan, as though the final purpose of

¹⁸ This is the way Rashi, the medieval commentator, understands *doleket*.

¹⁹ David Lurie (1798–1855) so writes about *doleket*.

sending Abraham to Canaan was that he reaches this place. Just so, our wise man: He finds what he was sent to find only when entering the private chambers of the king.

- (6) At the end of the episode of the *aqedah*, we read in Genesis 22:14: And Abraham called the name of that place *A-donai-yireh*; as it is said to this day: “In the mount where *A-donai yera-eh*.” The first term, *A-donai-yireh*, means literally that God *sees*, while the second, *A-donai yera-eh*, means that God *is* seen. Recall that at the end of Reb Nachman’s story, the king both sees the wise man and is seen by him. If the story is about Abraham, then we have here a pointer to the double, mutual seeing contained in this verse, a double seeing that takes place only at the *aqedah*. God sees (“Now I know,” says God at the *aqedah*) and is seen. For the first time, Abraham understands, seeing what can be captured only in an empty portrait.

Based on the identification of Abraham with the wise man, including elements of the *aqedah*, I suggest our story, in part, at least, allegorizes the *aqedah* story. I now provide a Reb Nachmanesque interpretation of the *aqedah* – where Abraham discovers that God is an eternally hidden God.

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him: “Abraham”; and he said: “Here am I.” And He said: “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.” (Genesis 22:1–2)

God had sent Abraham to Canaan, and Abraham obeyed God in righteousness and faithfulness. In all of these, Abraham believed he was coming ever closer to God. For that very reason, Abraham does not truly *know* who God is. For as Hegel has told us, there is no reconciliation between Abraham and the Jewish God. Now, the time has come for Abraham to see God face to face.

And so, God commands Abraham to sacrifice, not a fleecy lamb or a bleating goat, but the most beloved to him of all, his son, his only son, Isaac. In the words of Maimonides:

In this story [Abraham] was ordered to do something that bears no comparison either with sacrifice of property or with sacrifice of life. In truth it is the most extraordinary thing that could happen in the world, such a thing that one would not imagine that human nature was capable of. Here is a sterile man having an exceeding desire for a son ... and having the wish that his progeny should become a religious community. When a son comes to him after his having lost hope, how great will be his attachment to him and love for him! Because of his fear of God and because of his love to carry out His command, he holds this beloved son as little, gives up all his hopes regarding him, and hastens to slaughter him after a journey of days. (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:24)

And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:3)

As Abraham travels to Mt. Moriah, with son in hand, excited thoughts run through his head: “I am on my way to perform the greatest act anybody could possibly do for God, sacrificing my own son! Isaac! Can you imagine? I am giving up that which is most dear to me, for God’s sake. I am about to carry out an act that finally will bring reconciliation between God and me. I will be God’s beloved! I will be God’s Single One! I will be God’s Knight of Faith!”

Abraham arrives at the glorious moment. He binds Isaac with supreme seriousness, and raises the knife for the greater glory of God. Abraham’s heart pounds with awareness of the remarkable significance of this act. But then:

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said: “Abraham, Abraham.” And he said: “Here am I.” And he said: “Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do any thing to him ... (Genesis 22:11–12)

Just then an angel calls out: “Abraham! Abraham! Stop! Don’t lower the knife to his throat!” Notice that it is not God Himself who tells him to stop. God is nowhere to be seen, only an angel. At this fateful moment Abraham is meant to grasp that even the most courageous sacrifice to the sublime Infinite is for naught! God is the infinite, forever hidden Other, with whom reconciliation is never possible! Yes, even sacrificing your beloved son will not achieve the desired result.

Alas, Abraham does not get it. A Midrash has the following conversation ensuing between the angel and Abraham:

The angel said: “Do not bring the knife down on the boy.” [Abraham] said, “O.K., so I’ll choke him.” So the [angel] said, “Do nothing to him.” So, Abraham replied, “I’ll take a drop of blood from him.” To which the angel answered, “Don’t do to him anything [*meumah*],” meaning, “Don’t make him a wound [*mum*].” (*Genesis Rabbah*, 56:6)

Abraham simply must be made to understand that no manner of harm he can do to his beloved son can possibly make him any closer to God. How much more so, no *lesser* act of obeying God can bring reconciliation. The angel continues,

“For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, for you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (Genesis 22:12)

The angel is saying: “Dear Abraham, O.K. You have shown me you are a *fearer* of God, because you did not hold back your son. But you are *no more than* a *fearer* of God.” “Fearers” of God, as Hegel has told us, are those who mistakenly think they can serve the *sublime* Infinite with their actions. Abraham, the would-be sacrificer of Isaac, has proved himself a supreme “fearer” of God, because he believed that sacrificing his son would be the ultimate service of God. Now, Abraham must internalize the fact that God did not allow the sacrifice. If sacrificing Isaac was not able to effect reconciliation, then nothing can.

And now, Abraham is about to become one who *loves* God, no longer a fearer of God, but one who yearns for the God who is beyond yearning. At the *aqedah*, Abraham has come up empty, with an empty portrait of God. And now Abraham returns that portrait to God, in the form of another sacrifice:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in place of his son. (Genesis 22:13)

Abraham now proceeds to “return the empty portrait to God.” Abraham finally realizes that his having bound Isaac with purity of heart, yearning for God, with *no* sacrifice, was as “good” as sacrificing him with purity of heart, which means worth *only* the purity of heart. So, Abraham sacrifices a ram, doing so *in place of his son*. The key here is that in Abraham’s mind, the ram is in place of Isaac. *The ram signifies absolutely no loss of anything to Abraham* – after all, he found the ram on the spot and simply took it and sacrificed it. Abraham thereby declares that *no* loss is the same as a *supreme* loss, no more – since God is unreachable in either case – and no less – since the purity of heart in yearning for God is what is of worth in both cases. So, Abraham sacrifices the ram, acknowledging God’s unfathomable hiddenness. Abraham sacrifices the ram to God “as though” he were sacrificing the ram to God. Just as, for Reb Nachman, we are to pray as though we are praying, and do the commandments as though we were doing the commandments.

And Abraham called the name of that place A-donai-yireh; as it is said to this day: “In the mount where A-donai yera-eh.” (Genesis 22:14)

Abraham then calls the place: “God sees and is seen.” God has looked out on Abraham, the one who now knows how utterly “other God is from the world,” and Abraham has seen God to be the king of the empty portrait.

And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself have I sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, for I will bless you.” (Genesis 22:15–16)

The angel did not bestow the blessing on Abraham immediately after the halting of the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham receives the blessings only after having sacrificed the ram *in place of Isaac*. The blessings are not given to Abraham until after Abraham has done “this thing,” the “thing” here being the sacrifice of the ram! And now, and only now, can he be blessed for having been willing to sacrifice Isaac. For retroactively, Abraham understands the proper way to have bound Isaac. Abraham is truly blessed to have learned that there is no way to bring God out of hiding, that all he can do is yearn for God, who he will never reach.

So, Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba. (Genesis 22:19)

According to Jewish tradition, “Abraham was tested with ten trials, and passed all of them” (*Mishnah, Avot* 5:3). Abraham endured and passed ten tests. The episode of the near sacrifice of Isaac was the final test. Abraham now comes back down the mountain and goes home, never needing to be tested again.

PROOF

Hegel was a proponent of universal reason and Nietzsche its opponent; Hegel was a Christian thinker and Nietzsche a self proclaimed Anti Christ; Hegel strove to bring modernity to its climax, while Nietzsche wanted to divert the evolution of modernity into completely different paths. In view of these conflicting attitudes and philosophical projects, how did each of them assess the historical role of the Jews and their place in the modern world? The mature Hegel partly overcame the fierce anti Jewish attitude of his youth, yet continued to see Judaism as the alienation of its own new principles. This brilliant and absorbing study examines the image of Judaism and the Jews in the work of two of the most influential modern philosophers, Hegel and Nietzsche. Part V God's Hiddenness and God's Nature in the Major Monotheisms 9 The hiddenness of "divine hiddenness": divine love in medieval Islamic lands Jon McGinnis 10 The hidden God of the Jews: Hegel, Reb Nachman, and the aqedah Jerome Gellman. 155 157. 175. 11 The hidden divinity and what it reveals N. N. Trakakis. 192. 12 Hiddenness and transcendence Michael C. Rea. The hidden code is said to be cracked by mathematically selecting letters from the texts which appear to create words which can be read as prophecies. Documentary film The Torah Codes: End to Darkness, by filmmaker Richard Shaw, has helped popularise the theory "being available on Amazon Prime. Judaism's end of days heralds the coming of the Jewish Messiah ushering in the kingdom of God. He will rule during the Messianic Age which will see the end of the world as we know it. Rabbi Galzerson believes the current end of days process began in 2016 " and will end in 2021. With his analysis of the Torah Codes, he said his prediction of the redemption can be found in the Book of Leviticus.