

The Akedah in Israeli Poetry and Art

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/akedah-israeli-poetry-and-art>.

Introduction

The story of the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), is a prominent motif in Israeli literature and art. This account of a divine test of sacrifice and devotion has inspired many to explore the tension between one's capacity for self-sacrifice and one's doubts about its worthiness and consequences. What is the meaning of such sacrifice, and what is the cost? These are prominent themes in Israeli artistic interpretations of the story. (It is worth noting that in Hebrew the word *korban* means both "sacrifice" and "victim.")

The materials in this resource kit introduce teachers to various artistic treatments of this story and help them explore the ways in which artists and writers have reimagined the biblical myth in terms of contemporary Israeli reality. Using at least one of the visual works along with two or three poems is recommended. To use the full kit, allow for at least five meetings of 45 minutes each.

Subjects

Art, Hebrew, Poetry, Religion, Tanakh, Israel-Palestine

Reading and Background:

- The story of the Akedah is from the Hebrew Bible, [Genesis 22](#).
- For an accessible discussion of the Akedah, including interpretations of literary works, see Avi Sagi, "The Meaning of the 'Akedah' in Israeli Culture and Jewish Tradition," *Israel Studies* 3 (1998): 45–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30246795>.
- A general discussion of the Bible in modern Hebrew literature, including a chapter dedicated to the topic of the Akedah, can be found in Ruth Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogues with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1999).
- A rich and lengthy discussion of the topic of the Akedah in Israeli national culture can be found in Yael Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford University Press, 2010).
- Yad Vashem has developed its own teachers' guide on this subject, entitled "[Your Son, Your Only One](#)" – *The Sacrifice of Isaac as a Motif in Holocaust Poetry*.

Resources

1: Excerpt from the story of the Akedah, Genesis 22.

In *Genesis 22*, God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Abraham, unlike the readers, does not know that he is being tested. The biblical narrative uses many verbs to describe this story of religious obedience while it avoids revealing Abraham's emotions. However, a close reading suggests a more ambivalent and emotional Abraham, whose inner struggle between his love for his son and his commitment to his God became a source of inspiration for many writers and artists.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt with students and discuss the following questions: What do we know about Abraham's feelings toward the divine command to kill his son? What does Isaac think? What does he know or feel? Where is Sara? What does she know? Why are there so many verbs describing each and every one of Abraham's actions?

Source: Barry Moser, designer and illustrator, *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, (New York: Viking Studio, 1999), 20.



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2: Excerpt of midrash on the Akedah.

This midrash attempts to answer one of the central questions that the story of the Akedah leaves unanswered: what went through Isaac's mind while he was walking to the sacrifice with his father? It also provides a possible interpretation of the "togetherness" emphasized in the Torah where it is written: "...so they went both of them together."

Suggested activity: Read this midrash together in class and ask: What is the question the midrash tries to answer? What is the answer that it gives to this question?

Source: Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 41.

3: Poem, "Heritage" ("Yerusha") by Hayim Gouri, 1960.

Hayim Gouri was born in Tel Aviv in 1926. He served in the Haganah and in the commando troops during Israel's War of Independence. His poetry from and following the war is often described as a poignant expression of the sentiments of the "war generation." The poem "Heritage" deals with the relationships between the fathers of that generation and their sons, a common theme in Israeli society during the 1950s and 1960s. Gouri reflects the perspective of the young generation and depicts an old, passive, one may even suggest diasporic, Abraham.

Suggested activity: Ask the students to find one famous painting of the Akedah online. Ask them to compare the depiction of Abraham in their chosen painting to Gouri's depiction. How old is Abraham in each depiction? Why might Gouri have depicted Abraham as an old, weak, and passive man? Call the students' attention to the way in which the third stanza switches from Abraham's perspective to Isaac's.

Source: Hayim Gouri, "Heritage," in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi (London: Penguin, 1981), 565.

4: Video of Hayim Gouri reading "Heritage," 2012.

The poet reads his poem.

Suggested activity: After reading and discussing the poem (resource #3 above), play the video for the class. Ask students, even those who don't speak Hebrew, what the reading adds to their sense of the poem's tone, rhythm, and meaning.

Source: Hayim Gouri, "CultureBuzz's Hebrew Writers-Readers' series! Haim Gouri reads his 'Heritage,'" YouTube video, 1:35, CultureBuzzIsrael, November 1, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqIzU2erWHM>.

5: Poem, "Isaac" ("Yitzhak") by Amir Gilboa, 1953.

Amir Gilboa was born in Volhynia (Ukraine) in 1917. He immigrated to Palestine in 1937 and in 1942 volunteered for service in the Hebrew Unit of the British Army, which fought in World War II against the Germans. After the war, in which he lost most of his family, he participated in the efforts to bring Jewish survivors to Palestine. The poem "Isaac" describes the Akedah as a nightmarish experience, leading many readers to associate it with the Holocaust. Gilboa does not deal with the Akedah as a trial of faith, but rather as a recollection of the ordeal of the poet's family, expressing perhaps his own guilt for not being able to save them. Gilboa died in Israel in 1984.

Suggested activity: Read the first stanza of the poem, and ask the students to draw a picture describing what happens in it. Ask them what the tone of their picture is, i.e., is it cheerful, dark, or something else? Why does the poem start out so peacefully and then turn scary? Who is the poem's narrator?

Source: Amir Gilboa, "Isaac," in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi (London: Penguin, 1981), 560.

6: Poem, "The Real Hero" ("Ha-gibor ha-'amiti shal ha-Akedah") by Yehuda Amichai, 1983.

Yehuda Amichai, one of Israel's most famous poets, was born in Germany in 1924 and immigrated to Israel with his parents when he was eleven. This poem was written in 1983, about a year after the beginning of the Lebanon War (1982-2000). The poem is

commonly associated with the emergence of waves of protests against this war and is thought to refer to its many silent victims, the fallen soldiers. Amichai chooses the story of the binding of Isaac to critique the manner in which leaders of war, seeking fame and glory, ask ordinary men and women to make the ultimate sacrifice. He retells the story of the Akedah as a story about the silent and naive victims, those who are usually in the margins or shadows of the main cultural narrative. The biblical “heroes” of the story are depicted here in an unflattering light; even God is represented as a celebrity who doesn’t really care about the result of this trial.

Suggested activity: Ask for volunteers among your students and, with their help, try to stage the “frame” that the poem depicts beginning in the second stanza. Who are the characters? Where are they in relation to each other? What are their attitudes? Why does the poet describe Isaac as a “young man who is tanned and manicured”? Why are he and the angel depicted in such a way? Why does Amichai stress the fact that everyone went home except the ram?

Source: Yehuda Amichai, “The Real Hero,” in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 156.

7: Sculpture, “The Binding of Isaac,” Menashe Kadishman, 1982.

Menashe Kadishman (1932 – 2015) was a well-known Israeli painter and sculptor, whose artworks are present in many outdoor public locations and galleries in Israel. The Akedah is a prominent theme in his works. He is famous for, among other things, his thousands of paintings and sculptures of sheep. This particular work stands in the Tel Aviv University library plaza. [Kadishman’s website](#) includes images of and articles about his work.

Suggested activity: Study the sculpture together. Ask the students what they see in this work. Are there any similarities between Kadishman’s sculpture and Amichai’s poem (resource #5, above)? What do they think about Kadishman’s choice to work with steel? Is the animal depicted a sheep or a ram? Does it make a difference? And what might be the significance of the sculpture’s setting, in a plaza outside Tel Aviv University’s library?

Source: Menashe Kadishman, *The Binding of Isaac*, 1986-7, steel, Tel Aviv University Library Plaza, Tel Aviv. <http://www.menashekadishman.com>, accessed 23 Sept. 2016.