

# The Voice of God and the Face of the Other: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Abraham

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*I love him [God], but I love even more his Torah...*

Yossel Ben Yossel, cited by Levinas in *Difficult Freedom*

*Can we still be Jewish without Kierkegaard?*

Emmanuel Levinas, in *Difficult Freedom*

*The Akedah* begins with a command from God to Abraham. God demands that Abraham willingly sacrifice his [Abraham's] child to God in order to prove his faith.<sup>[1]</sup> The test, as Abraham understands it, is to take Isaac, his beloved son, the son through whom God has promised the fulfillment of the covenant, up to Mt. Moriah where he is to be offered as a sacrifice. It is in the absurdity of the situation that Abraham's faith is tested, for God has promised that Canaan will be delivered through Isaac, but now God is asking that Isaac be sacrificed. Abraham, because of God's initial promise, must believe Isaac will be returned to him, though this seems impossible. It is in light of this absurdity that Abraham proceeds with Isaac up the mountain.<sup>[2]</sup>

If we take seriously Kierkegaard's reading of the story in *Fear and Trembling*<sup>[3]</sup>, then we must imagine that it took all of Abraham's strength to get him to the point of raising his lethal knife. Kierkegaard gives us an excellent psychological portrayal of Abraham. In particular, Kierkegaard reminds us of the time it took for Abraham to make the decision: that he had to lie to Sarah, travel up the mountain, cut the wood, and then bind Isaac. To read *Fear and Trembling* is, to be sure, not to take lightly what Abraham is asked and commits himself to do. In light of the captivating power of this psychological profile, we are led to ask: what must have happened that Abraham so easily puts down the knife without so much as a question to the angel? If nothing else, inertia alone might have prompted him to execute God's original command.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, we might ask if Kierkegaard has glossed over the real concern: the father of Israel has just been asked by God to kill his own son, for no reason other than to pass a mysterious test.<sup>[5]</sup>

In light of this portrayal, I want to examine what it means that Abraham "heard" the second voice, and that Abraham put down the knife. Something is missing from Kierkegaard's reading of the story, a story he began but did not finish. Just as Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* teaches us not to read *The Akedah* too quickly, I think we should apply that same vigilance to Kierkegaard himself. We should read the story of the Akedah slowly and carefully, but we should also read it to its end! I think that we can read Kierkegaard back upon himself and discover another message in the text, a message Levinas himself notes, and one that I want to underscore. <sup>[6]</sup>

This paper will re-visit the *Akedah* using, as its point of departure, Marc Bregman's commentary on the visual in the text: what does Abraham see and how does vision mediate

what he hears? My aim here is to examine the relationship between the voice of God and the face of Isaac in order to see the role each plays in the test to which Abraham has been put. My claim is that the test Abraham had to pass was an ethical test, not a test of obedience to God. The test Abraham passed was to see the face of Isaac and abort the sacrifice. Moreover, I also claim that Abraham had to have seen the face of Isaac *before* the angel commanded him to stop.

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In his essay "A propos Kierkegaard Vivant," Levinas writes, "that Abraham obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is essential."[\[7\]](#) Levinas's focus on Abraham's attunement to the second voice should not be minimized. Like Silentio, Levinas does not want us to gloss over the fact that the sacrifice did not happen. This distance from obedience, this receptivity to the other that Abraham displayed, is at least as extraordinary as his initial faith.[\[8\]](#) On Levinas's view the dramatic moment of the story occurs when Abraham heeds the Angel of the Lord, who tells him "do not lay a hand on the lad."

This moment in the story marks the turning point from a focus on Abraham to a focus on Isaac. The story is no longer about Abraham as a man of faith or about Abraham's perceived duty to God. Rather, this moment in the story could be read as the need for our attention to be focused on the victims, those who suffer the violence, not the administrators of that violence, even if, or maybe especially if, that violence is administered in the name of God.[\[9\]](#) And yet by focusing on this last point, it is still possible to see Abraham as a man of faith, but not in the sense that Kierkegaard, Silentio, or Christianity wants to ascribe to him. The faith Abraham has must be a condition for him to see the ethical, not necessarily a faith merely to obey the command of God. Thus, as Bregman suggests, Abraham must be a man of faith in order to see what needs to be seen. He needs to be able to see Mt. Moriah as a holy site, as a place where this kind of sacrifice is out of order. He needs to be able to see Isaac's face, and he needs to be able to see his responsibility to God precisely as a responsibility to Isaac. As Bregman points out, these "seings" are not thing the others see. The servants, for example, do not "see" what Abraham sees. Thus, Abraham is a man of faith, but not the man of faith Kierkegaard and the rest of Christianity desires.

For Levinas, among others, a suspension of the ethical, which allows for the sacrifice/murder of another, cannot be tolerated. Levinas's criticism of Kierkegaard thus focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical, which is defined in terms of the "universal." The religious is the sphere in which one reclaims the particular. At the level of the religious, the particular is reclaimed but in a higher form than the particular at the level of the aesthetic. In Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical, the singularity of the self, and the other, is lost in a rule that is valid for everyone. Levinas's criticism rests on his claim that "the ethical is not where [Kierkegaard] sees it [emphasis added]."[\[10\]](#) As in much of the history of philosophy, the ethical is characterized in terms of the universal, as that which applies to everyone.

For Levinas, Kierkegaard's violence emerges precisely when he 'transcends ethics,'[\[11\]](#) and ascends to the religious. Though the religious, in Kierkegaard's account, reclaims the particular, it cannot be seen as Levinas's account of the ethical. Although the religious reclaims the particular, and although the ethical that is suspended for Kierkegaard is the ethical understood as the universal, in Levinas's view, the religious still appears to suspend the ethical, the ethical even as Levinas understands it. A conception of the ethical that accounts for the singularity of the *I*, and that poses the *I* as a unique individual, that implies an infinite requirement of a responsibility toward others, is still missing from Kierkegaard's religious stage.[\[12\]](#)

But, and this is crucial, the religious stage for Kierkegaard is outside language. This means that one is "out of communication," one cannot explain what one is doing. No one would understand what it means for Abraham to hear to this voice. And this is precisely the kind of relationship Levinas fears when he quotes Yossel ben Yossel with regard to loving the *Torah* more than God. For Levinas, to love the *Torah* more than God is precisely to love ethics more than God; it is to be willing to respond ethically to the other rather than to be willing to kill because one "heard" this commanded by the voice of God.

Levinas insists that responsibility pre-supposes response. Responsibility must not lose sight of 'response.' It is precisely this response that we see in Abraham at the point when Abraham aborts the planned sacrifice. An angel of the Lord says, "Abraham, Abraham."[\[13\]](#) Abraham replies to the angel, "here I am [*hineni*]." The Angel then says, "do not lay a hand on the lad." It is significant that while it was God who initiated this sequence of events, it is an Angel who brought them to an end. It is often remarked that Abraham should have wondered if it really was God who issued the initial command. We might also ask if Abraham should have wondered if this presence really was an Angel of the Lord, an Agent of the Lord, if you will? Should Abraham not have wondered if aborting the sacrifice really was what God intended?

I do not mean to suggest that "seeing is believing"; nor do I mean to suggest that we should always doubt what we hear. But we should be able to ask what it means to hear a particular voice, and what it means to hear the voice of God? Even if this is a voice Abraham has heard before, what does it mean that he hears the voice of an angel, and agent of God?

The "here I am" [*me voici*], *hineni*, in Hebrew, implies a sensitivity, a total awareness, or an openness to respond. In a sense, Abraham's words imply that the response actually precedes the utterance of the phrase.[\[14\]](#) To utter "here I am" is already to be ready to respond.[\[15\]](#) We should remember what Abraham endured to get to the point of raising the knife in order to respond to a command given to him by God. Then, is it not extraordinary that Abraham is *ready* to "hear" the second command, the command not to continue, a command given to him, not by God, but by an alleged messenger of God. This point in itself is significant for *Silentio*, since this means that Abraham no longer stands Absolute in a relation to the Absolute. The relationship between Abraham and God is now mediated by Isaac, and the immediate relationship has shifted to that between Abraham and Isaac, a relationship Levinas terms the "face to face."[\[16\]](#) Could we not say that Abraham's receptivity to the second voice implies that Abraham had already turned toward the ethical, has already *seen* the ethical? Could we not read this moment, as Levinas also suggests, as the *essential* moment in the story? Here I turn again to the *midrash*, which asks after the phrase, "do not lay a hand on the lad" and suggests that Abraham had already put down the knife. The Angel's voice, then, is a less a command from above, than it is a response to a response that is already in motion.[\[17\]](#) And though this is the essential moment for Levinas, I wish to claim that something had to take place in order for Abraham to be receptive to this voice: he had already *seen* the face of Isaac; he had already seen the holiness of the land. Thus, as Bregman suggests, Abraham does see what needs to be seen. He sees Mt. Moriah *as* holy, and as the picture of the ram tugging at Abraham's hem suggests, he has turned his attention from God to Isaac, from the command of God to the command of the other. As Bregman also points out in one midrash, "Abraham is bent over looking down at Isaac, who is lying on his back looking up into heaven. In the next 'shot', we see the face of Isaac through the eyes of Abraham. What he sees in his son's face is so horrific that it cause [sic] him to weep to a surrealist extent and to let out an inhuman cry." Though the end of this midrash has the angel staying Abraham's hand, I claim that Abraham was changed when he looked into Isaac's face. The staying of the hand was the continuation, or affirmation, of an action that was already set into motion; Abraham had already begun to abort the sacrifice. That is, I claim, he has turned from sheer obedience to the ethical.

For Levinas, the point at which Abraham hears the second voice marks the moment at which Abraham has heard the voice that has led him to the ethical. This moment is not only the essential moment; it is "the highest moment in the drama."[\[18\]](#) Is it not the case that, as Levinas says, we rise to the level of the religious precisely when we are ethical?[\[19\]](#) The ethical for Levinas takes precedence, even over the apparent commands of God. Thus, if religion is to provide genuine freedom, God must be understood to be free and able to deceive, or to command a murder that we are free to choose not to commit.[\[20\]](#) We must be free to show that we are strong by being able to disobey God's commands. It cannot be the case that Abraham waited for or merely responded to another command from God, even if the command was from an Angel. If it is, then we are left with the Divine Command Theory and all its problems, and Judaism is merely a religion that has its members wait for the word of God for orders to tell us what to do and how to act. As Levinas reminds us, Judaism is a *difficile liberté* precisely because it both commands us to be and allows us to be adults. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard gives us a different reading from the collection of *midrashim* in the Judaic tradition; Kierkegaard, if you will, gives us his own version of a *midrash* on Abraham's struggle. But Kierkegaard stops precisely where the drama begins, namely, when Abraham hears the angel, puts down the knife, and sees in the face of his son the true meaning of the religious. This, I claim, was the test Abraham had to pass and did pass.