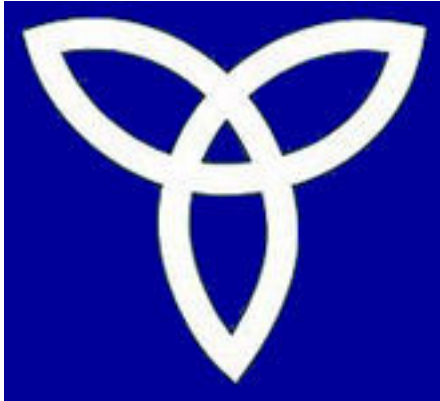




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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (Spring 2003), pp. 155-176

Published by: [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25834566>

Accessed: 30/10/2012 04:18

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THE SACRIFICE OF THE SONS: FRAMING A MEDIA PSEUDO-EVENT

Mira Moshe and Ruth Amir

The 2003 election campaign was highlighted by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's press conference in response to a leak regarding an ongoing police investigation. The live broadcast was cut off by the chairman of the Central Election Committee, Judge Mishael Cheshin. The judge's argument was that the speech was unlawful since it contained political propaganda. This brought to the fore the symbolic relationships between fathers and their offspring in politics.

This essay analyzes the political interaction between Ariel Sharon and his sons since his election as head of Likud in 1999 and through his premiership in 2001 and during the 2003 campaign. We offer an interpretive analysis based on the biblical text and on Shoham's mytho-empirical model of the Akedah—the sacrifice of the sons. According to this model there is a symbiotic relationship between the authoritative father and the metaphysical source of absolute authority. Paternal victimization of sons leads to the separation inherent in the integration of the maturing child into the accepted normative framework of society. In our case, the issue at stake is the sacrifice of the son's future political career for that of their father's, or perhaps the father and sons sacrificing one another.

He said, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him (Genesis 22, 2-3).

Relationships between fathers and sons in Israeli politics have fascinated political scientists for some time.¹ The focus has mostly been on how the sons have measured up to the careers of their fathers—whether biological or ideological. There are ample instances across all political camps. Just to mention a few, Shmuel, Moshe, and Yael Dayan; Haim and Uzi Landau; Menachem and Benjamin-Zeev Begin; Yitzhak and Dalya Rabin; Joseph and Abraham Burg; Menachem and Meir Porush; Moshe and Ephraim Sneh; Geula Cohen and Tzachi Hanegbi; Shlomo-Israel and Yehuda Ben-Meir; Daniel-Yitzhak and Yitzhak Levy.

Longing for the comforting stability provided in the time of the founding fathers, scholars are rather critical of both the fathers and their offspring. For example, Yonatan Shapira was concerned with the leadership crisis emanating from the weakness of second-generation Israelis. Yet scant attention has been paid to how fathers deal with their children's political careers.

In this essay we are concerned with the unique political relationships between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his sons, M.K. Omri and businessman Gil'ad. In all other instances mentioned above, the offspring pursued their own political careers following the death of the parent or upon his or her retirement. Here, Sharon's sons actively assisted their father in promoting his position, first as Likud leader and twice as prime minister, in 2001 and once again in 2003. In parallel to supporting their father, Omri pursued his own political career, while Gil'ad focused his utmost attention on developing his business. Both father and sons had to pay a price for the political empowerment of the sons. The father was trapped in a situation where his sons could endanger his political fortune. Their options were either to sacrifice a son's future political career for that of his father's, or the father and sons could sacrifice each other.

With reference to the involvement of the sons in their father's political career in the elections of 1999, 2001, and 2003, we offer an interpretive analysis based on the biblical text and on Shoham's mytho-empirical model of the *Akedah*—the sacrifice of Isaac.²

Social Mythology

The concept of myth as a pre-scientific theory of nature has given way in the twentieth century to a wide array of applications.³ From mystic tales with a divine or religious character recounting unlikely situations, myths came to be recognized as being worthy of social science inquiry. The interest in myths is derived from their well-defined associations with the fabric of any given society.

In common usage, the term "myth" refers to a belief with no factual foundation, a fiction or an illusion that provides a fantasy.⁴ Many anthropologists have claimed that a myth is very simply the phenomenon of "sanctifying the simple."⁵ A myth tells a personal and symbolic tale, referring in dramatic form to the origin of things,⁶ and describing events of exceptional importance to the community. The tale is not necessarily true in the sense that it gives an objective description of reality and historical facts. Truth in a myth does not derive from an objective truth, supported by external proof, it lies within the myth itself and in the societal truth that the myth represents and communicates.⁷

We can discern a number of hidden foundations underlying myths. Reference to a shared culture or collective past gives the individual a sense of personal and social identity. The myth may lie within the narrative itself, or it may be connected to the structure of the tale. Whether the myth is in story or in another structural form, its constituent parts join to form a whole. Since myth refers to shared beliefs and values, it is taken as axiomatic.

Therefore, myth can operate on a subconscious level. The meanings attributed to it are almost universal and are not limited to any specific time or place. A community can attach itself to its mythic belief and obstruct and suppress any information that undermines the myth, if it vindicates leaders, a shared past, or hope for the future.⁸

Ethnographic research and theories about the role of myths in society have also unearthed the relationships between collective imagination on the one hand, and ethnic, historical, and social identities on the other.⁹ Myth, then, represents a method of interpretation, a point of view in which there is an inner cohesion and spiritual topography that constitutes a permanent, formative foundation of culture, society, and nation. It is simultaneously the creation of a culture, and is itself the creator of a culture. The reality to which a myth refers is one that is seen through the eyes of its patrons. Therefore, social change is reflected in mythological change, and vice-versa.

Ariel Sharon as a Mythological Leader Figure

We shall combine the ideas of Cassirer¹⁰ and Tudor¹¹ in our analysis of the leader myth as structured during an election period. Cassirer argues that where political activity is concerned, people tend to forget what they have learned in the course of their intellectual development and go back to the earliest stages of human culture. In this context, myth causes considerable deviation from empirical thinking and conceptualization of reality. It guides people into political activity by using emotional manipulation, typified by a preference for irrational thinking.

Tudor, in his work, *Political Myth*, also refers to political myth as a fantasy, or an illusion in political context. He outlines the mechanism whereby the myth is created, and the role and needs of the myths' creator. The myth lives on as long as it serves a given order of things. In modern times, the creation and dissipation of myths are inseparable parts of the dynamic of the struggle for cultural-political hegemony in society.

Since Israeli society has apparent militant characteristics, it comes as no surprise that the figure of the military leader turned politician is an icon of Israeli myth. Ariel Sharon's biography contains all the right elements for the creation of such a myth.

Various journalists and scholars have tried their hands at Sharon's portrait.¹² Despite the discrepancy between the laudatory and the cautionary versions, all the writers have adopted a mythic view of their subject. A brief look at his life exemplifies this view: he was born in Kfar Malal in 1928, attended secondary school in Tel-Aviv, and joined the Haganah in 1945.

In the War of Independence Sharon commanded a platoon in the Alexandroni Brigade and was wounded in the battle for Latrun. Early in 1949 he became a company commander, and two years later he was appointed intelligence officer of Central Command. In 1952-3 he studied history and oriental studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, during which time he was given command of Unit 101, a commando unit formed to carry out retaliatory actions to counter *fedayeen* attacks.¹³ While some of the military operations under his command were considered heroic, several actions came under heavy criticism, like the one in Qibiya, where women and children were among those killed.

In 1956 Sharon was appointed to command the paratroop brigade and fought in the Sinai Campaign. Because of a battle in the Mitla Pass, which many thought unnecessary and in which there were heavy casualties, serious disagreements arose between him and his subordinates and between him and IDF Chief of Staff

Moshe Dayan. In the wake of these criticisms, he commenced his studies of military science at the Staff College, Camberley, at the end of 1957. Further promotion in the army came to a halt.¹⁴ He took part in the Six-Day War as commander of an armored division, and the battles he led at Umm Kateif and Abu Ageila brought him glory.¹⁵

As head of Southern Command in the early 1970s, Sharon concentrated on fighting terrorist cells in the Gaza Strip and evacuating the Bedouin from northern Sinai. For this evacuation he once again came under heavy criticism, and was reprimanded by the chief of staff. In June 1973 he retired from the army in order to stand for election to the Knesset as a member of the Liberal party.

During the short period remaining until the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, he was highly active in promoting the formation of the Likud party. However, during the war he was brought back into active service as commander of an armored division, and crossed the Suez Canal with his men. Once again, he was subjected to severe criticism for his refusal to carry out orders—while praised for his abilities as a commanding officer and tactician. Many saw this battle as the turning point of the Yom Kippur war.

In December 1973 he was elected to the eighth Knesset. Then in December 1974 he decided to resign from the Knesset and received a senior emergency appointment in the IDF.¹⁶ In 1977 he was appointed minister of agriculture. In this capacity he was the leading force behind the Jewish settlements in the territories since 1979. After elections to the tenth Knesset (1981) Sharon was appointed minister of defense.

In January 1982, at his request, the IDF chief of staff drew up a plan called the Oranim Campaign, which was implemented a few months later in the Peace for Galilee Campaign. In this campaign, which began on June 6th, he was personally involved every step of the way. His detractors claim that he concealed his moves from the prime minister on more than one occasion, or only reported them post facto. Sharon personally approved the Phalangist Christian militia's entry into the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in order to look for terrorists on 15 September 1982, the day after the assassination of Lebanon's elected president, Bashir Jumayel. As a consequence of the slaughter carried out in the camps by the Phalangists, and the subsequent report of the Kahan Commission, he had to resign his post at the Ministry of Defense, but he remained in the government as a minister without portfolio.¹⁷

After Netanyahu's defeat in the May 1999 elections for prime minister and his resignation as Likud party leader, Sharon became head of the party. On the occasion of a visit to the Temple Mount on 28 September 2000, he declared, "Every Jew has the right to visit the Temple Mount."¹⁸ In February 2001 he was elected prime minister of Israel for the first time; in January 2003 he was re-elected.¹⁹

Mythological Matrices as "Master Framing"

The structure of Sharon's leadership is in keeping with the idea that myths interpret reality in light of the past, for a collective and its constituent individuals. The myth also serves to guide their behavior.²⁰ In his book, *God as the Shadow of Man*, S. Giora Shoham²¹ shows how structures and ahistorical experiences are blended into what he calls the "mythogene." The mythology which is the sum total of all mythogenes in a given group is employed for interpreting various motivations in society.

Thus, adaptation of the myth to everyday events is carried out by placing the characters inside familiar mythological matrices—"hero," "good," and "evil." This applies primarily to extreme situations: in victory the group's faith in itself, in its leadership, and in its values is reinforced; in defeat, the myth is reinterpreted so that one aspect can be singled out and shown as a miraculous victory.²² The symmetrical matrices serve to create a stirring scenario in which the facts are conveniently tidied away. The random nature of the events is emphasized, creating an impression that "someone up there is looking after us," rather than showing the event's inner logic.²³ The hero is depicted in contrast to the figure of the anti-hero, who generally has no place in the myth.²⁴

Above and beyond locally based myths, there are three types of universal myths: the scheming enemy—a homogenous group plotting harm to the "home" group; the heroic leader—whose attributes are courage, aggressiveness, and resilience; and the group's faith—the enemy can be vanquished if the group stands by its leader.²⁵ Among current Israeli myths we find myths from the past. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is an outstanding example.

The *Akedah*

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is woven into the mythology of Zionism in various ways. Usually the *Akedah* myth features as a code word used by Israeli society in its inner monologue about itself and its troubled fate.²⁶ But secular Zionism generally rejects the Jewish exegetic tradition, which offers a wide variety of interpretations of the *Akedah* story. In turn, it reverts to the biblical text itself, using it as a basis for comparison. It recalls the *Akedah* with reference to the modern generation of sons, recruited by the founding fathers to fight for the regeneration of Zionism.

God spared Abraham, but Isaac must journey on with the burden. Yet Israeli culture has its own unique way of interpreting the biblical text. Firstly, in modern Israeli literature, as opposed to the Bible story, Isaac is an active hero who takes the initiative in the *Akedah*. Secondly, modern literature places much greater emphasis than the Bible on the cooperation between father and son (as if there were no rift between them). Thirdly, Isaac, the solitary hero, serves as a paradigm for the Zionist pioneer.

The first two mythic types, absent in the Bible, are developed in the Midrash. But the Zionist version of Isaac figures in the story of a completely different generation. The subject here is a generation that sacrificed itself on the altar of national renaissance.²⁷ Here we have the sons coming of age and themselves becoming the generation of patriarchs. The tribe of Zionist-era Isaacs—or some of them—grew up, and became Zionist versions of Abraham. The question is how will the Zionist patriarch—Sharon—deal with the next generation of Zionist-era Isaacs, with his sons, Omri and Gil'ad?

While we consider this question, let us remember that the act of *Akedah* has psycho-mythic layers of some complexity. It is generally accepted that personality development in a normative society is expressed under the compulsion to accept social responsibility. The adolescent is expected to undergo rites of passage from childhood indulgence to the burdens of adulthood. In most cultures the father or a surrogate father is the authority figure. It is he who enforces the norms of society on his sons and daughters, preparing them for their binding social tasks. It is the father who has the authority to sacrifice the personal well-being of his son on the altar of the normative social system and the duties it imposes. This sacrifice has been called “the *Akedah* complex.”²⁸

The Background

The Campaign Financing Affair

During the elections of 1999, Omri, the son of Ariel Sharon, was a major actor. Omri cooperated with his father's close associate, Uri Shani, in enlisting hundreds of new members to the Likud party. In this capacity, he actively assisted in the election of Ariel Sharon to office in February 2001. Among other activities, Omri assisted in collecting funds required for his father's campaign. Upon his election in 2001, Ariel Sharon attempted to appoint his son, Omri, to a senior position in the Prime Ministers Office. This appointment was highly controversial. The Ministry of Justice, the legal advisor and the High Court were called upon to intervene in the matter.

Prime Minister Sharon demanded his son's participation as his emissary to the negotiations with the Palestinians. The Ministry of Justice, however, was reluctant to endorse this appointment.²⁹ Legal Advisor Elyakim Rubinstein rejected Omri Sharon's participation in the discussions and defined it as nepotism.³⁰ Nonetheless Sharon decided to continue relying on his son's services, addressing the High Court on this matter.³¹ The High Court ruled that Omri's participation is to be limited only to those missions needed for saving a life.³² Sharon was dissatisfied with the ruling, and consequently considered appointing his son as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He expected that the appointment would be confirmed, due to the similarity of this case to other cases of family ties in the public service.³³ Eventually, the appointment was not put into practice.

Another incident, which later came to be known as the Cyril Kern affair, unravels the relationship between Ariel Sharon and his sons. In 2001, the state comptroller examined Sharon's conduct and that of the Likud party in the elections of 1999. The comptroller found that while the Likud was above suspicion,³⁴ Ariel Sharon had collected illegal funds. The legal advisor then ordered the police to investigate suspicions of criminal violations in Sharon's election campaign.³⁵

The Cyril Kern Affair

At the height of the 2003 election campaign, the *Ha'aretz* daily paper published a series of articles entitled, "*Ha'aretz* Investigates: The Sharon Family Bank Account." It began with an article by Baruch Kra, "How \$2.5m. Found their Way to Omri and Gil'ad's Bank Account and Why: The Police Investigate" (7.1.2003).³⁶ This was political dynamite, and another development of the state comptroller's investigation in 2001.

The story begins when Ariel Sharon stood against Binyamin Netanyahu for leadership of the Likud party in May 1999. The state comptroller's report, published early in October 2001, dealt with the entire election campaign and revealed that payments to professional consultants working for Ariel Sharon were apparently made through "straw" companies, including "Annex Research." The state comptroller demanded that he return to "Annex Research" NIS 4.7 million out of NIS 5.9 million paid out by the company to his people....Sharon reacted to questions—such as questions about how the debt was repaid—by referring investigators to his son, Omri. When the investigators claimed that Omri had chosen to exercise his right to silence under questioning, Sharon's response was, "Look, Omri's a big boy now. He makes his own decisions."³⁷

In a document transmitted to South Africa, the Ministry of Justice also mentions the suspicious behavior of the other son, Gil'ad. Upon repayment of the first loan at a bank in Sderot, Gil'ad was requested, in accordance with the law against money laundering, to sign a declaration setting out the source of the money used for repayment. "It must be noted," says the document, "that he tried to evade signing a statement to the bank that he received the money as a loan from a certain Cyril Kern. In fact, he only signed it after the Israeli police opened an investigation."³⁸

The very day after suspicions of the prime minister and his sons appeared in print, Sharon's adviser and his attorney called a press conference at which they stated that in January 2000 his son had indeed asked Cyril Kern for a loan of \$1.5 million—Cyril Kern being an old friend of the family—in order to improve his (Gil'ad's) cash flow and liquidity, but it was a perfectly legal procedure.³⁹ However, the press conference was not successful in damming up the stream of articles on the issue, which threatened to overturn the prime minister's chances at the elections. He himself therefore called a press conference for the evening of Thursday, 9 January 2003. This was broadcast live on all three television channels and various radio channels. About twenty minutes

into the press conference, the chairman of the Central Election Committee, Judge Mishael Cheshin, asked for broadcasting to be stopped, since it constituted (unlawful) election propaganda.

Sacrifice of the Sons as a Pseudo-Event⁴⁰

In constructing an issue, one way to enhance its importance is to present it in the matrix of a media event. In their book, *Media Events: The Live Broadcast of History*, Dayan and Katz propounded the idea that when exceptional events take place, the media have consistently used a specific genre of broadcasting.⁴¹ This genre comes into play when a number of conditions are met, such as granting equal access to all the viewers of the event; distribution of the viewers in several places at the same time; using as a stereotype one of three basic mythic scenarios—coronation, conquest, contest. Liebes⁴² added to the three mythic scenarios above—disaster. The term “media event” later came to include the mythic scenario of “intimacy from a distance”—presenting the reactions of average citizens⁴³ and extensive use of pictures, which create a sense of “apparent connection” with the events.⁴⁴

The concept of “media event” is closely related to the term “pseudo-event” coined by Daniel Boorstin in 1964. Boorstin coined the term “pseudo-events,” for synthetic events that are staged to stimulate media reporting. The timing and location of the event, including their logistics and the presentation, are designed according to the media’s preferred format.⁴⁵ According to Dayan and Katz, the most significant media events are “pseudo-events” which work. These events become “real” because they are responded to as such.⁴⁶

Before defining the prime minister’s press conference three days after the *Ha’aretz* investigation as a pseudo-event, we would like to express a few reservations. Firstly, although the story of the *Akedah* has been used as a motif in Zionist mythology, there is no intention of casting Ariel Sharon in the role of Abraham, nor, of course, do his sons resemble Isaac. Secondly, the role of the God who tested Abraham is taken in our story by the media and representatives of the law. This, however, should not be taken as evidence that we share the common inclination among certain public figures in Israel to attribute mythic powers to these bodies.

The Test

The story of the *Akedah* begins with a test. "After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I'" (Genesis, 22, 1). The Bible stresses the importance of unconditional loyalty to God's commands. This is Abraham's test—to find the strength to offer his son as a sacrifice to the Lord. It is indeed a trial, the hardest one of all because of his great love for his only son, but also for other reasons. Abraham has declared publicly that worship of God has nothing to do with live sacrifices, it is a matter of inward heart and of deed that should not injure others, and similar ideas. Thus the trial is immense and difficult.

The Jewish sages named the test "the sacrifice of Isaac," as if to suggest that Isaac, too, shared the test. Many commentators have tried to reach a conclusion about who was more greatly tested. But perhaps the sages gave this name to the story in order to tell us that there were two partners in the act of sacrifice: for Abraham, the trial itself was the main thing, whereas Isaac learned unique lessons from the sacrifice.⁴⁷

The modern story of the sacrifice of the sons likewise begins with a test. "Good evening. I have come here this evening to respond to the despicable tale cooked up against me and against the Likud for a single purpose: to overthrow the government of Israel by a fabrication and to seize power through a lie." Sharon stresses the import of unconditional loyalty to the truth and to the responsibility borne by him. "I shall not be deflected from carrying out my duty on account of a politically motivated provocation connected with the elections. I am the head of the government. The responsibility is mine. I shall continue to act as usual, to tell the truth, and to do everything I must to defend the inhabitants of Israel and care for them, today and the day after the elections."

The Victim

The demand for a sacrifice arises right at the beginning of the story. "He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'" (Genesis 22, 2). The text returns to the motif of sacrifice over and again: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love."

Auerbach coined the phrase “deep background,” referring to the structuring of the characters in the Bible in general, and the figure of Abraham in the *Akedah* story in particular.⁴⁸ The deep background in the hero’s consciousness is of course not spelled out directly in the story. It is enshrouded in dim shadows, and only viewing the story in its broader context can give it solid form. In the deep background of the *Akedah* story are a series of tests to which Abraham has been subjected and which he has passed with honor: the promise of the land, the promise of the seed are fulfilled only after agonizing delay in a state of painful, barren aloneness.

There is a deep background to Sharon’s story, too. A number of preliminary sacrifices were demanded of him also, before the sons’ turn came. “There have been personal attacks on me; my preparedness for war has been presented as an election gimmick....This is one example of everything that has been happening here in the last few weeks. To begin with, there was the hue and cry after the whole Likud. There have been attempts to blacken an entire political movement, with all its elected representatives, down to the last one. They have tried to make us all out like the Mafia, like organized crime, and all from political motives.” Then reference is made to a real victim: “Then they went one stage further and tried to get at me through my sons. They picked on Omri, whose only sin was to help me, as prime minister, and tried to turn him into a figure from organized crime. When that failed they tried to find some story about a Greek island and make it stick to Gil’ad any way they could.” While in the Bible story there is only one beloved son, the political *Akedah* story doubles the demands made. There are two beloved sons.

Abraham’s Reaction

After hearing the words of the Lord, Abraham rises early in the morning and sets out on his way. “So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass...and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22, 3). Abraham does not impose the preparations for execution of the command on anyone else, he arises early to carry them out himself; he does not wait to reach the appointed place to chop the wood for the altar, in the hope that perhaps the awful edict might be changed.

In the contemporary *Akedah* story, after Sharon has read the hostile newspaper investigation, his personal assistant calls a

news conference. Only when it becomes clear that the storm is still raging does Sharon come personally to every home in Israel by means of a live broadcast of another press conference.

Whereas Abraham sets out at once, as the Lord commands, Sharon tries to defer or appeal the edict. In the first place, according to him, it is no edict, but an enemy plot. The scheming foe, i.e., the Labor party, decided "for reasons of its own, out of internal political necessity, to drag the whole country into elections...even I never dreamed how wantonly and irresponsibly they could act."

Sharon—the heroic leader—responds swiftly to the cowardly foe's actions. "I acted at once—Mitzna did nothing. I immediately announced that I would remove from the Likud and from the government anyone elected improperly, and I did so. Mitzna did nothing, nothing at all. I appointed a commission to block the loopholes in a democratic procedure, and I adopted its recommendations. Mitzna did nothing."

The leader's response, of course, is backed by his faith in the group he leads. "I know the people of this country. I have served the people for many years now. From the field of battle to the head of government....Right now certain groups are trying to mount an attack on me, but the people understand that this is all politics—dirty, petty politics—because they are a wise people, a people that know the difference between truth and lies, between what is important and what is cheap gossip. Our people want life."

The Bible's way of transmitting meanings is through key words that guide us beyond what is directly narrated as events take their course. The story of the *Akedah* provides a splendid example of the guide-word. The ones we find in this chapter are "here am I," which occurs three times, and "the place," which occurs four times. The story is clearly divided into two levels: discourse (the dialogs) and action. "Here am I" is found on the discourse level, and "the place" on the level of action.

"Here am I" are the first words spoken by Abraham in response to the call of the Lord, and the only ones he utters for a period of three days in the course of the story. They are spoken before the Lord's command is given, signifying that Abraham is unconditionally prepared to perform whatever the Lord demands of him. To sign an open check, so to speak, in unquestioning faith. Incidentally, at the last, decisive moment, the words "Here am I" are spoken once more.⁴⁹

In the course of his speech Sharon repeats the word "I" fifty-one times. Although he begins his press conference with an ex-

planation of its purpose, he quickly moves on to an explanation of his actions. "I ask....I must admit even I didn't dream..." and so on. The discourse level in his appeal to the nation is full of his readiness to do what must be done. He ends his speech by declaring, "I hear its opinions....I will not be deflected....I will continue to act as always, I am the head of the government, and the responsibility is mine; now and after the elections." The repetition of "Here am I" at the most fateful points in the Bible story, like Sharon's repetitions of "I" at the crucial moments of his speech, make us feel the deep inner struggle taking place, and how powerful it is.

We feel, say the commentators, the force of the "here am I" welling out from the inner depths of the man, while the second key word, "the place," denotes the setting in which Abraham will undergo his last test. Three times the word appears before the *Akedah*, and once more after. In its different contexts, the word throws an ever darker shadow of dread with each repetition.

The level of action in the speech is marked by the repetition of the word "elections"; he repeats it thirteen times. As "the place" is where Abraham faces his final test, so are the elections Sharon's final tests. At the beginning of the speech he repeats the word twice as the motive force for the whole story, "About two months ago, the Labor party decided, in view of its own inner political needs, to drag the whole country into an election campaign. I said at the time that these elections are unnecessary." He ends the speech by promising, "I shall not be deterred by the electoral tactics of political provocation from performing my duty....The responsibility is mine. I shall continue as always...doing everything I must...both today and after the elections. Because life doesn't end on Election Day—we have to go on living here the day after, too. I shall not be deflected, I shall go on, I am the head of government....Now, and after the elections."

The Meaning of the *Akedah*

Throughout history people have risked their lives for ideas they believed in, but with the sacrifice of Isaac, the opposite is required of Abraham. For Abraham, the sacrifice symbolizes the exact opposite of all the ideas he has cherished and preached throughout his life. It is in total opposition to the love of mercy and the love of mankind that so characterized Abraham. He, the patriarch, is called upon to sacrifice what is most dear to him, but not for a cherished idea. In sacrificing all that is dear to him, he

must crush the values he holds most sacred. This demand is the hardest of all for Abraham; hence he is singled out for special praise for standing up to the test.⁵⁰

Sharon was likewise required to sacrifice what was dear to him, while crushing his most sacred values. "Mr. Mitzna wants me to go to the police, to talk; he's even had election broadcasts scripted for this. What do I have to talk to the police about, the despicable gossip that his advisers are trying to use as fuel for his lame campaign? What should I talk about, every sorry rumor that he and his people spread about? About their broadcasts? Has he been to the police about his dirty deals? Is he talking to the police about the swindles in his party? Has he actually done anything? No, he hasn't."

The Meaning of Isaac for Abraham

For the patriarch Abraham, Isaac is far more than a son. Isaac is for Abraham the sole promise for the continued existence of his spiritual legacy, the labor of the hundred years before Isaac's birth, the doctrine to which he reared his son as his successor. Without a successor, Abraham's entire spiritual legacy is endangered. Abraham is required not only to offer up his son, but also to sacrifice his spiritual legacy. Again, unlike all those who have risked their lives for their ideals, Abraham is required, by giving up what he holds most dear, to endanger the unique way laid down by him, the way he has taught all his life.

For Sharon, the attack on his sons is an attack on the continuation of his political legacy. The attempt to hurt Omri, "whose only sin is that he came to help me, as prime minister," is made by "likening him to organized crime. When that failed, they tried to find a trumped-up story about some Greek island and make it stick to Gil'ad any way they could." But Sharon is "not prepared to play this rotten game. If the police want answers, let them come, let them ask their questions, I shall tell them everything I know about it, I shall hide nothing. Because I have nothing to hide; nothing! By all means let them come and ask; they will get answers."

Abraham stands up to the test of the *Akedah*. He is obedient to the divine command. He hastens gladly and respectfully to fulfill it. "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass...and he cut the wood for the burnt offering" (Genesis 22, 3). In the modern *Akedah* story, on the other hand, Sharon protests against the demand to sacrifice his sons, and names all kinds of

“guilty parties” in the situation. First, there is the Labor party: “The only thing in their heads is elections. They think the whole world turns around them and their chances of winning another little piece of power”; then there is the media—“along comes some journalist with a juicy story...they invent things, they tell lies, they exaggerate bits of gossip, they trade in fiction”; then people from the state attorney’s office, and so on. However, while the angel halts the sacrifice of Isaac, there is nobody to stop the sacrifice of the Sharon sons.

Now we have reached the high point of the drama, the sacrifice of the sons. “Just over a year ago, the state comptroller found that contributions had been accepted in contravention of the law, and I was informed of this. I was appalled at the discovery, went home to the ranch, and spoke to my sons. I told them myself, of my own accord: all the money must be returned to the donors....I myself have no financial resources....When my sons came back from military service, they took over the management of the ranch, along with their other business affairs....I tell you frankly, I didn’t know exactly how the money had been raised. We talked about mortgaging the ranch, and as far as I knew at the time that was what was done. When I was questioned about it by the police; that was what I said. That I don’t know exactly, that my sons took care of the affair, that as far as I knew they mortgaged the ranch. If it turns out that they found another way, all the better.”

What began as a titanic struggle against the sacrifice of the sons ended up with a resonant disclaimer of responsibility; with an accusatory finger pointing in their direction. Whereas Isaac was saved when the angel of the Lord called Abraham from above, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him” (Genesis 22, 12), the Sharon sons were saved in 2001 but not in 2003. By the time it became clear to Judge Mishael Cheshin that “This is not a press conference at all, it is the most virulent kind of election propaganda on the part of the prime minister,”⁵¹ and he stopped the television and radio broadcasts, it was too late. The sons had already undergone a very severe socialization process—a process of political socialization in which the father’s indulgence was replaced by the stringent rule of the “Isaac syndrome,” described in Shoham’s book.⁵² The sons—in this case, Omri and Gil’ad—are expelled from the bosom of the family, where they generally enjoy unconditional indulgence, into the unforgiving rat-race of competition and full responsibility in all the legal and normative sense. Perhaps in 2003 they were mature enough to go through this rite of passage than they were in 2001. In this sense Sharon, through his sacrifice, mediates between his sons and the

socio-political rules, and helps integrate them into the normative system of society.

Conclusions

We began this article with a question about the relationships between fathers and sons in Israeli politics, and we will end with it. Every single day between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we refer to the *Akedah* chapter relating the sacrifice of Isaac. During this period the *Akedah* is under intense focus.⁵³ According to tradition, the sages taught that the *Akedah* itself took place on Yom Kippur. How symbolic that Ariel Sharon came out of the Yom Kippur war a controversial hero. How symbolic that the press conference called by him after the revelations in *Ha'aretz* turns into his holding action to stop the tide of voters leaving the Likud. How symbolic that instead of Mount Moriah, there is a press conference—a media pseudo-event.

In order to answer the question of father-son relationships, we should perhaps ask who stands to gain from the conference. Who stands to gain from the *Akedah*? In that story there are two main “winners,” Abraham and Isaac, for “I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Genesis 22, 17). The promise appears to be to the seed of Isaac. However, it also says, “and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22, 18). But this blessing carries a price. Coming down from Mount Moriah, the sacrificer and the sacrifice are no longer together.

Somewhat cold-bloodedly, Sharon and his team of consultants decide, right after the press conference, to consign Omri and Gil'ad to the “underground.” Both “disappear” from the media and distance themselves from all overt public activity while he continues his election campaign. Not until January 28 does Omri come back to help with the logistic management of the election. Ariel Sharon was elected as Israel's prime minister-to-be, and his son, Omri, was elected to serve as a member of Knesset for the Likud party.

However, political gain carries a cost too; the parting of ways between Abraham and Isaac; the parting of Sharon and his sons. The sacrifice of Isaac, like the sacrifice of Omri and Gil'ad, begins with the son sacrificing himself for his father. The sages say that Isaac demanded the sacrifice. At some point, midway up the

hill, "they went both of them together," and to confirm the strength of the togetherness, "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!'" (Genesis 22, 7). Immediately after Sharon's election as prime minister in 2001, he sent his son Omri on state missions (although performing missions of this kind on behalf of the prime minister and the state is illegal because of his kinship and the conflicts of interest that arise under the circumstances). The prime minister claims that his son's mission is essential for stopping the violence in the area, and that Arafat, in fact, chose Omri as emissary. The father and the son were sacrificing each other in Israeli politics. Is this their way of indicating the beginning of the parting of their ways?

Perhaps so; according to the mytho-empiric model of the sacrifice of Isaac, there is a symbiotic relationship between the authoritative father and the metaphysical source of absolute authority. Paternal victimization of sons leads to the separation inherent in the integration of the maturing child into the accepted normative framework of society. But every such integration involves restrictions or sacrifices in terms of the freedom and convenience of the young adult for the benefit and well-being of the group and its justifiable rules. According to the model, Ariel Sharon and his sons have begun to go separate ways.

Notes

1. For example, Yonatan Shapira, *An Elite without Successors* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1984) [Hebrew]; Yonatan Shapira, *You Chose Us to Govern* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989) [Hebrew].
2. S. Giora Shoham, *The Dialogue between Myth and Chaos* (Tel Aviv: Ramot, 2002) [Hebrew].
3. Lauri Honko, "The Problem of Defining Myth," in A. Dundes, ed., *Sacred Narrative, Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 41-52.
4. Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
6. David Ochana and Robert S. Wistrich, "Introduction: The Presence of Myths in Judaism, Zionism, and the Israeli Being," in D. Ochana and R.S. Wistrich, eds., *Myth and Memory* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1996), pp. 11-40 [Hebrew].
7. Gabriel A. Almond and Sindey Verba, *The Civic Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963); Ma'oz Azaryahu, *The Rituals of the State: Independence Day Celebrations and*

- Remembrance of the Fallen, 1948-1956* (Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 1995) [Hebrew].
8. John Flowerdew, "The Discourse of Colonial Withdrawal: A Case Study in the Creation of Myth Discourse," *Discourse and Society* 8 (4) (1997):453-478.
 9. Rinaldo S.V. Arruda, "Rikbaktsa Myths: History, Society and Nature (Mitos Rikbaktsa: historia, sociedade e natureza)," *Margem* 5 (1) (1996):31-57.
 10. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*.
 11. Henry Tudor, *Political Myth*.
 12. To mention a few: Uri Even, *Arik—Fighter's Way* (Tel Aviv: Bustan, 1974) [Hebrew]; Uri Dan, *Bridgehead* (Tel Aviv: A.L. Special Publication, 1975) [Hebrew]; Uzi Benziman, *Sharon—An Israeli Caesar* (Tel Aviv: Adam, 1984) [Hebrew]; Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (Jerusalem: Schocke, 1984) [Hebrew]; Uzi Benziman, *I Spoke the Truth* (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2002) [Hebrew]; Oded Kotler, *The Crow and the Starling* (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 2002) [Hebrew].
 13. In January 1954 the unit was amalgamated with the paratroop battalion under his command, and this battalion continued carrying out the same unconventional operations behind enemy lines.
 14. Between 1958 and 1962 he commanded an infantry brigade, headed an infantry training school, and studied at Tel Aviv University's School of Law. It was not until Yitzhak Rabin's appointment as army chief of staff in 1964 that Sharon's advancement in the army recommenced.
 15. After the war, he returned to his command as the head of the IDF's training division, in which capacity he transferred training bases to Judea and Samaria. In 1969 he was appointed major-general of Southern Command, where he was engaged in the fortification of the Bar-Lev line and played an active part in the War of Attrition, while severely criticizing the methods of Chaim Bar-Lev, the chief of staff at that time.
 16. From June 1975 until March 1976 Sharon served as special adviser to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and began planning his comeback into politics. After sounding out several political parties, he formed one of his own (the Shlomzion party), which won two seats in the ninth Knesset in 1977, but very quickly merged with the Herut movement.
 17. Sharon was appointed to the Ministry of Trade and Industry in the national unity government after the elections to the eleventh Knesset (1984), and in February 1990 he announced his resignation from the government. On 15 March 1990 the government fell on a vote of no confidence. Yitzhak Shamir formed a government in June and appointed Sharon as minister of housing and construction.
 18. In Israel's Knesset, *Glossary*; <http://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/heb/sharon.htm> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].

19. There have been several tragedies in Sharon's personal life. His first wife, Margalit, was only thirty when she was killed in a road accident. In 1968 his eleven year-old son, Gur, was killed when a revolver he was playing with went off by accident. Lily, the wife who stood shoulder to shoulder with him for many years, died in 2000. Ariel Sharon is a widower with two sons, and resides at his Shikmim ranch. "Ariel Sharon—From Unit 101 to Likud leader," Y-net, 7.1.2003; <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-398308,00.html> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
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21. S. Giora Shoham, *God as the Shadow of Man* (New York: Lang, 2000).
22. Charles Liebman, "The Myth of Defeat," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 29 (1993):399-418.
23. Itzhak Roeh and Shmuel Feldman, "The Rhetoric of Numbers on the Front Page," in D. Caspi and Y. Limor, eds., *The Mass Media in Israel* (Ramat Aviv: Open University, 1998), pp. 440-454 [Hebrew].
24. Ya'acov Yadgar, *Intellectuals and Tradition: Leading Journalists' Treatment of the National Narrative in Israel, 1967-1997* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, doctoral dissertation, 1999) [Hebrew].
25. Murray J. Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham, 1971).
26. Avi Sagi, "The Meaning of the Akedah in Israeli Culture and Jewish Tradition," *Israel Studies*, 3 (1) (1998):45-60.
27. Avi Sagi, "The Meaning of the Akedah in Israeli Culture and Jewish Tradition."
28. S. Giora Shoham, *The Dialogue between Myth and Chaos*.
29. Yoav Yitzhak, "Ariel Sharon will be able to Appoint His Son within the Quota of the Prime Ministerial Office," 13.2.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/showonedoc.asp?SubjectId=1&DocId=322&PageNumber=&GoBackXTimes> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
30. Yoav Yitzhak, "Rubinstein Disapproves of the Participation of Omri Sharon in Political Negotiations—May Promote Nepotism," 5.4.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/showonedoc.asp?SubjectId=1&DocId=712&PageNumber=&GoBackXTimes> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
31. Yoav Yitzhak, "Sharon Decided to Continue Relying on his Son's Omri Sharon's Services, Despite Rubinstein's Ruling," 15.4.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/archive/001-D-787-00.html?tag=9-54-46> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
32. Yoav Yitzhak, "The High Court Judges Allow in Principle Omri Sharon's Missions in Cases of Saving a Life," 4.5.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/showonedoc.asp?SubjectId=1&DocId=967&PageNumber=&GoBackXTimes> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
33. Yoav Yitzhak, "The Prime Minister Considers the Appointment of his Son Omri Sharon Foreign Ministry Employee, Subordinate to Shimon Peres," 12.5.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/showonedoc.asp?>

- SubjectId=1&DocId=1058&PageNumber=&GoBackXTimes [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
34. Yoav Yitzhak, "Ariel Sharon's Sheep," 5.10.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/showArticles.asp?subjectId=3&DocId=666&PageNumber=&GoBackXTimes> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
 35. Yoav Yitzhak, "Rubinstein Ordered Police Investigation for Suspicions of Criminal Violations in Ariel Sharon's Campaign," 10.10.2001; <http://www.nfc.co.il/ShowOneDoc.asp?docID=3272&SubjectID=1> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
 36. Baruch Kra, "How and Why did \$1.5 m. get into Gil'ad and Omri Sharon's Bank Account? Police Investigate," *Ha'arets*, 7.1.2003; <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArtSR.jhtml?itemNo=249831&objNo=52417&returnParam=Y> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. This much is known about the Greek Island affair: a businessman with close Likud ties, David Appel, engaged Gil'ad Sharon to promote a big real estate project on a Greek island. The State Attorney's Office has reason to suspect that the choice of Sharon to act in this matter was not solely because of his professional credentials in finance, but also because his father was a government minister during the relevant period (1998-1999). According to the agreement between Appel and Sharon, if the project was carried out, Sharon was to receive \$3 million in two installments of \$1.5 million each. Their business connection was not only with respect to the Greek deal, but to an additional one in Spain. Appel had confirmed in the past that he had paid Gil'ad Sharon \$640,000 as consultation fees; he promised Sharon that he would make the sum up to \$1.5 million if one of the two projects he was involved with materialized. In view of the Spanish project's success, it is probable that the balance of \$860,000 was transferred to Gil'ad Sharon.
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 41. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcast of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
 42. Tamar Liebes, "Television's Disaster Marathons: A Danger for Democratic Processes?" in T. Liebes and J. Curran, eds., *Media, Ritual and Identity* (London and New-York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 71-84.
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 45. Daniel G. Boorstin, *The Image: The Guide to Pseudo Events in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
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50. Zalman Baruch Melamed, "The 'Vayira' Portion," Beit Midrash Yeshivat Beit El; <http://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/doc/doc3/vayera62U.doc> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].
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52. S. Giora Shoham, *The Dialogue Between Myth and Chaos*.
53. Mordechai Allon, "The Akedah Portion for Shabat Shuvah," 3 Tishrei 2003; <http://www.kerenyishai.org/shiur-hebrew-doc/teshuva63.doc> [20.2.2003] [Hebrew].