LEKH LEKHA

Travails of Faith

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing. . . .

—W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

The starting point

The story of Abraham is both beginning and end. Here begins the drama of the central family-nation of the Torah; here ends the prehistory, the rough drafts of God's intent. One such essay in creation had ended in exile (Adam driven from the Garden), the second in destruction (the Flood).

The first important phase of his life is introduced by God's command: "Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). There is no indication of circumstance, of previous encounter. Only a short preface, in which family context is sketched out:

> When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran;

> and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Avram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. (11:26–31)

Against the flow of generations of chapter 11—"This is the line of Shem. . . ." (11:10)—is set the central absence of Abraham's life: "Sarai was barren, she had no child" (11:30). *Toledot*, the word translated here as "line" and more commonly as "generations," is rich with a sense of the power of generation, of the multiple birthings, the realized consequences of potentialities inherent in each lifespan. And, ironically, it is the root of this word (*vlad*) that is used to refer to Sarai's childlessness: it is precisely this that she has not: the *vlad* that is the barest notation for some expression of self that lives on beyond self, an essence projected toward eternity.

"She had no child"—*ein la vlad*—the three pungent Hebrew words are freighted with irony. For this significant pair are marked by an emptiness, while all the "dying generations" (Yeats) effortlessly reproduce themselves. This is essentially the business of all other lives, as each generation enacts an identical ritual: the individual, generated by his father, lives a specified number of years; he then generates, projects a version of self beyond self, after which he lives a further tally of years and produces "sons and daughters." In this scheme, a central act of self-propagation is flanked by a period of immaturity and by a historically insignificant period of biological fertility. The expectation built up by the repeated formula is brought to a head in the almost feverish emphasis on Terah's generativeness: clearly, the narrative is closing in on its focus.

But here the rhythm changes: there is death (not the natural kind, but before the shocked face of the father [11:28]), and there is sterility. The resounding negation *ein la vlad* cruelly confirms: what was expected as part of the natural thrust of existence *is not*. Here, the language of the Torah enacts what Bergson calls "the peculiar possibility of the negative." In nature, Bergson argues, there are no negative conditions; only in the realm of consciousness, of desire and expectation, disappointment

and frustration, does the knowledge of the negative exist. Memory and imagination attach to a phantom object, in this case the *vlad*, the offspring, which bestrides positive reality and cries out *ein*—"no!" "Every human action has its starting-point in a dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling of absence."[1]

The "human action" of Abram and Sarai begins in this absence. The midrash expresses this paradox of generation as follows: "Wherever it is written '*Ein la*—there is not,' there essentially *is*."[2] A similar comment is made on the poignant leitmotif of absence in Lamentations: *ein la menaḥem*—"there is none to comfort her" (1:2); *ein av*—"we have become orphans, *fatherless*" (5:3). In the latter case, Midrash Rabbah refers to the paradigm of Esther, who is fatherless and motherless, and therefore is nurtured to a singular sensibility of absence and hope (Esther 2:7). What is suggested here in this first human experience of *ein*[3] is a new and difficult mode of being and having: absence leads a man and a woman to travel far in search of a realization of self that comes effortlessly to those who preceded and surrounded them.

Abram's wanderings

Here begins the journey of *Lekh lekha* (12:1)—with its strange order of abandonments—first land, then community ("moladetkha"—again, the *vlad* root: "Leave that which produced you as one possible realization of its potential"), and, finally, father's house. For the first time, a journey is undertaken not as an act of exile and diminution (Adam, Cain, and the dispersed generation of Babel), but as a response to a divine imperative that articulates and emphasizes displacement as its crucial experience.

For what is most striking here is the *indeterminacy* of the journey. What is left behind, canceled out, is defined, clearly circled on the map of Abram's being; but his destination is merely "the land that I shall show you": from "your land," the landscape of your basic self-awareness, to a place that you will know only when the light falls on it with a difference.

There is some discussion in the commentaries about the extent of Abram's knowledge of his destination. Ramban considers the possibility that Abram knows from the beginning that his destination is Canaan, since his father began a family journey to that destination, which was interrupted and resumed by Abram at this point after his father's death (11:31). However, the other possibility, radical and disturbing in its implications, is that Abram has *no* idea of his destination when the call comes to him.

> "*To the land that I shall show you*": he wandered aimlessly from nation to nation and kingdom to kingdom, till he reached Canaan, when God told him, "To your seed I shall give this land" (12:7). This was the fulfillment of "to the land that I will show you," and therefore he settled there. . . . Before that, he did not yet know that that land was the subject of the command. . . . That is why he later said to Avimelekh, "God made me wander from my father's house" (20:13). For indeed, he wandered like a lost lamb.[4]

On this view, Abram wanders from place to place, till God "appears" to him and, in a revelation that includes Godhead and Land, "shows" him the place of destination. ("And he built an altar *there* to the Lord who had appeared to him" [12:7].) This reading is powerfully underwritten by the verse, quoted by Ramban, in which Abraham himself sums up his life on the road, in his apologia to Avimelekh: "So when God *made me wander* from my father's house . . ." (20:13). Ramban hears in the word *hitu* ("made me wander") a resonance of the poignant image in Psalms: "I have strayed like a lost sheep; search for Your servant" (119:176). The Psalmist cries out of his sense of imperiled contingency. His journey is trackless, unmapped; but his cry evokes the ultimate responsibility of the absent Shepherd to choreograph a meeting with His lost sheep. The disoriented consciousness of the Psalmist retains a core sense of relation-in-absence: he concludes his appeal, "for I have not forgotten Your commandments."

What Ramban evokes here is an Abraham who is set on a course of total displacement, a series of encounters with *mekomot*, geocultural environments to be entered, known, and left.[5] This directionless traveling is in one sense a *travailing* that is intimately connected with the quest for birth. The Oxford English Dictionary glosses *travel*: "1. torment, distress, suffer afflictions, suffer pains of parturition. 2. make a journey, from one place to another."

Rashi, too, seems to understand the nature of Abraham's journey in this way: "When God took me out of my father's house to be a vagrant, roaming from place (*makom*) to place. . . . Anyone who is exiled from his place (*makom*) and is not settled is called a wanderer" (20:13). Even the plural verb, strangely used for "made me wander" (*hitu*), suggests a

plurality of *mekomot*, of existential frames of being, lacking coherent connection in an unmapped universe. Rashi's final prooftext, "They wander about without food" (Job 38:41), suggests the full paradox of a vital (and in that sense tensely focused) quest, enacted in empirical randomness.[6]

Midrash Tanhuma espouses this view of Abram's first trial: "Is there a man who travels without knowing to what destination [*makom*] he travels?"[7] A journey without apparent destination: absurdity at each step. The midrash gives us mocking voices that weave through Abram's consciousness as he travels: "Look at this old man! Traveling through the country, looking like a madman!"[8]

If the experience of indeterminacy is of the essence of this first trial of Abram (called in the midrash "the test *within* a test"—the heart of darkness within the travail of *lekh lekha*), then it is echoed hauntingly and even more explicitly in the mystery of his last trial, that other *lekh lekha* of the Binding of Isaac (22:2). Abraham is to take his son, Isaac, the long-delayed fruition of his longing, and sacrifice him on one of the mountains, "which I shall tell you." For three days he travels "to the place [*makom*] of which God had told him" (22:3). What is this "place"? Does God *name* the place? Then why the indeterminacy of the original demand? Or does he travel to No Place, to the place that God has told him He has not yet told him?

Abraham's life of vital experience ("God put Abraham to the test" [22:1]—*nissa* is trial, experiment, the knowing of self in muscular action) is thus framed by journeys that are travails of contingency, knowing what it means not (yet) to be shown, to be told.

Barrenness and alienation

"Sarai was barren"—the barrenness of Sarai evokes the other meaning of the word *akara*: the couple is uprooted, the ground cut from under their feet. Voluntarily, they respond to a call to alienation from all that gives self a placement in the world. By removing themselves from the normal conditions of fruitfulness, they—at least on the face of things—cut off vital sources of nourishment, doom themselves to a sterile nomadic existence, in which no organic fibers of connection and fertility can grow. That is why, according to Rashi (12:1), the blessings that follow immediately on the call of *lekh lekha* are so necessary and so paradoxical. The

divine command thrusts Abram and Sarai into the eye of the storm, takes the problem of *akarut* (barrenness) and has them act out all the meanings of deracination, of disconnection from a succession of pasts.

An act of radical discontinuity is, it seems, depicted in the Torah as the essential basis for all continuity: for that act of birth that will engender the body and the soul of a new kind of nation. At the very beginning of human life on earth, after God had created Eve—had made Adam unconscious, removed a rib, and closed the flesh—the narrative voice had proclaimed: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh" (2:24). The Targum translates, "Therefore shall a man leave *his parents' bedroom*": there is a profound and often wrenching act of relinquishing to be undertaken, before new unions can be established. The sterility of the child's involvement in the "family romance" has to be left behind, in order that the self may find the Other and, according to Rashi, in order that the new being, the *vlad*, may be born. The Oedipal problem indicated by the Targum here is the basis for a cultural and probably counterinstinctual directive by God.[9]

Abram's journey "from your father's house" can perhaps be seen as a realization on a much more complex plane of this original and universal demand. He detaches himself from a spurious or at least outgrown place within an organism. He and Sarai are *akarim*, they recognize the sterility of the place that nurtured them. In the full tension of that paradox, they exile themselves to place after place and encounter new possibilities of being.

Their *akarut*, in its double sense of infertility and rootlessness, is placed in a context of ultimate blessing. ("And I shall make you into a great nation and I shall bless you and make your name great, and you will be a source of blessing" [12:2].) However, the midrash allows us no facile resolution of the tension of their lives: " 'He makes the *akara*, the woman who is the essence of the house [lit., the barren woman] to sit as the happy mother of children' [Psalms 113:9]: this refers to Sarai, as it is said, 'And Sarai was *akara*—barren.' "[10] Sarai is described as both the barren one and the joyous mother; these are not simply successive stages of a life, but both remain necessary functions of her identity. Her later happiness never obviates the twin image of alienation: the pun that the midrash sets in focus insists on alienation-sterility as the very condition of Sarai's significant maternity.

The essential drama of Abram and Sarai is always to be expressed in paradoxical terms: Sarai is *always* both *akara* and "mother of children." Or, as the midrash puts it, "'*I will make of you a great nation*' [12:2]: coinage was issued with his image on it. What image was engraved on the coinage? An old man and woman on one face, a young man and girl on the other."[11]

Abram and Sarai acquire "currency" in the world, their image acquires a mythic potency, just because it is *two-faced*: they are forever old and young, barren and fruitful.[12] Through them, a dialectical vision seizes the imagination of human beings.

The *imperative of transformation*

The imperative of transformation is the driving force of Lekh Lekha. To leave one's place is ultimately to seek to become other. *Makom*, the word that becomes a leitmotif in midrashic meditations on Abraham's life, indicates not only physical space, but existential condition. *Makom* is the horizon of one's *kiyyum*, one's existence: the two words are clearly related. When Rashi (15:5) sees in Abraham's change of name yet another facet of his change of "place," he includes both imperatives under the rubric of a desired self-realization: "Abram has no son, but Abraham has a son. Similarly, Sarai shall not give birth, but Sarah shall give birth. I call you by a different name and your destiny shall change." The demand on Abraham and Sarah is to leave one existential environment, one set of paradigms, to emerge ("He took him outside" [15:5]) from their enclosure in the present (deathly sterile when outgrown) into a new condition, in which a fertile self-realization becomes possible.

The promise/demand of God is "I will make of you a great nation," which the Tanḥuma translates, "I shall create you anew."[13] In this reading, the call of *lekh lekha* is an urging to self-transformation: at base, that is the meaning of a change of name, or a change of place.

Rambam speaks of teshuva, the penitential process, as involving the same enactment of transformation: "The penitent should . . . change his name, as if to say, I am another, I am not the same person who did those things."[14] To become *other* is to cut oneself off from the existential conditions of previous nurturings.

Saul, for example, is to be transformed in a prophetic trance: "You will become another man" (1 Samuel 10:6–11). The response of his social

world ("All who knew him previously") is a blank skepticism: "What's happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul too among the prophets?" The abrupt discontinuity in Saul's identity rings false to those who have known him organically over time, going back to his origin as "son of Kish." Significantly, "another person there," an inhabitant of Saul's new world, responds to the skeptics: "And who are *their* fathers?" (10:12)—"What has the past, its social-psychological structures, to do with the inspiration of prophecy?" "Is Saul too among the prophets?" then becomes an aphorism. Saul's case crystallizes the radical but not uncommon phenomenon of conversion. In this instance, the conversion is charismatic: a turn of Saul's shoulder and God gives him another heart. Perhaps that is why he finds it so difficult to live his new condition authentically. That way madness lies.

The model of transformation presented by Abraham is more complex and ambiguous. The Talmud[15] speaks of a number of possibilities for transforming the perceptions of a life. The givens and predictabilities of a particular destiny may be subverted by acts of passionate will—by, for instance, a change of name—on some views, by a change of place (*makom*). For this strategy in "shredding a predetermined destiny," Abraham's odyssey is the paradigm: "Go forth from your land. . . . I will make of you a great nation." The "shredding of destiny"—there is *kri'ah*, a tearing apart of a *gestalt* apparently cut-and-dried. (*Gezar din* is literally the "cutting edge of judgment," the irrevocable sentence of fate.) It *is* possible, the Sages insist—and Abraham is the first to live this possibility—to move to a new place, to deconstruct all the structures of the old place of being, and in a radical act of *kri'ah*, of *akirah*,[16] to create entirely new paradigms of reality.

"I shall create you anew"—the call of God is the quasi-autonomous urge of man to create himself anew: "God took on the guise of a man who urges [*doḥek*—presses, squeezes, creates a sense of pressure or need] his friend, 'Go from your land.'"[17] The midrash, using the figure of God-as-friend, reduces the transcendent force of the command-from-beyond: *lekh lekha* becomes a divine-human drive, mysteriously originating within Abram himself, for the sake of his own enlargement and self-realization.[18] A voice urging discontinuity seduces him: only through a destabilizing process can Abraham move from being Abram (*av ram*), the father of Aram ("which was his place, *mekomo*," says Rashi [17:5]—suggesting the mastery over a known modality of existence, a sterile fatherhood) to

being Abraham (*av hamon goyim*), the father of many nations—master of multiple, successive places, who can then engender his true being ("Abraham has a son").

Rambam's view: Abraham as intellectual innovator

But how is such transformation achieved? In the Torah text, the call and response are instantaneous: culture and sense of self are jettisoned in an act without past or future.[19] It is relevant here to consider William James's discussion of instantaneous conversions, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. What lies behind such experiences, in James's analysis, is a long incubation period, in which subconscious elements prepare themselves for a flowering, which is as much of a process as an event. "To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."[20] The explosive emergence into daylight of hot and live ideas has had to bide its time, while a hidden process of growth takes place.

The complexity of Abraham's incubation emerges from Rambam's classic account of the spiritual and intellectual prehistory of Lekh Lekha:

> When this giant was weaned, he began to *roam around in his mind*, while he was still small, and began to think by day and by night, and he would wonder, "How is it possible that this sphere moves constantly without there being a mover, or one to turn it, for it is impossible that it turns itself?" And he had no teacher or source of knowledge but he was sunk among senseless idol worshippers in Ur of the Chaldeans; his parents and the whole people worshipped idols and he worshipped with them. But *his mind roamed* in search of understanding till he achieved the true way and understood out of his own natural intelligence. He knew that there is one God who moves the spheres, who created everything, and there is none beside Him. He knew that the whole world was in error and that the cause of their error was that they worshipped idols and images, so that they had lost the truth. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. As soon as he achieved this knowledge, he entered into dialogue with the people of Ur of the Chaldeans and contended with them about the truth of their beliefs, and he broke the idols, and began to tell the people that it is not right to worship anyone but the God of the world, and it is right to worship Him and bring sacrifices to Him, so that all future generations will recognize Him; that it is right to smash all the images so as to remove error from the people. . . . When his arguments prevailed over them, the king sought to kill him and a miracle happened for him, and he left Haran. Then he began to stand and to cry out aloud to the whole world and to tell them that the whole world has one God, whom alone it is right to worship. He would cry out while traveling, and gather people around him from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom till he reached the land of Canaan, and there too he cried out, as it is said, "And he cried out in the name of the Lord, God of the world." And when people gathered round him and asked him the meaning of his words, he would tell each one individually according to his capacity, till he brought him back to the true way. Thousands and myriads gathered round him and become part of his household, and he implanted in their hearts this great principle and wrote books and taught it to Isaac, his son.[21]

On this reading, Abraham undergoes an autodidactic process, from the age of three (he begins "small," though he is called a giant from the outset) to the age of forty. It is a process of cognitive questioning that leads him logically to the First Cause ("How is it possible? . . . It is impossible"). This inner process alienates him, teacherless and fatherless, from his entire world. Externally, however, he remains integrated into his society, until the process is completed.

Then begins, literally, his iconoclastic phase, which in Rambam's account is primarily a philosophical contesting of ideas, in which Abraham defeats his opponents. As part of his development, he becomes a peripatetic teacher of monotheism, arriving finally (and without mention of the originating *lekh lekha* moment) at Canaan. In Rambam's account, Abraham's life is essentially the continuous growth of a thinker, teacher, and writer. His early development is characterized by a striking and repeated expression:—"he began to wander in his mind [*le-shotet be-da'ato*]." This suggests a freedom from the cognitive norms of his society, a kind of inner vagabondry, even while he maintains an outward conformism.

Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, writes of the process by which scientists come to reject old paradigms—the activity of puzzle solving within the parameters of "normal science"—and to see reality in terms of new structures: "discovering a new sort of phenomenon is necessarily a complex event, one which involves recognizing both *that* something is and *what* it is."[22] Characteristics of such discoveries include "the previous awareness of anomaly, the gradual and simultaneous emergence of both observational and conceptual recognition,

and the consequent change of paradigm categories and procedures often accompanied by resistance. There is even evidence that these same characteristics are built into the nature of the perceptual process itself."[23]

Kuhn describes a psychological experiment, in which subjects are asked to identify anomalies in playing cards shown in brief exposure. "The anomalous cards were almost always identified, without apparent hesitation or puzzlement, as normal."[24] Only on increase of exposure did hesitation and confusion ensue, and for most subjects—"sometimes quite suddenly"—correct identification of anomalous cards. The experiment provides Kuhn with a "wonderfully simple and cogent schema for the process of scientific discovery. In science, as in the playing card experiment, novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation."[25]

Normal science tends to suppress novelties but paradoxically is also effective in causing them to arise. This is because the scientist's vision becomes immensely restricted by increasing professionalization but at the same time achieves a detail and precision that allows him, knowing with precision what he should expect, to recognize that something has gone wrong. "Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm."[26]

Seen against these observations, Rambam's account of Abraham's complex and gradual movement toward a revolutionary paradigm (philosophical rather than physical)[27] yields its ambiguous force. On the one hand, "he began to roam in his mind": a perceptual process in which, just because one has mastered the current models of vision and expectation one becomes increasingly aware (an "uncomfortable" experience)[28] of anomalies that are resolved more or less suddenly in the new paradigm. (Perhaps this professionalized mastery is indicated in Rashi's note on Abram's name: "father [*av*] of Aram, *which was his place*" (17:5), where he had expertise and full familiarity.) On the other hand, there is the *gestalt* switch, the change of paradigm that "must occur all at once or not at all"[29]—he "recognized his Creator."

On this view, scientific development is "a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by noncumulative breaks." To describe Abraham's intellectual searchings as a process of "roaming in his mind" is to suggest a freedom to perceive anomalies, without recourse to preconceived paradigms. There is an open-ended quality to the expression, a free-wheeling motion set in paradoxical relation with Abraham's

conformist behavior as a "normal" scientist ("and he worshiped with them")—until the breakthrough is achieved, until he sees both *that* He is and *what* He is ("He knew that there is one God—and that He moves the spheres").

Midrash Ha-Gadol: The passionate search

If we compare Rambam's account with that in *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, however, we find a significantly different emphasis, indeed a different order of development:

> "You love righteousness and hate wickedness; rightly has God, your God, chosen to anoint you with oil of gladness over all your peers" [Psalms 45:8]. This was said with reference to Abraham, who loved God and approached close beneath the wings of His presence, and hated the idolatry of his father's house. For his father's family were idol worshippers, they manufactured images and gave them to Abraham to sell in the market. And when someone would come to buy an image from him, what would he do? He would take a hammer and batter the head of each idol, saying, "Is it this one you want? Or this one?" And when the buyer saw this, he would give up his intention and go away. And Abraham would *roam in his mind*, thinking, "How long shall we bow down to the work of our own hands? It is not right to worship and bow down to anything but the earth, which brings forth fruit and sustains us." But when he saw that the earth needs rain, and that without the sky opening and sending down rain, the earth would grow nothing at all, then he thought again: "It is not right to bow down to anything but the sky." He looked again and saw the sun which gives light to the world, and brings forth the plants, and thought, "It is not right to bow down to anything but the sun." But when he saw the sun setting, he thought, "That is no god." He looked again at the moon and the stars that give light at night, and thought, "To these it is right to bow down." But when the dawn broke, they were all effaced, and he thought, "These are no gods." He was in distress at the thought: "If these phenomena have no mover, why does one set and the other rise?" To what can this be compared? To a traveler who saw a tremendous large castle, and wanted to enter it. He examined it from all sides but could find no entry. He called out a few times but there was no response. Then he lifted up his eyes and saw red woolen cloths spread out on the roof. After that, he saw white flaxen cloths. The traveler thought, "Surely a man lives in that castle—for otherwise how would

the cloths appear and disappear?" When the master of the castle saw that he was in distress over this, he asked, "Why are you in distress? I am the master of the castle." Similarly, when Abraham saw the appearance and disappearance of phenomena in nature, he thought, "Unless there were someone in charge, this would not happen. It is not right to bow down to these, but to the One in charge." And he wandered in his mind, trying to find the truth of the matter. When God saw him in distress, He said to him, "You love righteousness"—to justify the world.[30]

Here, the inner process of search ("roaming in his mind"), is accompanied by physical expressions of rejection, anger, a kind of impatience approaching contempt for the unenlightened responses of his world and indeed of himself—"How long shall we bow down . . . ?" The anger of his iconoclasm is literally enacted here in the smashing of idols; while in Rambam's account, Abraham engages in philosophical encounters: "he entered into dialogue with the people of Ur of the Chaldeans and contended with them. . . ." The actual smashing of the idols is there merely a logical outcome of his arguments: "he began to tell them that *it is not right* to serve any but the God of the world."

In *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, Abraham acts with an immediacy and passion that Rambam modulates into a philosophical key. Even the idolatrous belief Rambam explains (in a famous passage just preceding the one we have quoted) as a philosophical error, a result of quite plausible stages of response to the world. In the midrash, the existential confrontation with each stage of hope and faith reduced to absurdity is lived through primarily by Abraham himself; it is a shared human dilemma that he endures. "When he saw . . . he looked again": repeatedly he suffers disillusion as his passion for worship is denied ("It is not right. . . ."). He lives the vicissitudes of his temporality as though he were primal man first set in the world of nature. The setting of the sun is the fading of a world of hopes and beliefs. As the cyclical dimension of time dawns on him, he comes to an utter recognition of "le néant"—"When they were all effaced, he thought, 'These are no gods.'" His reaction is emotional and personal—"he was in distress." His search issues from imperative need, like the need of the traveler to *enter* the castle, to find an opening, ultimately to receive an answering cry to his cry.

Faced with the closed facade of the castle, he observes the changing phenomena on the battlements and concludes that there *must* be a Being

who contains and harmonizes contraries within Himself. This faith is characterized by the pain and constriction of not knowing. Only after he has reached the impasse of overwhelming desire confronting total opacity ("When He saw that he was in distress"), does the Master of the Castle speak to him. In the *mashal* (parable), what He says is simply that He *is*; in the *nimshal* (the decoding of the parable), what God says is a return to the opening prooftext, now demonstrably descriptive of Abraham.

The whole thrust of the midrash, indeed, is a phenomenological account of the passion for *tzedek*, for righteousness: for a vision of the natural human world that is spiritually coherent. Abraham here becomes archetypal man in quest of meaning, the *experience* of meaning. What he wants is to *enter into* the castle, not merely to observe its changing colors. The rovings of his mind are passionate and needy; his intent finally ("to find the truth of the matter") is to find a stable core to his own existence (the truth is figured as a *basis*, a *standing* ground), and the pain of his quest is essential to the revelation he is granted. The recognition of God is not a final conclusion reached after a long private philosophical odyssey, but—as the verse about the love of righteousness indicates—an unlocated passion which inspires him with an energy for hope and disillusion that takes him through the phases of his experience.

In the midrash, then, the evocative expression, identical with Rambam's—"the roaming of his mind"—is used to very different effect. Here, Abraham bears the whole world with him in his personal anguished search. *Le-shotet*—To roam, implies full exposure to the hazards of experience. The resonance of *shoteh*—"fool"—lingers on: the radical "folly" of those who abandon safe structures and fare forth on unmapped roads.[31] In terms of the "normal science" of his world, his is a non-paradigm problem and is therefore viewed as a "distraction"[32]—irrelevant, even crazed. He is armed with no alternative paradigm but only with a pressing sense of anomaly that may find no resolution at all. His question can never be solved within the puzzle-framework of "normal science"; the question he asks is a different, a larger one; and in seeking to "enter into" the castle, he intuits an experience that is latent, not manifest in the material world.

Here, we approach the essence of the *lekh lekha* experience. In *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, after the quoted passage, the bold statement ensues: "The first trial was *tiltul*, which is the hardest of all." *Tiltul* is a kind of harassed, distracted, even confused movement. Is Abraham's journey indeed a

movement of *distraction*, in the full irony of its two senses: a drawing away, a truancy from the fruitful pursuits of life, and, ultimately, a madness? *Tiltul* is the word that is most vividly descriptive of exile;[33] to be in exile is to be "off the point," it is to be reduced to a handled passivity in which drives and compulsions dominate freely regulated motion. Like a ball, says the midrash, which is caught in the air, and can never touch ground. Or like a dove that never rests; folds one wing at a time and flies on, obedient to some instinct of the species.

Tiltul is the hardest experience of all, and it is this that is the measure of Abraham's passion: " 'Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance, Your name is like finest oil' [Song of Songs 1:3]. What did Abraham resemble? A flask of myrrh, surrounded by wadding placed in a corner, so that its fragrance could not escape. But when it was carried from place to place [*tiltul*], its fragrance wafted out."[34] The transformation of Abraham's being, which is signified in the change of his name (the "extension" of his name) can be achieved only through a readiness to submit himself to the "distractions" of placelessness. The perfume is released and diffused in the transforming discontinuities of the *lekh lekha* travail.

Bereshit Rabbah: *The castle afire*

Another version of the castle midrash is found in *Bereshit Rabbah*; the differences are significant:

> "The Lord said to Abram, Go forth from your land." "Take heed, lass, and note, incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house" [Psalms 45:11]. This is like a man who was traveling from place to place, when he saw a castle on fire. He thought, "Can you say that this castle is without a master?" Then, the master of the castle looked out at him, and said, "I am master of the castle." In the same way, since Abraham was constantly wondering, "Can you say that this world is without a Master?" God looked out at him and said, "I am Master of the world." "And let the king be aroused by your beauty; since He is your Lord" [Psalms 45:12]: And let the King be aroused by your beauty, that is, to show your beauty to the world. "And you shall bow down to Him."[35]

Here, the traveler moves from "place to place"; he sees a castle on fire, and he articulates in *negative* form a hypothesis about the meaning of the fire: "Would you say that this castle is without a master?" An uncontrolled conflagration suggests that there is no one to care for the castle, to extinguish the flames. In the negative form, the question expresses expectation disappointed. In Bergson's terms, Abraham indulges in the "peculiar possibility" that language affords: the confrontation with the "Idea of Nothing" that does not exist in nature. Only verbally can man formulate absence, and only man can move "from place to place"; can yield his firm footing in one existential frame for vertiginous space between places of *kiyyum* (clearly located being).

It is in response to this form of the question that the Master looks out at him—a revelation that reinforces the enigma. This *hatzatza*, the glance of the Master, is an intimation, a glimmer produced by the courage of the question. Ultimately, this intimation reveals the *traveler to himself*: it is a moment of self-awareness, of the extent of his protest and his terror/wonder at the Masterless world. In this flash of knowledge, the question becomes the answer; through the contingency of frustration, the traveler finds an avenue to consciousness.

Love *and madness*

This is, in fact, the reading of the midrash offered by the hasidic writer, Mei Ha-shiloah (the Ishbitzer). The emphasis here is on Abraham's quest for *himself*, for the "root of his own life." This is the literal rendition of *Lekh lekha*—"Go to *yourself*"; only in the movement inwards is the God-joy that is true life to be found. Mei Ha-shiloah also renders literally the phrase in the midrash, "The Master of the castle *looked out at him*"—the preposition *al* suggesting that Abraham is the focus of the Master's gaze. Abraham's attention, in the moment of anger and despair at the absurdity of a Masterless world, is drawn to himself. In a Kantian movement of self-awareness, he turns inward, finds a point of contact with a power not himself in his moral consciousness, in the "search for righteousness rather than . . . for truth"[36]—"You love righteousness. . . ." This is a theology that, in Peter Berger's terms,[37] begins with anthropology; the sense of outraged questioning is itself the first confrontation with God.

Sefat Emet, in commentaries on this midrash,[38] speaks of this essential capacity to detach oneself from the psychological conditions of one's being, one's standing place in the world ("Go forth *from your land*"). To move onwards to new "places" is the creative gift of the tzaddik, which is called "greatness." "I shall make you into a great nation" is the promise,

then, of the continuing expansion of possibilities and of visions. The great enemy, in this perspective, is torpor, habituation. Abraham becomes emblematic of man discovering his own life's energies, as he confronts the hiddenness of God. "Where you are, there arises a place" (Rilke). Or, in the words of the *Sefat Emet*, "Go to the Land that I shall show you—where I shall *make you visible*, where your potential being will be realized in multiform and unpredictable ways."

From this last version of the midrash, then, there emerges a sense of the journey itself, the travail, as essential to the birth and growth of self. *Tiltul*, the not always graceful lurching of uncertainty, releases the perfume; it also teeters on the verge of madness—"Look at that old man traveling about the country like a madman!" And ultimately, that is the finest compliment that is paid to Abraham. Rambam describes Abraham as the epitome of the "love of God," an ideal but rare condition, testified to by God Himself, who speaks of "Abraham, My lover" (Isaiah 41:8).[39]

> What is this condition of right love? It is, that one should love God with an excessive, powerful love, till one's soul is totally involved in love of God, and one is constantly obsessed [*shogeh*] by it, as though ill with love sickness, when there is no place in one's mind free of the love of that woman with whom one is obsessed—neither when one sits nor stands, eats nor drinks. More than this, should be the love of God in the heart of those who love Him and are obsessed by Him. This is the meaning of the command, "You shall love your God with all your heart and with all your soul. . . ." And also of King Solomon's allegory, "for I am love-sick" [Song of Songs 2:5]: indeed, the whole of Song of Songs is an allegory for this.[40]

To love is total obsession: the word used is *shogeh*, which is clearly related to *shaga*, madness. Rambam describes a kind of pathology of passionate love, human as image for the divine. The characteristic of this "love sickness" is that it *leaves no space*—it is a constant accompaniment to all the normal activities of life. It represents, then, a paradoxical union of fixity and dispersion. It is the capacity to live on two planes at once; to seem to be in possession of oneself, so that one acts within the normal limits of culture and society, and yet to know inwardly that one is utterly lost in a not-here distraction of love.

The most interesting aspect of the word *shogeh* is perhaps the fact that though it is used to express focused fascination,[41] the root meaning is almost the opposite: to be unfocused, to reel away from, to be off target

(related to *shogeg*, unwilled action). (Rashi acknowledges the paradox:[42] "Beware the *distracting* effects of passion, even for your own wife!") To be *shogeh*, or *meshugga*, is at root to be absent. In the ideal model of love of God offered by Rambam, a passionate absence from the world is paradoxically set at the heart of behavioral normalcy.

This model of Abraham's achievement represents a fragile equilibrium; on the one side, worldliness, on the other, madness. It is the awareness of this tension that characterizes Abraham's "reeling" motion. Current explanations of the world no longer work for him;[43] the *shogeh*-alienation caused by "love of righteousness" contains within it (in the English word, as well as in the Hebrew—alienation was once one of the clinical terms for madness) both hazard and the birth of a "terrible beauty."[44]

Love and mystery

Abraham's active spiritual life begins and ends, we noticed, in indeterminacy. The *lekh lekha* of the first trial is echoed by the *lekh lekha* of the last, the Akedah. In both, the nub of his experience (the "trial within the trial") is indeterminacy. ("Go . . . to the land that I shall show you" [12:1]; "Sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall tell you" [22:2].) No destination is specified. In the Akedah narrative, Isaac's name, too, is not at once revealed ("Take your son, your favored one, whom you love, Isaac" [22:2]). Rashi's comment on all three points of mystification is enigmatic: "'*that I shall show you*': He did not reveal to him the land right away, so as to endear it to him, and to give him reward for each word spoken" (12:2).

Rashi affirms a relation between mystery and love. He adds that there is a reward for each word spoken: where there is total revelation, there is no room for language; where meaning is uncertain, words, approximations of interpretation and communication, proliferate.[45] And this state, it seems, offers an opportunity to Abraham—the reward that is called *ḥiba*, love ("so as to endear it to him"). Maharal, in his supercommentary on Rashi, suggests that in the veiling of the truth, there is distress for a human being, who wants to know clearly what is God's will. This distress generates an intense receptivity to every shred of communication that comes from God. When one strains for intimations of relationship, one demonstrates *ḥiba*.

When, however, we compare Rashi's comments on the other two passages he includes here to illustrate his point, we find that they are not identical:

> "*your son*": why did He not reveal the son's name initially? So as not to confuse him abruptly, with the result of sending him out of his mind and driving him mad. Also, so as to endear the command to him and to give him reward for each word spoken. (22:2)

> "*on one of the mountains*": God keeps the righteous wondering (*mat-heh*), and only afterwards reveals meaning explicitly to them—and all this in order to increase their reward. (22:2)

Clearly, Rashi wants us to understand these three phrases as illustrations of a single motif. In the second example, however, he adds as a reason for delayed clarification the desire to preserve Abraham's sanity, which might crack under too sudden and too brutal a statement. The danger of *teruf ha-da'at*, literally, the rending of the mind, an experience of sharp dislocation and discontinuity, is thus woven into the text about love and reward. Are they quite separate reasons for delaying clarification, or has this delay, which preserves the integrity of the psyche, got something to do with love and the rewards of language? In the third example, Rashi significantly generalizes his point, to make a statement that transcends the particular narrative; it is characteristic of God's relation with the righteous that He allows them time for questioning and wonder, and only reveals the determined reality *aḥar kakh*—afterwards, ultimately.

The expression Rashi quotes from *Bereshit Rabbah* is highly evocative: *mat-heh* means to wonder, gaze, be astonished, be plunged into a sense of the unfathomable (*tehom* is the unfathomable deep, which contains all and expresses nothing: out of it emerges heaven and earth). It can mean regret, an openness to conflicting responses. The capacity to move to new paradigms of perception is the creative possibility in human life and, to the anthropomorphic imagination, it is the basis of the concept of divine forgiveness. It is called *tehiya*, the waste space between clarities.[46]

In another version of Rashi's text, the word used is *mash-heh*—delay, a time that stands still, as it were, when the flow is retarded and a freedom is granted for contemplation.[47] God gives the righteous time-out-of-time, like a still in a film, in which a different sense of being-with and being-in the crisis develops. This is the irreducible word, colorless, transparent,

for being; simple survival, the gift, the interval between the named, the placed—that exile-in-time in which selves are born.[48] In this condition of *akarut*, where nothing is assumed, between worlds of naming, a radical astonishment abides. As with Rashi's alternative term *mat-heh*, God's grace to the righteous is the "wild surmise" of discovery.[49] In this interval, each *dibbur*, each speech act, is crafted by man's articulation of God's voice out of the silence. An intense listening—and "afterwards," *aḥar kakh*—revelation.

This kind of communication between God and the human being has as its purpose *ḥiba*. Its disadvantages may be obvious—indeterminacy, loneliness, the kind of sterility and palpable absence that *akarut* in its ambiguity poignantly suggests. But the protraction of suspense in time and space is presented as a key to the experience of "love of the commandment."[50] This quality of love, intimate, familiar, personal, is the strange fruit of a dislocation that threatens Abraham's very sanity. At the core, this is the paradox of Abraham's life from alpha to omega. The crisis of *lekh lekha*, of the Akedah, is a demand for deracination. The words *akira* (barrenness, uprootedness) and *keri'a* (torn-ness, rupture) describe a condition of exile that threatens the very possibility of language. (Consider, for instance, Rashi's comment on God's promise of blessing and fruitfulness: this is necessary precisely *because* exile by its nature erodes the sense of self and the connections between self and world.[51]

The expression Rashi uses to describe the menace of groundlessness—*tazuaḥ da'ato alav*, "sending him out of his mind and driving him mad" (22:2)—conveys an overbearing *elation* (literally, being borne out of all structures and limits). That way madness lies, consciousness torn adrift of all the fibers of connection. There is a seductive lure in the call of *lekh lekha*: to cut free of all that one was is to rend the very fabric of consciousness.[52]

And yet *teref natan li-y'reiav* (Psalms 111:5): the gift of rending, *teruf*, of discontinuity, madness, God gives to those who fear Him. This is the hasidic (mis)reading of the text, which translates more literally, "God gives food, daily sustenance [lit., the torn-off portions of meat] to those who fear Him." What the hasidic reading emphasizes is that the man who stands in a certain relation with God (called *yirah*, fear, a condition of balance, limitation) acquires the capacity to find his own sustenance, his inner springs of being, in a modality that isolates him in passionate

individuality. But how live a *teruf*, a torn-ness, that is a gift and not a destruction?[53]

The question relates to the innermost quality of Abraham's experience—the "trial in the midst of the trial." What is given is the unmapped space and time, that we call freedom, in which to nurture love. *Ḥiba* is the organic relation that is developed in spite of, or perhaps only because of the vicissitudes and travails of a world in which God does not reveal His meanings. "We interpret always as transients," writes Frank Kermode in a study of hermeneutics (Hermes, he points out, was the god of *travelers*).[54] The opportunity that is offered by dislocation is of *shehiya* and *tehiya*, of infinite possibilities open to human articulation. In mystery, therefore, the command of God becomes integrated over time into man's fullest creative life.

The peculiar quality of love suggested by *ḥiba* can be seen, for example, in the statement in B. Berakhot 63b: "The Torah is as beloved (*ḥavivah*) each day to those who learn it as it was on the day it was first given." How do we know this? asks the Talmud. "Because a person reads the *Shema* prayer morning and evening, but if he forgot one evening—it is as though he had never read the *Shema* at all!" In a sense, one missed connection in the web of *ḥiba* spun from Sinai to "this very day"[55] unravels the whole web. For the very nature of *ḥiba* is the continuous organic thickening of relationship. The interplay of consciousness with the mitzvah is what creates *ḥiba*; the uninterrupted murmur of "those who learn" Torah is the cumulative voice of Sinai.[56]

The redemptive possibility of *teruf* lies in the intensity of loss it registers. The word implies a wrenching knowledge of alienation from oneself. In a passage in Midrash Tanḥuma,[57] Pharaoh's dreams are compared with Nebuchadnezzar's:—*Va-tipa'em ruḥo* ("his spirit was agitated") (Genesis 41:8) is compared with *va-titpa'em ruḥo* (Daniel 2:1)—the more intense reflexive form: "Pharaoh, who knew the dream, but not its interpretation, suffered one *teruf*, one anxiety attack. Nebuchadnezzar, who had forgotten both the dream and its interpretation, suffered a double *teruf*—therefore it is written, *va-titpa'em*."

To be "torn" is to know oneself bereft; on another level, to know oneself diminished. In mourning, one tears one's clothes; but there are certain losses—of parents, of a teacher, of a burnt Scroll of the Law—that represent *kera'in sheheinan mitaḥin*—gashes that can never be sewn together: these are irreparable losses, that affect the survivor in his very

essence. In a poignant narrative in B. Berakhot 42b, Rav's students tear their clothes on his death. A problem immediately arises about the right course of action in a halakhic question (grace after meals). Rav Ida reverses the tear he has already made, in order to tear again: "Rav has left us, and we did not learn how to say the grace after meals from him!" In halakha, *keri'a*, the tearing of clothes, expresses the existential awareness of distance, of not knowing. A source of light is withdrawn: with each throb of that realization comes the increasing appreciation of torn-ness.

Turmoil and integration

At the core of Abraham's experience is the complex of *akarut*, *keri'a*, *tiltul*, and *teruf*. But in the *shehiya*, the *tehiya* that God gives him, he plumbs these experiences to their depths. In the space and time that are his freedom, he contemplates the possible meanings of mystery.

This is the tension at the heart of Abraham's faith, as the midrash portrays him. On the one hand, he is classically praised as one of the fathers of the nation, who had no questioning thoughts about God's ways.[58] The famine that afflicts him immediately when he arrives in Canaan is explained as a test of his unquestioning faith in God's promises: "to test him whether he would have qualms [*hirhurim*] about God's promises" (Rashi, 12:10). But, on the other hand, active *hirhurim*, a term that expresses the imaginative, passionate level of consciousness—perhaps the area of the *id*—is just what Abraham *is* credited with:

> "*And it was after these things*" [15:1]: after the *hirhurim*, the troubled thoughts that ensued. Who was troubled? Abraham questioned God, "Master of the universe, You made a covenant with Noah that You would never destroy his children. Then I came along and pleased You better, so that my relation with You overrode his. Perhaps someone else will come along and please You better than me, so that his relation with You overrides mine?" [The reference is to the fact that Abraham had been allowed to kill with impunity descendants of Noah; his fear is that his own descendants may find themselves expendable, if a further process of selection takes place.] God replied, "Among Noah's children there are no righteous people who intercede for others, but among yours there will be."[59]

Abraham brings many responses to bear on his victory over the four Canaanite kings (chap. 14). His vision transcends the immediate grati-

fication of triumph: there are larger questions to trouble him about God's dealings with man. His questionings are not faulted; on the contrary, they lead to an unfolding of meaning in God's response.

Similarly, after the anguish of the Akedah is resolved, there is another "after these things" (22:20), and again the midrash speaks of questioning responses:[60]

> "*And it was after these things*" [22:20]: after the *hirhurim*, the troubled thoughts that ensued. Who was troubled? Abraham questioned God, "If Isaac had died on Mount Moriah, would that not have meant that he died childless? Now that a miracle has been done for him, what shall I do? I shall marry him to one of the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei, who are righteous—what do I care for aristocratic connections?" God answered him, "There is no need for you to do that. Isaac's mate is already born—'Milcah too has given birth.'" [22:20]

Again, the *hirhurim* have to do with an unexpected range of responses within Abraham's imagination, an openness to many possible implications in what has just happened to him. Abraham is concerned for eternity, knows himself responsible for providing scaffolding for the future. With that concern uppermost in his mind, he is willing to do what previously had been unthinkable for him—to marry Isaac to a daughter of Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei. After he has explored the reaches of his apprehensions and commitment, God reveals that He has, in fact, already taken responsibility for the future.

The word *hirhur* in its doubled-root form suggests vagueness, the inchoate dream state that precedes cognition.[61] The *hur* root evokes the state of *herayon*—gestation, conception, in its physiological and its intellectual sense. The *hirhur* is at the opposite pole from the act: a heated, fluid state in which many things are implicit, as opposed to the crystallized realization. "*Hirhurim* of sin are worse than sin itself"—fantasy is more powerful than reality, because it answers more adequately to the infinite demands of the spirit. An anarchic range of consciousness is attributed to Abraham in these classical midrashic sources, although in others he is just as specifically credited with a pure and untraveled faith (in the matter of the famine, and of the land promised but still laboriously purchased as a burial plot).

"There is an angel appointed over *herayon*, over pregnancy."[62] Each state of *hirhurim*, while apparently formless and open-ended, still has its coloration and implicit form. Abraham's *hirhurim* are suffused with the characteristic hues of his concerns: they are unique to him. Conversely, certain sorts of *hirhurim* are not "for him," can never be his.[63] But where he is observed in the world of *hirhur*, he expresses the central paradox of his destiny. Responsive to displacement, he probes his condition to its limits; for this purpose, he is given time and space for "play," in Huizinga's sense.[64]

But even here, in the interstice "between place and place" (*me-makom le-makom*), he is animated by the vital quest of his being—"'You have loved righteousness': he loved God and sought to come closer beneath the wings of His presence."[65] His knowledge of God is not the *result* of an orderly process of inquiry (the Platonic notion of truth that is reflected in Rambam's account: "at age three, he began to explore . . . at forty, he recognized his Creator"), but rather the informing passion of a life in which all forms are to be deconstructed. When he is cut loose in the world, "chaos is come again."[66] In the world of words, of questions asked and questions unasked, Abraham discovers his own being and the *ḥiba* that is his personal nexus with God.

Midrash Tanḥuma illuminates the paradox with a pun:

> "We have a little sister, whose breasts are not yet formed" [Song of Songs 8:8]. Of whom does the text speak? Of Abraham, when he was thrown by Nimrod into the fiery furnace—he was still "little," for God had not yet done miracles for him. Why is he called "sister"? Because he *sewed the whole world together* in the presence of God! [This is a pun on the words *aḥot* (sister) and *la-aḥot* (to sew); in fact, the sibling concept is integrally related to the paradox of together/separate.] *He was like a person who tears apart and sews together*—therefore he is called "sister" [my italics].[67]

Abraham is called *aḥot*, because he represents the desire to reintegrate (*eḥad* [one], *aḥot* [sister], and *la-aḥot* [to sew] are clearly connected) his own world with God. Paradoxically, however, his radical activity is dual: "tearing and sewing," rending and rendering one. As he comes to understanding and resolution, he uncovers further mysteries, invitations to love.[68]

Perhaps, the midrash even implies in this audacious phrase (rending and rendering one) that the peculiar greatness of Abraham is his response to the hiddenness of God. Despite his distress, he must even "seek for ways of magnifying the breakdown."[69] In this sense, he will "often seem

like a man searching at random." But in the current generated between the two poles of "rending and rendering one," there is intensified life.

"I will make of you a great nation" (12:2)—the "small sister" has the potential to grow into a "great nation." For to be great is Abraham's destiny, in the sense of maturity and high evolution—"like a grown-up son who knows how to search in his father's treasuries [his hidden drawers]."[70] The index to Abraham's maturity is the exquisite tension he maintains between the hiddenness, the incommensurate Otherness of God, and the daring activity of his own integrative mind.

VA-YERA

Language and Silence

The demand for sacrifice

> Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." (22:1–2)

Aḥar ha-devarim ha'eleh—"And it was after these things" (or, in the JPS translation, "Some time afterward"): the subject of this chapter is to be the culmination of Abraham's life. Here, God demands of Abraham (*pleads* with him, in Rashi's reading of the word *na* that modulates God's demand[1]) that he take his beloved son, Isaac (*yeḥidkha*, lit., your only one) and offer him as a sacrifice. As a burnt offering, Isaac will—technically—be consumed totally; emotionally, existentially, this will leave Abraham with nothing to show for his life. "After these things" places the Akedah test in the sequence of Abraham's life; it suggests, too, that what is at stake is a judgment on Abraham's whole history.

The Talmud, however, understands the opening clause very specifically:

> "*After these things*": after the words of Satan, as it is written, "The child grew up and was weaned, and [Abraham] held a great feast" [21:8]. Satan said to God, "This old man—You granted him fruit of the womb when he was a hundred years old. And yet of all the feasts that he made, he did not have a single turtle dove or a young bird to sacrifice to You!" God answered him, "He has done nothing that was not for his son—and if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice your son to Me,' he would immediately obey." Immediately after that, "God tested Abraham."[2]