

REVIEW

Lippman Bodoff

*The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murder and Kabbalah:
Seeds of Jewish Extremism and Alienation?*

(Jerusalem and New York: Devora Publishing, 2005)

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Twice every year, on Rosh Ha-Shanah and on the Sabbath, a few weeks later, when Genesis 22 is read as part of the annual cycle of reading the Torah in the synagogue, Jews are confronted by the drama of the *Akedah*, Abraham's "binding" of Isaac in an ultimately aborted attempt to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice to God. On many Sabbaths, and on festivals when the *Yizkor* (memorial) prayers are recited, Ashkenazi Jews have the custom of reciting the *Av Ha-Rahamim*, an anonymous prayer from the thirteenth century commemorating Jewish communities martyred in Germany during the first Crusade. Masada, where, after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, some 960 Jewish zealots and their families held off the Roman army and finally, facing the inevitable, committed mass suicide in 73 CE rather than surrender, is not merely a spectacular historical and archeological site; it has become a site of pilgrimage, where Israeli soldiers proclaim "Masada shall not fall again," and where many youngsters celebrate their becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The common thread to these three Jewish practices is what Lippman Bodoff calls "religious murder." To offer one's child as a sacrifice to God is murder. To kill one's family and then commit suicide, even under extreme circumstances, as Jewish husbands and fathers did at Masada, and then a thousand years later in the face of Crusader mobs in the Rhineland (1096), and again a century later in York, England, on the Sabbath before Passover, 1190, is, Bodoff argues passionately, murder, and a violation of the moral teachings of Judaism. The story of the *Akedah*, he shows, was used to justify medieval Jewish martyrdom, in which Jews killed their children and themselves, rather than finding a creative way to resist. By this religious murder and suicide, they violated "the laws of religious martyrdom [which] specified that one should die at the hands of the enemy – not by one's own hand, not by the murder by one Jew of another," let alone of one's children. "The martyrs could have resisted until death, as other Rhineland Jews did, or agreed to allow themselves to be dragged to the baptismal font, visibly resisting and protesting as they did so, only to return to Judaism later, after the Crusaders moved on, or after moving on themselves to another city or town. But they chose not to do so, and to abandon Jewish law in the process...They looked to Abraham at Moriah (the *Akedah*) as the model of spiritual perfection by his willingness to kill his beloved son, Isaac" (p. 188).

The title of Bodoff's book, *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murder & Kabbalah: Seeds of Jewish Extremism and Alienation?*, sums up his thesis. Bodoff is less interested in biblical and historical scholarship for its own sake (although his copious notes reflect serious reading of such scholarship as well as of the classical texts) than he is in the existential predicament of Jews and Judaism today, resulting from misreading biblical and rabbinic texts, ignorance of Jewish history,

and misunderstanding and even perversion of Jewish ethical and halakhic imperatives. These are not merely theoretical points, as Bodoff points out. In 1994, Baruch Goldstein murdered Arab worshippers in the Machpelah Cave; and, in New Jersey (where Bodoff lives), Avi Kostner killed his two children to prevent their being raised as Christians by their mother. The next year, Yigal Amir assassinated Prime Minister Rabin.

Bodoff does not make the academic mistake, for which Gershom Scholem blamed rationalist historians, of ignoring or underplaying the powerful forces of mysticism in much of traditional Judaism, but, again, Bodoff's interest in defending a rationalist or enlightened, modern Orthodoxy is existential and forthright, in the face of "Jewish Mysticism: Medieval Roots, Contemporary Dangers and Prospective Challenges."

And so, he argues, "Orthodoxy today is mystical in outlook, with little interest in *hokhmah*, general knowledge and wisdom, even as to Jewish nationalism in its land. From this standpoint, only the Modern Orthodox can be considered as carrying on the Classical Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism of the first millennium" (p. 18). In Bodoff's view, these mystical developments are a result of exile: "Classical Judaism, designed to guide Jews in every facet of an active, and interactive, life in this world, was transformed by the exilic oppression under a powerful and hostile European Christianity into an insular, withdrawn, ascetic, ecstatic, magical and mystical culture" (p. 21). It seems to me, however, that this diagnosis, blaming conditions in Christian European society for the mystical developments in Judaism, is somewhat facile and fails to take sufficiently into account internal Jewish dynamics: the phenomenal growth, in the last decades of the twentieth century and first years of the twenty-first, of *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish religion, not in Christian contexts, but in the State of Israel and in largely secular America. It does seem to be easier to take the Jew out of the cultural and spiritual ghetto than it is to take the ghetto out of the Jew. If, then, mysticism is, as Bodoff claims, a "contemporary danger," the danger may be all the greater for its being the outgrowth of the very sources Bodoff reads with such love and affirmation.

Bodoff brings his rich educational background and professional perspectives to this wide-ranging collection of essays on a variety of themes, which appeared over some twenty years in different journals. An attorney and retired assistant general counsel of AT&T Technologies, Bodoff is also a trained cantor and a former associate editor of the journal *Judaism*. His essays include such disparate discussions as "Kabbalistic Feminism in Agnon's *Betrothed*," "Secular Humanism and Creation Science in the Public Schools," and "Music in Jewish Liturgy: Art for Whose Sake?"

The first section of the book presents Bodoff's provocative reading of the *Akedah*. Abraham's faith, for which he was rewarded with divine blessing, was not (as frequently argued) that it was actually God who had commanded him to kill his son, but that God would intervene and stop the murder, just as God had avoided killing the innocents in Sodom and had promised Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael would be safe. This is what Bodoff calls "a remarkable, coded, counter-message in the *Akedah*, that exists in parallel with the traditional meaning of the text" (p. 30). In this sense, it is not merely that God was testing Abraham, but that Abraham was testing God and himself. Unlike the earlier incident at Sodom, however, where Abraham directly challenged God's justice ("Will not the judge of all the earth do justice? – Gen. 18:25), now Abraham adopts the tactic of a bureaucracy: not to rush to execute an order, nor to defy overtly one's superior, but to stall and play for time, to let one's superior come around to the correct decision: "At each step Abraham was waiting for God...to withdraw His command: when that was not forthcoming, Abraham took the next step, and put the Almighty to the next test – as it were – always showing obedience...At the very end, when Abraham took the last step before he would have been forced by his conscience to stop and challenge God's command, the angelic order to stop finally came"

(p. 40). So Abraham was testing God, just as God was testing Abraham, not to see whether Abraham would obey the command, but to see whether Abraham would remain faithful to the divine moral law by violating an immoral command, even when that command came from God Himself.

Bodoff's moral concern and legal analytical talents are also evident in an essay, "Was Yehudah Halevi Racist?" Halevi had attempted to explain the anomaly of Jewish survival from ancient times and the uniqueness of Israelite prophecy, in what were for him scientific terms. If, as rationalist philosophers (such as Sa'adiah Gaon and Maimonides) claimed, prophecy is inherently a rational process, how can one explain the historical fact that no philosopher was ever a prophet and no prophet a philosopher? Since the faculty of reason is common to all humans, how can one account for the fact that prophecy is not a universal phenomenon and that the only prophets recognized as such by other religions are the prophets of Israel? Halevi's answer is that the Jewish people have a biological faculty transcending reason, the *amr ilahi* (Hebrew: *inyan elohi*), the divine power, which enables them to prophesy. A convert to Judaism, therefore, is equal in all other respects but can never attain prophecy. (Nor can native-born Jews any more, in the absence of the sacrificial cult of the Temple that activated that latent prophetic faculty). In answering his question – is Halevi's racial theory racist? – Bodoff points out that Halevi wrote his *Kuzari* to reinforce Jewish identity and restore Jewish self-respect, at a time when Jews and Judaism were universally despised and regarded as inferior. After comparing the status of proselytes in Judaism with Catholic treatment of *conversos* (given the Spanish fixation on *limpieza de sangre*, the purity of blood), and the American constitutional requirement that only native-born citizens can become president, Bodoff concludes that for Halevi, a proselyte's progeny presumably could attain prophecy and that the inequality of the first-generation proselyte reflected his or her prior religious status and not present spiritual inferiority; therefore, the inequality is not racial in nature. Conversion to Judaism, he argues, means joining the Jewish nation as well as religion, and birth is pertinent to national identity. This is not, he argues, the same as racism.

The point is debatable, and my students in medieval Jewish philosophy enjoy the mock trial of Halevi I invite them to hold, on the charge of racism. But the fact that Bodoff's conclusions here cannot be proven conclusively in no way detracts from the importance of the discussion. The same may be said of Bodoff's reading of the *Akedah* and his judgment regarding the martyrs of Masada and the medieval Jewish communities.

Some of Bodoff's other conclusions are also debatable. In his essay "Challenging Lubavitch's New Messianic Claims," he states that "messianism, like mysticism and apocalypticism, is a response to trauma of some unbearable reality" (p. 294). That certainly sounds reasonable. The problem is that Jewish history all too frequently seems to defy reasonable explanation. Lubavitch messianism has certainly become more extreme, more desperate, after their beloved Rebbe's death (which some of them deny and others explain in messianic terms), but it long preceded his death and indeed was at least tacitly, if not overtly, encouraged by the Rebbe himself. Therefore, it cannot simply be reduced to the trauma of his death. Gershom Scholem's classic study of "the mystical messiah" Shabbetai Tzevi also challenges such common-sense explanations of messianism in terms of suffering and despair, as he pointed to strong opposition to Shabbetai Tzevi in areas of Poland that had experienced the Chmielnicki massacres and support for him in free and prosperous Amsterdam. How, also, shall we explain the spread of messianic fervor (typically, rabbinic sermons inevitably ending with the expressed hope for the messianic redemption) in other branches of Orthodoxy, including Bodoff's modern, Zionist type, in Israel and abroad, since the Six Day War of 1967 – certainly no traumatic defeat or "unbearable reality," and apparently (at least at the time) a phenomenal victory?

Another example of Jewish history violating common-sense explanation may be found in the controversy over Maimonides and over philosophy in the century following his death (1204), which Bodoff attributes to the mystics, crediting (or blaming) Nahmanides for the fact that “we are still struggling with this dispute, and writing about it, to this day” (p. 234). But, as Abba Eban once noted, there are things too strange to be believed, but not too strange to have happened in Jewish history. The research of Dov Schwartz into medieval Jewish astral magic, and into the Maimonidean controversy, has shown that use of magic for medical purposes by rationalist philosopher-physicians (yes, the rationalists!) was one of the grounds for protest by the opponents of philosophy (whom Bodoff lumps together as mystics). At which point, haven't our neat categories of rationalists and mystics broken down?

So there's room for disagreeing with some of Bodoff's conclusions and interpretations, which are always well argued and reasonable, even if they're not always necessarily correct. However, as is the case with stimulating thinkers, the questions Bodoff asks are ultimately far more important than the particulars of his answers, and the answers, whether or not one ultimately accepts them, provoke thought and concern. Which is why this is an interesting and valuable book for both Jews and non-Jews.