

# Rabbis draw parallel

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"The major polemical ground, from my perspective, upon which the rabbis responded to the burgeoning Christianity in the second and third centuries was the story of the binding of Isaac."

**SO SAID DR.** Norman J. Cohen, a member of the faculty of Hebrew Union College-Institute of Religion in New York, in the last of three lectures to members of the Mobile Ministerial Association in a program at Spring Hill Avenue Temple.

Cohen said rabbis of the second and third centuries responded to challenges of early Christianity with Midrashic literature, or biblical interpretation.

**IN THEIR LORE** — as opposed to law — the rabbis produced a number of interpretations of the biblical story of Isaac in response to early Christianity.

The Isaac story in the 22nd chapter of Genesis, as generally interpreted, is that God instructed Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac traveled three days to Mount Moriah, and Abraham bound his son and laid him on an altar of wood and was about to slay his son when an angel of God told Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac. God was testing Abraham's faith.

Said Cohen, "When Christianity, I believe, firmly placed at the center of its theology the atoning power of the blood of Jesus, Judaism felt it incumbent upon it to somehow highlight traces of what might have been a very ancient notion that something actually happened to Isaac on Mount Moriah.

**"TO BE SURE,** the major thrust of rabbinic tradition says that nothing happened to Isaac, that at the denouement of the story, at the climax when Abraham's hand is cast over the child, the angel comes down, God himself comes down and says in the immortal words ... 'Don't lay your big hand on that child. Don't do anything to him.'"

Said Cohen, an ordained rabbi, "Rabbinic Judaism said that in a sense, crucifixion was one step, from a theological perspective, below rabbinic theology. God did not demand human sacrifice. God simply wanted to test Abraham and in no way wanted to kill his son in reality."

**HE ADDED, HOWEVER,** "There's a minor thrust in Jewish tradition, a minor thrust that very few of us pay attention to, very few of us know about, a thrust that tells us that indeed on that fateful day on Moriah many, many years ago something really happened to Isaac."

According to the Bible, the story of Isaac begins with the words, "And it came to pass after these things that God did tempt Abraham."

The word "things" in Hebrew can mean "words," according to Cohen.

**HE ASKED,** "WHAT words? What conversation transpired prior to the binding of Isaac which ultimately might have caused the binding of Isaac?"

One of several views given by rabbis was that Isaac and Ishmael, the two sons of Abraham, were involved in a sibling argument, each describing why he was more beloved by his father Abraham.

Isaac argued that "if at this very moment God came down to me and asked me to cut off one of my limbs then I would not refuse." Subsequently, God tested Abraham and Isaac.

**IN ONE INTERPRETATION,** rabbis described Isaac as a 37-year-old man "who was a willing self-sacrifice."

To arrive at the age, the rabbis noted Isaac was born when his mother, Sarah, was 90 years old. Sarah died at age 127, and her death was linked to the knowledge that Isaac was to be sacrificed, according to a view given by rabbis.

The rabbis' story was that Satan tried to prevent Abraham from sacrificing his son but was ignored. Likewise, Satan was turned aside by Isaac.

**WHEN SATAN WENT** to Sarah, however, he found her vulnerable.

Cohen ascribed words to Satan in speaking to Sarah: "Abraham might have told you he was going to the supermarket or to take Isaac to school.... They're going to the mountain, and Isaac is going to be the offering before the Lord." At that moment, according to rabbinic tradition, Sarah died.

# in Isaac and Jesus stories

Cohen said the rabbis explained that even though the Bible described Isaac as a "lad," he could still be 37 in a period when persons were living to age 200.

"My father still calls me those very endearing names, and I happen to be 37, ironically," said Cohen.

**IN TALKING ABOUT** the idea that Isaac was a willing self-sacrifice, Cohen said Midrashic literature notes that the Bible describes Isaac and Abraham as going together.

"Why the word 'together'? What is implied? That Isaac was not distressed by what his father had intended," according to Midrashic literature from the second and third centuries.

**COHEN SAID,** "LOOK how far we've gotten from the typical major thrust of the tradition — Isaac the self-sacrifice, Isaac the 37-year-old man who wanted to die for the faith that he believed, but even more so the rabbis in several texts even indicate that something actually happen to Isaac on the mountain."

A Midrashic view was that Isaac shed blood. In the biblical book of Exodus "when God passes over the houses of the Israelites because of blood on the doorposts of their houses in Egypt, what blood does God see? God sees the blood of the binding of Isaac."

**ACCORDING TO THE rabbis'** explanation, Isaac shed a substantial amount of blood. He almost died, "and because he almost died, the Jewish people and all of humanity ultimately would be redeemed."

Another Midrashic view is that Isaac did die and God resurrected him on the spot. The ministering angel said, "Blessed are you, God, who resurrects the dead."

Said Cohen, "It's interesting to me that that benediction in the traditional liturgical setting is said every day by Jews — 'Blessed be God who resurrects the dead.'"

**THE SPEAKER SAID,** "What parallelism have we seen here in the rabbinic reconstruction of the binding of Isaac with the story of Jesus and his death? To name a few parallels, they are both young men in their 30s; second, according to the New Testament, Jesus carries the wood of his sacrifice on his back, and Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice on his back; both are involved in a test of father and son — Jesus and God, Isaac and God, Isaac and his father Abraham, and Abraham and God; both are resurrected; each has the notion of the three days inherent within the story, Jesus' resurrection coming after three days and Isaac being sacrificed on the third day."



Asking the question, "Why the third day?" for the binding of Isaac, Cohen said, "There are three events, the rabbis say, that took place and will take place on Tuesday, the third day.

**"THE FIRST IS** the binding of Isaac, which becomes a kind of redemptional, salvific symbol. The second event is Sinai (when Moses receives the Ten Commandments), again the model of salvation and redemption, giving the Israelite nation the law, the means by which to achieve redemption in the world; and finally, according to rabbinic tradition, the coming of the messiah will be on the third day."

Cohen said, "the rabbis seemed to be offering their constituents an alternative model of redemption and salvation. When the church handed out the message of Jesus to their constituents, the rabbis said our model is a model not simply of believing in Isaac but of emulating Isaac."

**"JUST AS ISAAC** was the willing self-sacrifice who willingly gave of himself, we too must be willing to give of ourselves, and in the second and third centuries that meant to be willing to die for the sake of our Judaism under Roman oppression."

**THE RABBINIC VIEW** was that the person who emulates Isaac does "whatever it takes to make God a reality in the world.... The messianic age is brought a step closer. When Jews internalize ultimately the message of Midrash, when all peoples internalize this message of faith and works that the rabbis underscore that the world will be perfected, the messianic age is a step closer."

Said Cohen, "A man through his act will ultimately redeem this world. When we internalize that message, not only will we insure for ourselves that Jews survive, but most importantly we will insure the survival of all of mankind."

# Jewish lore responds

During the first thousand years of the Christian movement, rabbis, particularly in Palestine (today's Israel), responded to the Christian challenge through use of Midrashic literature.

Dr. Norman J. Cohen, in one of three lectures to the Mobile Ministerial Association, said Midrashic literature also was used to respond to Gnosticism, a religious movement especially strong in the first, second and third centuries of the Common Era (Common Era is the Jewish term equivalent to the Christian words *anno Domini*, or after Christ's death).

Cohen, an ordained rabbi and associate professor of Midrash at the Hebrew Union College-Institute of Religion in New York, listed other challenges to which the Midrash responded, including the Roman domination of Palestine in the early part of the Common Era.

The Midrash, according to the speaker, functioned on this level of responding to particular times in history, but it functions on a second level by addressing "timeless questions, questions about what it means to be a human being living on this planet. What role do we as human beings play in God's design?"

## Midrash definition

Defining Midrash, Cohen told the clergy gathered in Spring Hill Avenue Temple that the word "literally means Scriptural exegesis (interpretation), to search out meaning.

"But Midrash has a wider definition ... and that is the mass of rabbinic lore ... as opposed to law, the non-legal elements of the Jewish tradition, which in a sense are a kind of potpourri of rabbinic material, similes, saws, analogies, anecdotes, sermons and the like."

## Gnostic challenge

In specifically discussing how Midrashic literature responded to Gnosticism, the speaker said Gnostics believed in a plurality of the deity, or that there was more than one god.

The Gnostics believed there was a "god of goodness, that source of power and redemption that is outside of the world, sparks of whom were simply hidden in the spirit of man in this world."

Further, Gnostics believed there was "the creator god, the god of the Bible (who was considered a demiurge, a lesser god. He was more pejoratively a negative god, a god of evil, a god who created this world to shackle man in this world, a god who gave commandments to hold man in this world, a god whose creation was seen to be evil, a god who wanted to persecute man instead of redeem him."

To buttress Judaism against the challenge of Gnosticism, the Palestinian rabbis during the early centuries of the Common Era produced arguments against more than one god.

The rabbis pointed out that when God appeared to the Israelite nation at the Red Sea, according to Scripture, he appeared as "a mighty hero doing battle, a man of war."

Yet the rabbis acknowledged another description of God by Scripture at Sinai. "When the Jewish people went to receive the law, God appeared to them as an old man full of mercy," according to Cohen.

Citing Scripture showing God's mercy, the rabbis used Exodus 24:10, which depicted God as sitting on a throne, and under his feet was a lattice work of sapphire.

Rabbis "played with the phraseology 'lattice

work of sapphire.' In Hebrew there's even a more common word with the same structure which means brick," according to Cohen.

"When Israel was ensconced in slavery in Egypt, God was sitting on his throne making bricks just as they. God places himself in the exilic experience as a means of comforting his people, as a means of sharing their pain.

"God is full of mercy because he himself was there in exile suffering the trials and tribulations of the Egyptian exilic experience," Cohen said.

The rabbis cited Daniel 7 to show God is like an old man.

Now, however, the "rabbis have a problem because in one passage it seems God's visage is a young, energetic warrior. In another passage, it seems to imply God is a kind of father figure."

The two characteristics of mercy and justice of God appear on the surface to be contradictory.

The rabbis turned to Exodus 20:2, in which God said, "I am the Lord thy God." The two characteristics of God were unified in the word "I." God was "seen as both merciful and judgmental," said Cohen.

He said that God is shown as "the Lord who was

in Egypt, who was at the sea, who in the end of time will be there as the exiles come back from slavery."

Thus did the rabbis respond to the Gnostic claim of more than one god.

The rabbis went on to respond to the Gnostic claim that the creation is negative.

Citing the book of Isaiah, the rabbis said God "did not speak out of darkness in the domain of demiurge in that negative atmosphere that the Gnostics are talking about."

God said, "Don't seek me in chaos. I am known through cosmos. I am known through the ordered nature of the universe, the goodness that's inherent in the universe."

God was shown in the book of Isaiah as "a speaker of righteousness, one who transmits a message of goodness and straightness and love."

# to Christian challenge

## *Christian rivalry*

Cohen also talked to the Mobile clergy about how Midrashic literature responded to early Christianity in Palestine.

The Apostle Paul taught that "in order to gain redemption, one simply had to be a person of faith, accept Jesus and his divinity."

The rabbis saw Pauline Christianity as a rejection of Jewish ritual practice. The battle "was over Jewish ritual practice in Paul's time, specifically the battle over circumcision."

Paul said the promise that Abraham "should be the heir of the world was not given to Abraham or to his seed through the law but rather through his righteousness of faith."

The teaching, according to Cohen, was that "one must and need only accept the notion of Jesus and his role and one need not observe circumcision, observe the Sabbath and a host of other particularized Jewish ritual practices."

As a Midrashic response to the Pauline teaching, the rabbis cited the book of Exodus, in which the Jewish people voiced belief in God and his servant Moses, and the people sang after crossing the Red Sea.

The Scripture then used the future verb, indicating Moses will sing. "The rabbis understood it as a future song of redemption. If one believes, if one has faith, ultimately one will experience this future messianic song of redemption," according to Cohen.

He said the rabbis "played with" the Hebrew for the word "sing" because "it says if you believe, the Holy Spirit will rest upon you." The Hebrew for "rest upon you" is the same as the Hebrew for "sing."

Thus "if you believe, the Holy Spirit will be there somehow. You'll have a glimpse into the redemptive future. Because they believed, they will be redeemed."

Cohen asked, "But how can the rabbis say that? What do they mean by faith? Was it purely belief in God?"

A Midrashic teaching from the second century, citing selections from the book of Genesis, was that if "one accepts even one single commandment with true faith, he's deserving to have the Holy Spirit rest upon him. It is no

longer simply abstract faith but observance of a commandment faithfully," according to Cohen.

He said the rabbis "saw Abraham's faith as expressed through the circumcision act." Abraham observed God's commandment by circumcising his son Ishmael and all the males of his household.

An exegesis of the rabbis was that the Israelite people "believed in God, not simply that they heard but they internalized. They understood that God had commanded the Jewish people to act in a particularistic way, but ultimately would guarantee their survival and guarantee redemption."

Thus did the rabbis respond to the argument about faith vs. works.

## *Faith and works*

Cohen concluded, "Pure faith is not enough. One must do as a Jew, particularly in terms of ritual practice and, as a human being, ethical acts, if one is to survive as a people and if this world is to become a better place.

"Ultimately the test of faith from a rabbinic point of view is not simply faith alone but faith as translated into the everyday act that a person summons and musters through life experience, that acting out one's perception of self as a Jew and as a human being that ultimately the 'messiah' or 'messianic' will come, that ultimate redemption, the ultimate parting of the waters, the ultimate redemptive waters will be experienced.

"We ... like Abraham who circumcised his son and like all the other models the rabbis underscored, we like they stand up and say it's simply not enough to profess faith, it's simply not enough to say I'm a Jew and I'm proud of it....

"Ultimately the test of faith is the ability of the human being to act, to throw him or herself into the life experiences and to begin to effect change in the world around him."