**Abstract:**

This essay focuses on the story of Isaac’s binding in Genesis 22 and retellings of it from four different writers. I analyze how each retelling is brought into secular frameworks focused around modern wars, further complicating character’s traditional labels in interesting ways; positions of unquestioning loyalty commonly praised are problematized for being unethical, while the human consequences of Abraham’s divine “temptation” are brought to the forefront. By focusing on war, I simultaneously discuss literary and societal considerations that must be taken into account for each reading. These poets not only approach the text with different wars and politics in mind, but come from diverse literary traditions. This impacts the content of each poem, but also each poem’s relationship to the intertext – for example, the three ethnically Jewish writers I examine (Amichai, Hecht, and Cohen) keep a level of fidelity to Isaac’s binding, a practice more in line with midrash tradition, while Owens directly changes events to convey his message.

**Overview:**

Yehuda Amichai

* Poems: “The Real Hero of The Sacrifice of Isaac” (1983) ;“Jewish Travel 5” (2000)
* Ethnicity: Jewish
* Nationality: German, Israeli
* Emphasis on war(s) in selected poems: Six-Day War of 1967 ; Lebanon War of 1982
* War Experience: Served in World War II and 1948 Arab-Israeli war

Anthony Hecht

* Poem: “Sacrifice” (2001)
* Ethnicity: Jewish
* Nationality: American
* Emphasis on war(s) in selected poem: World War II
* War Experience: Served in World War II

Leonard Cohen:

* Song: “The Story of Isaac” (1973)
* Ethnicity: Jewish
* Nationality: Canadian
* Emphasis on war(s) in selected song: Vietnam War, Yom Kippur War (?)

Wilfred Owens

* Poem: “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1920)
* Ethnicity: White
* Nationality: British
* Emphasis on war(s) in selected poem: World War I
* War Experience: Served in World War I (Killed in Action)

Emily Dickinson (?)

* Poem: “Abraham to kill him” (poem 1317 in complete poetry)
* Ethnicity: White
* Nationality: American
* Emphasis on war(s) in selected Poem: Unsure. Questioning whether I could link to Civil War?

**Genesis 22 (King James Version)**

**1** And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

**2**And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

**3**And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

**4**Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

**5**And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

**6**And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

**7**And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

**8**And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

**9**And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

**10**And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

**11**And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

**12**And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

**13**And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

**14**And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.

**15**And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,

**16**And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

**17**That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

**18**And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

**19**So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

**20**And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor;

**21**Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram,

**22**And Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel.

**23**And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother.

**24**And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.

**“The Real Hero of The Sacrifice of Isaac” (1983)**

The real hero of the sacrifice was the ram

Who had no idea about the conspiracy of the others.

He apparently volunteered to die in place of Isaac.

I want to sing a memorial song about the ram,

His curly wool and human eye,

The horns, so calm in his living head.

When he was slaughtered they made *shofars* of them,

To sound the blast of their war

Or the black of their coarse joy.

I want to remember the last picture

Like a beautiful photo in an exquisite fashion magazine:

The tanned, spoiled youngster all spiffed up,

And beside him the angel, clad in a long silk gown

For a formal reception.

Both with hollow eyes

Observe two hollow places,

And behind them, as a colored background, the ram

Grasping the thicket before the slaughter.

The angel went home

Isaac went home

And Abraham and God left much earlier.

But the real hero of the sacrifice

is the ram.

-Yehuda Amichai

**“Jewish Travel 5” (2000)**

Every year our father Abraham would take his sons to Mount Moriah

The way I take my children to the Negev hills where I once had a war.

Abraham hiked around with his sons. “This is where I left

The servants behind, that’s where I tied the donkey to a tree

At the foot of the mountain, and here, right here, Isaac my son,

you asked:

Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt

offering?

Then, up a little further, you asked for the second time.”

When they reached the mountaintop, they rested a bit, ate and drank,

And he showed them the thicket where the ram was caught by its horns.

After Abraham died, Isaac started taking his sons to the same place.

“Here I lifted the wood, this is where I got out of breath,

here I asked, and my father answered: God will see to the lamb

for the offering. Over there, I already knew it was me.”

And when Isaac’s eyes were dim with age, his children

Led him to that same spot on Mount Moriah, and recounted for him

All that had come to pass, all that he might have forgotten.

- Yehuda Amichai

**“Sacrifice” (2001)**

*I  
 Abraham*

Long years, and I found favor  
In the sight of the Lord, who brought me out of Ur  
 To where his promise lay,  
 There with him to confer  
On Justice and Mercy and the appointed day  
 Of Sodom’s ashen fate;  
For me he closeted sweetness in the date,  
 And gave to salt its savor.

Three promises he gave,  
Came like three kings or angels to my door:  
 His purposes concealed  
 In coiled and kerneled store  
He planted as a seedling that would yield  
 In my enfeebled years  
A miracle that would command my tears  
 With piercings of the grave.

“Old man, behold Creation,”  
Said the Lord, “the leaping hills, the thousand-starred  
 Heavens and watery floor.  
 Is anything too hard  
For the Lord, who shut all seas within their doors?”  
 And then, for his name’s sake  
He led me, knowing where my heart would break,  
 Into temptation.

The whole of my long life  
Pivoted on one terrible day at dawn.  
 Isaac, my son, and I  
 Were to Moriah gone.  
There followed an hour in which I wished to die,  
 Being visited by these things:  
My name called out, the beat of gigantic wings,  
 Faggots, and flame, and knife.

*II  
 Isaac*

Youthful I was and trusting and strong of limb,  
The fresh-split firewood roped tight to my back,  
And I bore unknowing that morning my funeral pyre.  
My father, face averted, carried the flame,  
And, in its scabbard, the ritual blade he bore.  
It seemed to me at the time a wearisome trek.

I thought of my mother, how, in her age, the Lord  
Had blessed her among women, giving her me  
As joke and token both, unlikelihood  
Being his way. But where, where from our herd  
Was the sacrifice, I asked my father. He,  
In a spasm of agony, bound me hand and foot.

I thought, *I am poured out like water, like wax  
My heart is melted in the midst of my bowels.*  
Both were tear-blinded. Hate and love and fear  
Wrestled to ruin us, savage us beyond cure.  
And the fine blade gleamed with the fury of live coals  
Where we had reared an altar among the rocks.

Peace be to us both, to father Abraham,  
To me, elected the shorn stunned lamb of God—  
We were sentenced, and reprieved by the same Voice—  
And to all our seed, by this terror sanctified,  
To be numbered even as the stars at the small price  
Of an old scapegoated and thicket-baffled ram.

*III  
 1945*

It was widely known that the army of occupation  
Was in full retreat. The small provincial roads  
Rumbled now every night with tanks and trucks,  
Echoed with cries in German, much *Mach schnell,  
Zurück, ganz richtig, augenblicklich, jawolh,*  
Audible in the Normandy countryside.  
So it had been for days, or, rather, nights,  
The troops at first making their moves in darkness,  
But pressures of haste toward the end of March  
Left stragglers to make their single way alone,  
At their own risk, and even in daylight hours.

Since the soldiers were commandeering anything  
They needed—food, drink, vehicles of all sorts—  
One rural family dismantled their bicycle,  
Daubed the chrome parts—rims, sprocket, spokes—

with mud,  
And wired them carefully to the upper boughs  
Of the orchard. And the inevitable came  
In the shape of a young soldier, weighted down  
With pack and bedroll, rifle, entrenching tools,  
Steel helmet and heavy boots just after dawn.  
The family was at breakfast. He ordered them out  
In front of the house with abusive German words  
They couldn’t understand, but gesture and rifle  
Made his imperious wishes perfectly clear.  
They stood in a huddled group, all nine of them.  
And then he barked his furious command:  
*Fahrrad!* They all looked blank. He shouted again:  
*FAHRRAD! FAHRRAD! FAHRRAD!*, as though sheer

volume  
Joined with his anger would make his meaning plain.  
The father of the family experimentally  
Inquired, *Manger?* The soldier, furious,  
At last dredged up an explosive *Bicyclette,*  
Proud of himself, contemptuous of them.  
To this the father in a small pantomime—  
Shrugged shoulders, palms turned out, a helpless, long,  
Slow shaking of the head, then the wide gesture  
Of an arm, taking in all his property—  
Conveyed *Nous n’avons pas de bicyclettes*  
More clearly than his words. To the young soldier  
This seemed unlikely. No one could live this far  
From neighbors, on a poor untraveled road  
That lacked phone lines, without the usual means  
Of transport. There was no time to search  
The house, the barn, cowsheds, coops, pens and grounds.  
He looked at the frightened family huddled together,  
And with the blunt nose of his rifle barrel  
Judiciously singled out the eldest son,  
A boy perhaps fourteen, but big for his years,  
Obliging him to place himself alone  
Against the whitewashed front wall of the house.  
Then, at the infallible distance of ten feet,  
With rifle pointed right at the boy’s chest,  
The soldier shouted what was certainly meant  
To be his terminal order: *BICYCLETTE!*

It was still early on a chilly morning.  
The water in the tire-treads of the road  
Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,  
Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves.  
The very grass was a stiff lead-crystal gray,  
Though splendidly prismatic where the sun  
Made its slow way between the lingering shadows  
Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.  
There was leisure enough to take full note of this  
In the most minute detail as the soldier held  
Steady his index finger on the trigger.

It wasn’t charity. Perhaps mere prudence,  
Saving a valuable round of ammunition  
For some more urgent crisis. Whatever it was,  
The soldier reslung his rifle on his shoulder,  
Turned wordlessly and walked on down the road  
The departed German vehicles had taken.

There followed a long silence, a long silence.  
For years they lived together in that house,  
Through daily tasks, through all the family meals,  
In agonized, unviolated silence.

- Anthony Hecht

**“The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1920)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,

And took the fire with him, and a knife.

And as they sojourned both of them together,

Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,

Behold the preparations, fire and iron,

But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?

Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,

and builded parapets and trenches there,

And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,

Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,

Neither do anything to him. Behold,

A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;

Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,

And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

- Wilfred Owen

**“The Story of Isaac” (1973)**

The door it opened slowly  
My father he came in  
I was nine years old  
And he stood so tall above me  
Blue eyes they were shining  
And his voice was very cold

Said I've had a vision  
And you know I'm strong and holy  
I must do what I've been told  
So we started up the mountain  
I was running he was walking  
And his axe was made of gold

Well the trees they got much smaller  
The lake a lady's mirror  
We stopped to drink some wine  
Then he threw the bottle over  
Broke a minute later  
And he put his hand on mine

Thought I saw an eagle  
But it might have been a vulture  
I never could decide  
Then my father built an altar  
He looked once behind his shoulder  
He knew I would not hide

You who build the altars now  
To sacrifice these children  
You must not do it anymore  
A scheme is not a vision  
You never have been tempted  
By a demon or a god

You who stand above them now  
Your hatchets blunt and bloody  
You were not there before  
When I lay upon a mountain  
And my father's hand was trembling  
With the beauty of the word

And if you call me brother now  
Forgive me if I inquire  
Just according to whose plan  
When it all comes down to dust  
I will kill you if I must  
I will help you if I can

When it all comes down to dust  
I will help you if I must  
I will kill you if I can  
Have mercy on our uniform  
Man of peace or man of war  
The peacock spreads his fan

- Leonard Cohen

**Abraham to kill him**

Abraham to kill him —

Was distinctly told —

Isaac was an Urchin —

Abraham was old —

Not a hesitation —

Abraham complied —

Flattered by Obeisance

Tyranny demurred —

Isaac — to his children

Lived to tell the tale —

Moral — with a Mastiff

Manners may prevail.

- Emily Dickinson

**“The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1920)**

**ABRAHAM ON TRIAL (CAROL DELANEY)**

* As a way of protesting the Vietnam war, Bob Dylan wrote a song ("Highway 61 Revisited") that imagined Abraham questioning God's order. Perhaps he was aware of the practice of using the story of Abraham to legitimate war, as was Wilfred Owen in his famous poem against the "fathers" sending the "sons" off to World War I. (9)

**THE GENERATION OF 1914 (ROBERT WOHL)**

* “Owen hated the war from the beginning with undivided feeling and devoted himself to celebrating its victims rather than to exposing and satirizing the supposed authors of their sufferings.” (100-101)
* “Owen's first employment was as an assistant to a vicar in Oxfordshire. These two years were critical in the young poet's development. They weakened to the breaking point his faith in organized Christianity and stimulated his natural sympathy for the underdogs of English society.” (101)
* \*\*This is a good source for biography information. Not going to read now, but come back to if needed.\*\*
* Owen had no time or opportunity to reflect on the deeper reasons for the war. Like Sassoon, he lacked the background in history and international politics that would have been necessary to understand them. He was typical of his age-group and his class in that he was more at home with Keats than with Clausewitz or Marx. But myths do not depend upon detached or even well-informed reflection. They arise and derive their purchase over the collective mind from the way people feel about their history as they live it. This was Owen's great contribution to the myth of the war generation. From the beginning he felt that the coming of the war represented a disaster and that its price was going to be paid by the young men of his generation. His experience at the front confirmed this intuition. Steeped in the imagery of the Bible and still deeply Christian in his patterns of thought, he came quite naturally to view the combatants as a generation of innocent youth being led to the slaughter, with himself as both the agent of their suffering and the celebrant of their sacrifice. Many war poets wrote verses on this theme, but none expressed the central idea so powerfully or related it so effectively to Christian tradition as Owen did in his poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." (104)
* “The war poets had provided the theme: doomed youth led blindly to the slaughter by cruel age.” (106)
* Goodbye to All That, pp. 28&-289 Robert Graves.. Imaging old men fighting instead of the young

**UNDER THE RIBS OF DEATH (LATHAM HUNTER)**

* “In The Generation of 1914, Robert Wohl writes that, after the battle of the Somme in 1916, when more than 400,000 British soldiers died, "the fact of mass and meaningless death seared itself on the consciousness of the survivors and was never to be removed" (95). In order to "justify the sacrifice of its sons" after the war (91), the British relied--civilians and enlisted alike--heavily on a mythic "evil form of the Older generation" (115). This myth was so highly developed and embraced that it gave rise to what Wohl called "a new poetry, and ultimately a new literature" (95), whose "essential theme" was "the betrayal of Youth by Age" (92). We need look no further than two such poems by a poet often held up as representative of the period: Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (Collected 44) and "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" (42). Wohl suggests that "it was Owen, as the most influential of the British war poets, who 'provided the theme' of 'doomed youth led blindly to the slaughter by cruel age' that would come to define future interpretations of this war" (91). According to Tom Hastings, England celebrated and romanticized its doomed youth and pointed its collective finger at "an abusive older male figure. [...] This myth invokes a discourse of negative paternity as a way of blaming people without having to specify exactly who they are" (91). This representative guilty older father lost weight, however, alongside multiple representative victimized sons; as Paul Fussell points out in The Great War and Modern Memory, there are constant references to "men [...] boys [...] lads" (282, emph. mine) in the writings of this war. Therefore, the "older male figure" (singular) is matched by younger male figures (plural). Male groups are, predictably, a predominant dynamic to come out of the experience of young men enlisting en masse and dying en masse.”

**MIDDLE CLASS FATHERS (LAURA UGOLINI)**

* War poetry provides some of the most striking images of this supposedly hard-hearted older generation, who had benefited from the suffering of the young. In ‘The blood of the young men’, Richard Aldington portrayed the ‘bitter indifference of the old men’, who grew ‘stronger and healthier / with broad red cheeks and clear hard eyes – / is not your meat and drink the choicest? / Blood of the young, dear flesh of the young men?’6 It was an easy shift for the cruel ‘old men’ to become the cruel ‘fathers’: Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘The parable of the old man and the young’ used the biblical story of Abraham, showing the father tying his son ‘with belts and straps’ and preparing to kill him. In a significant departure from the biblical story, ‘Abram’ ignored the angel’s call to desist and ‘slew his son / and half the seed of Europe, one by one’.

1. First published in 1920 by Siegfried Sassoon [↑](#footnote-ref-1)