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## **War is a Spiritual Crisis**

It's inscrutable, the story of Abraham and Isaac, tucked into the twenty-second chapter of Genesis. Here are the facts: Sarah, at ninety years old, gives birth to Isaac. Abraham, Isaac's father, is promised by G\*d that his son would, in turn, father a great nation – the Jewish people. In Isaac's young life – generations of scholars with time on their side have spent years trying to determine just how old he was – G\*d commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> Father and son climb a mountain. Abraham binds Isaac to an altar. And then, at the last minute, an angel stays Abraham's hand, saying “Now I know you fear G\*d.” A ram, caught in some nearby bushes, is captured by Abraham, and is sacrificed instead of Isaac.

My very first reaction to this story was, “Not my god!”

Are we supposed to admire Abraham for his faithfulness? Is child sacrifice, or the willingness and intention to sacrifice a child, an acceptable way to demonstrate devotion? As is often the case with Biblical texts, I'm lost, and not a little perturbed. So *why* this story?

I was eleven years old when Canadian songwriter and singer Leonard Cohen released his album *Songs from a Room*. I listened to it over and over, and loved – and still love – what Leonard Cohen did with the story of Isaac. The fourth verse is mystical – a whole sermon in itself – but the first three are entirely accessible, and important. He begins with the story, told in Isaac's voice:

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

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:5 ff

He said, 'I've had a vision  
 And you know I'm strong and holy,  
 I must do what I've been told.'  
 So he 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.

And now, verse three; Leonard Cohen on what we are supposed to learn from this story:

You who build these altars now  
 To sacrifice these children,  
 You must not do it anymore.  
 A scheme is not a vision,  
 And 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 heart was trembling  
 With the beauty of the word.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Leonard Cohen, "Story of Isaac," from *Songs from a Room* (1969). Here is the fourth (final) verse:

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.

Through the voice of Isaac, the poet says, We are, every one of us, called to act in accordance with a higher directive, a divine plan. “G\*d has not commanded you – any of us – to kill.” Leonard Cohen closes this song with a prayer for mercy.

Late last month<sup>3</sup> marked the festival of Eid-al-Adah, the Feast of the Sacrifice – a celebration of Abraham and Isaac's story. Traditionally, to honor Abraham's willingness to obey G\*d and sacrifice his son, Muslims ritually slaughter a cow, keeping a third for their family; giving a third to relatives, friends, and neighbors; and giving away a third to those in need. Everyone in the community partakes in the sacrificial meal. Less traditional Muslims also remember the poor at Eid-al-Adah, though not quite so literally. I love this translation of the story of Abraham and Isaac:

*Don't kill your children. Feed the hungry.*

Reflecting on how best to honor the veterans of war, and, especially, to honor those who are, at this very moment, in harm's way, in our good name, among the most important choices we can make are to support every effort to stay the hand of slaughter, and to feed the hungry.

The late Senator George McGovern died last month at the age of 90. He will be remembered as our “Don't blame me – I'm from Massachusetts” candidate, having lost every state but the Commonwealth in the 1972 presidential election that brought us Richard Nixon. But when I think of George McGovern, I think of his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Like Veterans Against the War, he knew of which he spoke. “A decorated World War II bomber pilot who landed more than one plane that was engulfed in flames, he became the leading voice against the war because [he had] had to wage one.”<sup>4</sup>

In September of 1970, speaking to an amendment to end the war, he excoriated those who opposed him. “Every senator in this chamber is partly responsible for sending 50,000 young Americans to an early grave,” he said. “This chamber reeks of blood. Every senator here is partly responsible for that human wreckage at Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval [Hospitals] and all across our land – young men without legs, or arms, or genitals, or faces, or hopes. There are not very many of these blasted and

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When it all comes down to dust,  
I will help you if I must, I will kill you if I can.  
And mercy on your uniform,  
Man of peace, man of war,  
The peacock spreads its fan.

<sup>3</sup> October 25-26, 2012

<sup>4</sup> From a tribute to Senator George McGovern by Robin Young, 10/22/12. You can read the whole piece at [hereandnow.wbur.org/2012/10/22/robin-george-mcgovern](http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2012/10/22/robin-george-mcgovern)

broken boys who think this war is a glorious adventure. Do not talk to them about ... national honor or courage. It does not take any courage at all for a congressman, or a senator, or a president to wrap himself in the flag and say we are staying in Vietnam, because it is not our blood that is being shed. But we are responsible for those young men and their lives and their hopes. And if we do not end this damnable war, those young men will some day curse us for our pitiful willingness to let the executive carry the burden that the constitution places on us.”

The senate was silent. Later, one lawmaker told the senator that he was offended, to which George McGovern replied, “That was my intent.”

Don't kill your children. Feed the hungry.

War is a spiritual crisis. Visionary and activist Marianne Williams writes, “It's not only morally obscene; [it's] unsustainable. We ... are moving in a direction that is maladapted for the survival of our species; ... we fight too much.”<sup>5</sup>

Even short of war, “political and economic change have never been sufficient in themselves to alleviate suffering when the underlying causes are not also addressed. The worst problems on earth – [war,] poverty, [and] ecological destruction, [to start the list] – [all come from] greed, ... delusion, [and] fear.... [Albert] Einstein called us nuclear giants and ethical infants.”<sup>6</sup>

Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes, “There are many important levels from which we can address global suffering. We must ... [bring] compassion and skill to economics, to education ... government ... service ... and ... world conflict. Underlying all this work, we [are called to muster] a strength of heart to face injustice with truth and compassion.

“There are two sources of strength in our world,” he continues. “One is the force of hatred, of those who are unafraid to kill. The other, ... greater strength comes from those who are unafraid to die. This was the strength behind [Mahatma] Gandhi's marches against the entire British Empire, the strength of Dorothy Day's tireless work for the poor on the streets of New York. This strength of heart and being is that which has [always] reclaimed and redeemed human life.

Jack Kornfield concludes, “Awakening compassion and freedom on this earth will

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<sup>5</sup> <http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/marianne-williamson-love-bottom-line>

<sup>6</sup> Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 295

not be easy. We need to be honest in dishonest times, when it is easier to fight for our principles than to live up to them.... We must find or discover in ourselves [a way of life] based on truth and compassion....”<sup>7</sup>

At what altar will we choose to worship? What are we willing to sacrifice? Who are we prepared to feed? Mahatma Gandhi said, “The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems.” *Peace begins with us.* Only when we commit to a spiritual path that calls us to love and service, justice and peace, only when we take responsibility for the greed, delusion, and fear in our own lives, will we begin to turn the tide of the lifeblood of war.

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we seek to do everything in our power  
to stay the hand of slaughter, and to feed the hungry.

*Peace begins with us.*

May we seek a way of life based on a mission of love, service, justice, and peace;

May we muster the strength to face injustice with truth  
and a heart of compassion for ourselves, for one another, for our country,  
and for the world.

I close with Archibald MacLeish's anointed poem, *The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak*.

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:

who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night  
and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died.

Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could  
but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished  
no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,  
they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for  
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,  
it is you who must say this.

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<sup>7</sup> *op cit*, pp. 295-296

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.  
We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.