

AKEIDA ALONE: WHERE IS THE LAMB? Paintings by Richard McBee

Jerusalem Biennale 2026: Jewish Art Salon exhibition; Yona Verwer, curator

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ENCOUNTERING GENESIS 22 (1998)

A young Rabbi is prospering, building his Greenwich Village congregation as his family grows to seven bright happy children. One child has diabetes but is growing stronger and stronger. She seems fine. Near her twelfth birthday, on vacation with the rest of her family in Israel, she suddenly falls into a diabetic coma and dies. The Rabbi rushes to Israel to bury her in a Jerusalem hilltop cemetery at night in the rain. His brilliant wife has been diagnosed with a brain tumor. She is dead within two years. He still leads his congregation in their prayers and praise to the merciful God.

In the Torah, the twenty-second chapter begins, “And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham.’ And he replied, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Please take your son, your only one, whom you love – Isaac -- and get yourself to the Land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering, upon one of the mountains which I shall indicate to you.’ Abraham is blindly obedient and obeys, until, at the last moment, is stopped by an angel of God. Isaac the victim survives.

What kind of cruel God rules this world?

As an artist, I encountered the passage called the ‘*Akeidah*’, (The Binding) in Genesis 22; 1-19, sometime around 1978 in my exploration of the Bible as a subject matter. Its evocation of terror fascinated me as I began to work with the passage in painting after painting. As I worked on other subjects from the Hebrew Bible over the years, I continued to return to the Binding of Isaac, either reworking older paintings or starting a new canvas as some aspect of the narrative caught my attention and interest. But there was something drawing me to this awesome subject, a fascination that would not let go.

Finally, in 1998, I had an exhibition at The Synagogue for the Arts Gallery (Tribeca Synagogue 49 White Street) of 24 paintings concerning the *Akeidah* that I had done over the previous eighteen years. The subject had become practically an obsession for me and the exhibition was a welcome opportunity to reflect on what I had done and, perhaps, why.

My original notion of Abraham and Isaac was one of confrontation -- the murderous father assaulting his victim, his son. The confrontation also had an element of contradiction within it. Our earlier knowledge of Abraham was synonymous with compassion and kindness. The patriarch was exemplified by his contentious argument with God in an attempt to save the wicked city of Sodom, his effusive hospitality to the Three Strangers at Mamre (actually three angels) and especially his longing for a son to inherit his knowledge of the God he had ‘discovered.’ Could this same man be a murderous monster? Around that time I read a book called ‘*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*’ by Julian Jaynes. The author’s thesis was that ancient people were radically different than we are. They did not have consciousness as we do. Rather, they were unable to introspect and therefore heard voices, auditory hallucinations, that they took to be the gods speaking to them. And in times of crises they listened and

obeyed.

In this understanding, Abraham is listening to “God” and unable to question or oppose Him. As a result, Abraham becomes for Isaac and for us, a monster, inhuman, unselfconscious, unreachable, directed by an ineffable and unknowable God. In my paintings Abraham towered, automaton-like, over a diminished Isaac.

Notwithstanding this anthropological filter, a father acting in this murderous manner toward his beloved son shatters all of one’s preconceptions of the world, of what is right and normal, what is just and loving. The *Akeidah* leaves us with a shattered world in which no one is spared, neither Abraham, Isaac, God, not even ourselves.

It seemed that this was the perfect expression of a world of shattered values. The headlines of the 20th century, the Holocaust, the effects of total war and totalitarian terror, all can find their antecedent in this Biblical tale. The modernism of 20th Century art with its shattered forms, blurred vision and disjointed perspective informed some of the paintings I did at that time.

In looking at these paintings during the exhibition I noticed something strange and singular. Before ‘the moment of slaughter,’ there was brutal confrontation. After, there is an understandable alienation and distance. Isaac, the 37-year-old son, cannot imagine his father, kind and loving, as before. But at ‘the moment’, when the knife is poised at Isaac’s throat, there reigns a disquieting unity. The text says twice that ‘the two of them went together,’ interpreted to mean in unity of purpose to fulfill God’s will. This is evidence of a complete and blind faith ultimately foreign to us. My paintings revealed to me this unity when they faced God together. Isaac was bound atop the altar, quiet and looking up at the sky and Abraham stood obediently next to his son with the knife at the ready. They were united in an act that would remove them from the world of men and usher them into the realm of the will of God -- a will, which is incomprehensible and infuriating.

Sarah, Abraham’s wife, doesn’t even appear in this chapter of the narrative. But the next chapter finds Abraham burying Sarah. Jewish tradition tells us that Sarah dies when she hears what Abraham almost did to her only son, Isaac, on the mountain. How is it that she is the one who must bear the fatal consequences of their actions? The will of God is incomprehensible and infuriating.

As I confronted the *Akeidah*, I realized that my confrontation was with God. I saw the conflict in every personal tragedy, loved ones hurt or worse by the incomprehensible ‘will of God’. To recoil and reject God, however, would be to cast an overwhelmingly positive and creative universe into chaos. And yet an attempt at a normal human ‘understanding’ of God only produced doubt and anger. But another road was becoming clear. The very distance and incomprehensibility of God was the key. God’s ultimately unknowable essence was the matrix around which the narrative of the *Akeidah* revolved. It was the key to the united leap of faith for both Abraham and Isaac. In the heart of monotheism I had discovered the impenetrable chasm between God and Man. God is unknowable. Just as we impute what amounts to human meanings to the workings of the God’s universe, so too we proclaim the human attributes that God is just, merciful and full of kindness. But whenever we are faced with the incomprehensible, we have begun to taste the radical Otherness of God. God cannot be not bound by human concepts of time, reward and punishment. To do so would violate the very principle of a Creator, all powerful and all knowing. The Creator is not limited by His creation or the consciousness He placed in man.

Isaac learns this lesson. He must live with it and transmit what is called 'The Awe of Isaac' to the one who will inherit the monotheistic faith, his son Jacob. For modern man, the unknowable is a heresy. And yet ours is the century of terror and uncertainty. Therefore, we have all been Isaac in some fundamental sense. His experience is paradigmatic of our times. Either through the events of our own struggling lives in a disintegrating world, or in the tortured life of our time with its Holocausts and genocide, we have all been Isaac.

ISAAC'S JOURNAL (1998)

At the time of the exhibition I became Isaac, as in a dream. I saw with his eyes and felt with his heart. I wrote a page in his journal.

I opened my eyes. I saw the brilliant blue sky above me, shimmering.

I was still alive. I had heard voices just before, indistinct yet close. My eyes and face were wet; before it had been very cloudy.

Who was this old man standing over me? Where was my father? I was afraid and confused.

This man was untying me and helping me down from the altar. He looked like my father but.... what had happened?

He went over to a bush and took the ram by the horns and slit its throat in one motion. There was blood everywhere. Mine. The look in the ram's eyes. Mine.

The man took the ram and placed it on the altar and lit the wood beneath it. It started to smoke and burn, sizzling flesh and fat. The smell was awful. I was dizzy with a fear I could not define.

The old man.... was that my father? I just don't know now.... he was speaking to me, something about a blessing, God, and stars, or sand. I think he might be crying. His voice was far away; it sounded different, foreign.

I really couldn't bear to hear him. I had to leave now.

I didn't know where to go. Then I thought of my mother, ... yes, if I could reach her... somehow she might understand, she could help me.

I was exhausted when I saw her standing in the tent doorway. She called my name and I blurted out what had happened to me on the mountain.

She cried out and fell backwards. Oh, my God!

She was dead.

I am alone. I am lost.

Richard McBee (1998)

Akeida Alone: Where is the Lamb? (2025), 6 paintings, 72" X 60" each, oil on canvas:
Richard McBee

“Out of the depths I call You, O Lord. O Lord listen to my cry; let Your ears be attentive to my pleas for mercy.” (Psalm 130)

And God tested Abraham...commanded him to slaughter his beloved son and eradicate all future generations. After creating 100 paintings on this subject, over 35 years, one thing I have concluded is that after the Holocaust we Jews are all “Isaac.” We have faced total annihilation as victims and survivors; the most recent October 7, 2023. We are all Isaac and the modern world turns its back on Israel.

This series of 6 paintings opens in mid-narrative, answering Isaac’s unnerving question; “Where is the lamb?” Abraham says; “God will provide.” Next, Abraham carefully places his son Isaac on the altar, a sacrifice. Suddenly an angel physically restrains Abraham’s murderous obedience. Defeated, Abraham begins to walk away, but Isaac is suspended atop the altar, abandoned by his father. Now under a Divine cloud, Isaac turns furiously back to his father’s advance. Finally, Abraham has brutally left his son and decided to return home, rejoining Ishmael and his servant Eliezer. Isaac is left on the mountain where he was to die. He is totally ALONE.

“For with you is forgiveness, that you may be feared.” Some of us manage to walk away from the terror. We...at least some of us, can survive the depths. Nonetheless, we find ourselves after such cruelty, again, ALONE.

Painting Captions: Top to bottom, left to right

- 1) WHERE IS THE LAMB? GOD WILL PROVIDE
- 2) SACRIFICE: PLEASE, DAD. BIND ME AND CAREFULLY PLACE ME ON THE WOOD...
- 3) DO NOT: WAIT, I’M STILL ALIVE...
- 4) ABANDONED: ...GET ME DOWN...
- 5) NEVER AGAIN
- 6) ALONE