

A Mystical Interpretation of the Binding of Isaac

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets the *Akedah* or the binding of Isaac that is found in *Genesis 22*. Standard interpretations of that passage raise serious moral questions about both God and Abraham. This reinterpretation, however, presents neither God nor Abraham as morally culpable. Using the symbols of astrology to interpret the *Akedah*, Isaac represents Abraham's fifth house of children, joy, and creativity. Connections are drawn between an astrological reading of the *Akedah* and the mystical teaching of renouncing the fruits of one's (5th house) creative action. Renouncing the fruits of one's action is then linked with egolessness (slaying Aries the Ram).

Introduction

One of the most difficult passages in the Torah is the *Akedah* (Hebrew: עֶבְרִיָּה), the binding of Isaac. At *Genesis 22*, God tests Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac.¹ Abraham appears to pass this test as he picks up his knife to slay his son. Theologians, rabbis, and lay people have struggled to make sense of this passage. Some feminists display outrage with a Divine parent who requires blind obedience for such a heinous act. For example, Nel Noddings states: "But for the mother, for us, this is horrendous . . . For us, then, Abraham's decision is not only ethically unjustified but it is in basest violation of the supra-ethical—of caring. The one-caring can only describe his act—'You would kill your own son!'—and refuse him forgiveness. . . I suspect no woman could have written *Genesis*."² Elizabeth Wurtzel calls the *Genesis* story an "act of atrocity alleviated by an eleventh-hour episode of Divine intervention" and "an incident of God-mandated filicide."³ These are powerful critiques. Is it not morally outrageous for a central religious text to glorify the murder of one's own innocent child?

This essay reinterprets the passage from a Kabbalistic or Jewish mystical perspective. Since my interpretation is symbolic and not literal, it presents neither God nor Abraham as morally reprehensible. By utilizing the astrological symbols present in the story, I will contend that it is not a story of filicide but a story about abandoning the fruits of our labor and egolessness. The Mezritcher Rebbe encourages us to "turn into nothing."⁴ The turning into nothing, this turn away from egocentricity, is the astrological message of the binding of Isaac.

Isaac as Abraham's Fifth House

Although many Kabbalists practice astrology,⁵ it is rare to see astrological interpretations of specific passages of Torah. It is commonplace for Kabbalists to draw a connection between the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 signs of the Zodiac,⁶ but unusual to see astrology used to interpret various stories in the Torah. I shall, however, propose an astrological interpretation of the *Akedah*, an interpretation that does not require us to see the Divine as a parent with a fragile ego who demands blind obedience in the commission of unconscionable acts.

The Torah opens: "*Bereshit bara Elohim*" (בראשית ברא אלהים). This is usually translated, "In the beginning, God created." For an entire chapter, we witness the creative acts of a Divine Being. For six days, God creates the

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heaven, the earth, the sun, the moon, vegetation, living creatures, and, on the sixth day, human beings. The one thing we know about God from the first chapter of *Genesis* is that God is a creator. On the sixth day (*Genesis* I: 27), “God created man in His own image”. Human beings are made in the image of a Divine creator. It seems reasonable to conclude that humans are also creators. The very first thing that God says to the new humans is (*Genesis* I: 28): “Be fruitful and multiply”. God is blessing these new creatures by encouraging them to create, to produce, to reproduce, and to be prolific.

In astrology, each of the 12 houses rules a specific area or segment of life. For example, the second house rules finances, the sixth house rules work, the seventh house rules marriage, etc. The fifth house rules creativity. When we engage in creative activity, when we produce, this is a manifestation of fifth house energy. The fifth house is linked with the ways in which we are creative (drama, music, art, romance) and the joy associated with those activities.⁷ The fifth house is also associated with the products or fruits of

creative activity. These fruits may include works of art, symphonies, plays, and most importantly for our purposes, the product of romance and love, namely children. In a natal chart, the fifth house represents one’s children. Hence, Isaac is Abraham’s fifth house. Isaac’s name in Hebrew is *Yitzhak* (יצחק) meaning “laughter.” Laughter is associated with joy and fun, and the fifth house is known as the house of fun or the house of joy because creating is considered joyful. From an astrological perspective, everything in the Biblical narrative points to the fact that *Yitzhak* is Abraham’s fifth house, the house of Abraham’s

creative projects and the fruits of those creative projects.

Renouncing the Fruits of One’s Labor

In *Genesis* 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. On my astrological interpretation, God is asking Abraham to sacrifice, give up, or renounce the fruits of his creative activity. Renouncing the fruits of one’s labor is a common theme in mystical literature. For example, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna tells Arjuna: “You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward. . . The wise unify their consciousness and abandon

attachment to the fruits of action.”⁸ The final chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* is very clear. As humans, we must perform actions. Each one of us has duties, responsibilities, or a *dharmic* path. We should not cease to perform those duties. However, we should give up selfishly clinging to the fruits of those activities. Gandhi was once asked if he thought a particular march would change the British policy towards

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India. He responded: “That is none of my business.”⁹ Despite the fact that Gandhi worked tirelessly for the independence of India, he gave up attachment to how it turned out. He performed his *dharma* by marching, but he renounced attachment to the fruits.

Rabbi Harold Kushner believes that we can find the same message in *Ecclesiastes*. The Book of *Ecclesiastes* repeatedly states that there is nothing better for a human being to do than find enjoyment in their work (their vocation or *dharma*) and to savor the moment.¹⁰ It also recommends that, whatever we do, we do it with all of our might because we don’t know

what the future holds.¹¹ In interpreting these passages, Rabbi Kushner states “If logic tells you that in the long run, nothing makes a difference, then *don’t live in the long run . . .* learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever.”¹² He further explains that the sages of the Talmud say that “‘One hour in this world is better than all of eternity in the World to come’ . . . I take that passage to mean that when we have truly learned how to live, we will not need to look for rewards in some other life . . . We totally misunderstand what it means to be alive when we think of our lives as time we can use in search of rewards.”¹³ Kushner concludes that the message of *Ecclesiastes* is that we will be frantic and frustrated if we search throughout our lives looking for rewards or successes.¹⁴ In the best known tractate of the Mishnah, *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers)*, it says: “Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward.”¹⁵ To create or produce in order to receive a reward is essentially future oriented. As long as we think about a reward, as long as we think about the future, we are pulled out of the present moment.

Mindfulness

Attention to the present moment or mindfulness is not only a central feature in Zen Buddhism, it is essential in Judaism. When God called to Abraham at the beginning of the *Akedah* narrative (*Genesis* 22:1), Abraham responded with a one word answer: “*Heneini*.” When God called to Moses from the burning bush (*Exodus* 3:4), Moses gave the identical one word response. “*Heneini*” (הנני) means “I am here” or “I am fully present.” The two most important figures in the Torah respond to God’s call by saying “I am fully present.” In the Jewish tradition, to do something with “*heneini* consciousness” means to do it with all your heart, all your soul and all your might. Thich Nhat Hanh defines mindfulness as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality.”¹⁶ This is the Zen parallel of doing something with all your heart, soul and might.

In Judaism, the view that grounds mindfulness is found in *Isaiah* 6:3: “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai tz’vaot, M’lo chol ha-aretz k’vodo*”:

קדוש קדוש קדוש יהוה צבאות מלא כל
הארץ כבודו

Translated, it says: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord; the entire earth is filled with Divine glory.” Divine, radiant glory permeates the whole earth. There is no sacred-profane distinction. The entire earth is filled with Divine energy. When we are in *heneini* consciousness, we are aware of the holiness, the sacredness of the present moment. Martin Buber points out the the central commandment of Hasidic Judaism is the “the hallowing of the everyday.”¹⁷

The Zen teacher Cheri Huber says: “Please do not do yourself the disservice of assuming there is something to do that is more important than just being right here, right now, present.”¹⁸ This ability to be fully present can only be achieved by abandoning the fruits of one’s labor. One of the slogans of the *lojong* teachings of Tibetan Buddhism is “Abandon any hope of fruition.”¹⁹ This is the symbolic point made in the Biblical narrative when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Abraham’s fifth house, the fruit of Abraham and Sarah’s creative activity). The astrological point is that Abraham is being asked to renounce the fruits of his labor. In order to be present to holiness, one must be present. One can’t be present when one clings to the future.

Killing the Ram Interpreted as Egolessness

The second noble truth of Buddhism is that suffering is caused by clinging of mind or by selfish craving, i.e., wanting things to turn out a certain way (and then being disappointed when they don’t). The third noble truth recommends that we renounce our selfish craving or clinging (to results). Because the world is impermanent and ever changing, clinging will always lead to suffering. Clinging to an ever-changing world is like trying to hold on to a rushing stream. Since we will never make the world exactly as we want it to be, clinging to the world being a certain way inevitably leads to suffering. The only solution is to give up

our clinging to results or the fruits of our actions. When we do something, we should do it with every fiber of our being; but it will turn out as it turns out. Clinging to it turning out a specific way is a recipe for disappointment and frustration. Hence, on the mystical interpretation of the *Akedah*, God is telling Abraham that in order to obtain a more elevated level of consciousness (*heneini* consciousness); he must relinquish the attachments to the fruits of his creative activity. Write books, sing songs, plant gardens, conceive children, but do not be attached to what is produced. This is symbolized perfectly by asking Abraham to sacrifice the most important symbol of the fifth house. Since Abraham and Sarah longed to have a child, *Yitzchak* is the perfect symbol of the fruits of one's creative action.

Therefore, Abraham goes to the land of Moriah to sacrifice his son. In his limited understanding of God's command, Abraham thinks that sacrificing the fruits of one's labor requires destroying or killing the product. If Abraham had written a book, he would

have understood the Divine voice to command him to burn the book. So (*Genesis* 22:10), "Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." At this point, God intervenes in order to expand Abraham's limited comprehension. God sends a ram (neither the lamb that Isaac expects nor a bull). The ram is, of course, Aries. Aries is the first sign of the Zodiac and represents the first house. The first house is the house of the ego, the house of the self.²⁰ Abraham must kill the ram that represents the ego or the self. This is the third noble truth, eliminate selfish craving. It is what Krishna tells Arjuna (*Bhagavad Gita* 18:11) when he says "true renunciation is giving up all desire for personal (selfish) reward."

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In terms of Jewish mysticism, the Hasidic Rabbi, Nachman of Bratzlav, insists, "You must nullify your ego completely, until you are included in God's own unity."²¹ In commenting on *Deuteronomy* 5:5, the Hasidic Rabbi Michael of Zlotov said: "What stands between you and God like a wall is your Ego. This I, this consciousness of a separate existence, is a wall between you and the Divinity."²² The Buddhists, the Hindus, and the Kabbalists are all saying similar things. Egoism and selfishness are hindrances to achieving more exalted states. The Hindus call the exalted state "*samadhi*," a state in which the selfish agitations of the mind

become so still that the meditator, act of meditation and object of meditation all become one.²³ The Buddhists call it "*nirvana*," a state of "no wind" in which selfish desires and egoistic cravings are stilled. The Kabbalists call this state *yichud* (יחוד), or unification, a state in which there is no more egoistic wall separating a person from the Divine. As long as

one clings to the fruits of one's actions, one has a selfish or egoistic desire that places a wall between oneself and the Divine. One must slay the ram, or nullify the ego in order to achieve more refined states of awareness. So, in order to renounce the fruits of his labor, Abraham need not destroy Isaac, he must slay the ram or nullify his ego. As long as we are locked into egocentric conditioning (*i.e.*, the experience of feeling oneself to be separate from life, separate from the present moment, or separate from God), we will experience "loneliness, fear, desperation, disconnection, deprivation, inadequacy, greed, hate and confusion."²⁴

Stillness

The technique taught in Jewish mysticism for destroying the ram or ego is the technique of meditation or quieting the mind.²⁵ At *Isaiah* 30:15, the prophet proclaims: “In sitting still and rest shall ye be saved. In quietness . . . shall be your strength.” There is an emphasis on inner stillness in *Psalms*. For example, at *Psalms* 4:5, it says: “Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.” And most dramatically, at *Psalms* 46:11, we find: “Be still and know I am God.” Elevated consciousness is achieved by quieting or claming the mind. This is reminiscent of Patanjali’s classic definition of Yoga (union with the Divine): “*Yogas citti-vritti-nirodha*.” Translated, it says: “Yoga is the calming of the agitations of the mind.”²⁶

The connection between stillness and expanded consciousness is evident from the passage describing the ascent of Elijah to the mount of God (*I Kings* 19:11-12). At the top of the mountain, Elijah witnesses a strong wind, and earthquake and a fire. But Elijah discovers that the Lord was not in the wind; the Lord was not in the earthquake; and the Lord was not in the fire. It is only when Elijah hears the *still small voice* that he is in touch with the Divine. It is not through colossal shows of strength and power that we reach the highest state of consciousness but through stillness. Fancy fireworks displays are enjoyable, but to truly expand one’s consciousness, one must quiet down the inner agitations (desires, emotions, and thoughts). The founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, states: “The world is full of wonders and miracles; but we take our hands, cover our eyes and see nothing.”²⁷ Radiance is everywhere. But we just don’t see it. The inner agitations of the mind prevent us from being fully present to the wonders that abound. Through meditation or quieting the mind, we become aware of the miraculous nature of life.

Innocence

This nullification of the ego leads us to genuine innocence. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, Shunryu Suzuki discusses the importance of *shoshin* or beginner’s mind. A beginner’s

mind is not a closed mind, but an empty and ready mind. It is the mind of innocence. An empty mind is always ready for anything and open to everything. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”²⁸ He concludes, “When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners.”²⁹ In the Zen tradition, the innocence of a beginner is associated with giving up thoughts of self and relinquishing or renouncing thoughts of achievement and accomplishment.

This Zen concept has its origins in the Taoist idea of the uncarved block. In Chapter 28 of the *Tao-te-Ching*, Lao Tzu urges us to “return to the state of infancy” and to “return to the state of simplicity (uncarved wood).”³⁰ Lao Tzu urges us to become more simple and childlike. Benjamin Hoff made this the theme of his book, *The Tao of Pooh*. Hoff states:

From the state of the Uncarved Block comes the ability to enjoy the simple and the quiet, the natural and the plain. Along with that comes the ability to do things spontaneously and have them work, odd as that may appear to others at times. As Piglet put it in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, “Pooh hasn’t much Brain, but he never comes to any harm. He does silly things and they turn out right.”³¹

The entire point of Hoff’s book is to say that the innocent, simple-minded Pooh Bear is a perfect example of a Western Taoist. I would like to propose that the Zen concept of beginner’s mind, the Taoist concept of the uncarved block, with their emphasis on simplicity and innocence, has a parallel in the Biblical idea of slaying the ram or the ego.

In the West, both Jewish and Christian sources emphasize the importance of innocence. In *Mark* and *Luke*, we find the same story:

They brought children for Jesus to touch. The disciples rebuked them, but when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you: whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”³²

In the Hasidic tradition, there is the often-told story of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who hesitated for a long time before blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*. After the congregation grew impatient, the Rebbe explained that there was an innocent, uneducated Jew standing in the back of the congregation. He was never taught how to pray. His knowledge of Hebrew was limited to the *aleph-bet*. So this innocent said to God: “Oh Great God, I am uneducated and ignorant. I cannot even recite the holy prayers from the book. I only know the 22 letters of the *aleph-bet*. So, I shall recite them for you: *aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet* . . . You, Lord, in your great wisdom and mercy, will weave them together into the words of a beautiful prayer.” It was for this man that Levi-Yitzchak waited.³³ This innocent man prayed with more *kavanah*, more heart-felt intensity than the more “enlightened” members of the congregation. The child-like innocence of the man in the story is similar to the innocence of Winnie the Pooh. The lack of a sophisticated ego-structure is praised in Taoism, in Zen, by Jesus, and in the Hasidic tradition. This, I submit, is the true meaning of slaying Aries the Ram.

This is also, on my interpretation, the symbolic meaning of the story of “the (alleged) fall.” In the Garden of Eden, there are two trees that are specifically mentioned. There is *Etz Chaim*, (עץ חיים), the Tree of Life; and of course there is *Etz Da-at Tov Va-Ra* (ועץ הדעת טוב ורע), the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Hebrew word *Da-at* (דעת, “knowledge”),³⁴ has the sense of an opinion, a judgment, an outlook, a belief. It is the ability to distinguish.³⁵ If it is *Da-at Tov Va-ra*, it is the ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. Once we eat from the tree of knowledge of duality, knowledge of opposites, right and wrong, good and bad, us and them, we have

already left Eden, the world of unitary consciousness or *yichud*. Now, it is inevitable, that, as humans, we conceptualize, rationalize, think, compare and contrast, adjudicate, arbitrate, and judge. But, when we do that, we leave the world of unity and union, and enter the world of duality, the realm of opposites, the world of suffering.

So, how do we get back to *Etz Chaim*, the tree of Life, the world of the sacred? As sung by Joni Mitchell and also by Crosby, Stills and Nash in the song, *Woodstock*, “We’ve got to get back to the Garden.” How do we do it? How do we tune into the divine channel? By tuning into the world of duality, we cannot

possibly get to the divine channel. It’s like tuning into MTV³⁶ and hoping to find the Discovery Channel. In *Isaiah* 51:1, the prophet says: “Hearken to Me, Ye that seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which ye were hewn, the quarry from which you were digged.” In other words, look to your roots, your source. Go back to your original state of non-duality or innocence. Go back

to the state of the uncarved block or beginner’s mind.

Conclusion

Egocentricity, the view that we are separate and isolated from life, prevents us from seeing the holiness in life. In order to attain *heneini* consciousness, one must begin to dismantle the seductive ego-structure. From an astrological perspective, the binding of Isaac is not a story of the willingness of a faithful man to murder his own son. It is a symbolic tale instructing us that in order to reach God-consciousness (*yichud*), one must sacrifice the fruits of one’s labor. Just as the exodus story is understood symbolically as the movement from the land of Egypt (*Metzraim* or limited consciousness) to the Promised Land of Israel (expanded consciousness),³⁷ the *Akedah* is understood as the

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path of the renunciation of the fruits of one's labor. How does one do that? Not by destroying the fruits, but by giving up selfish attachments to the fruits, thereby becoming more selfless and more innocent.

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- ¹ The standard interpretation of this passage is: "The purpose of the command was to apply a supreme test to Abraham's faith, thus strengthening his faith by the heroic exercise of it." *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*, ed. Dr. J.H. Hertz, Late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 201.
- ² Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 43.
- ³ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (New York: Random House, 1998), 36.
- ⁴ Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam, 2000), 55.
- ⁵ See Rabbi Philip Berg, *The Star Connection: The Science of Judaic Astrology* (New York: Research Centre of Kabbalah Press, 1986); Rabbi Joel Dobin, *The Astrological Secrets of the Hebrew Sages* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1977); and Matityahu Glazerson, *Above the Zodiac: Astrology in Jewish Thought* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997).
- ⁶ Dobin, 39-49.
- ⁷ Debbi Kempton-Smith, *Secrets From a Stargazer's Notebook: Making Astrology Work for You* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 18.
- ⁸ *Bhagavad Gita* 2:47, 51, tr. Eknath Easwaran (Petaluma, California: Nilgiri Press, 1985), 66-67.
- ⁹ Bo Lozoff, *Bo Lozoff at Twin Rivers Corrections Center*, (Durham: Human Kindness Foundation, 1995), videocassette.
- ¹⁰ *Ecclesiastes* 2:24, 3:12, and 3:22.
- ¹¹ *Ecclesiastes* 9:10.
- ¹² Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 141.
- ¹³ Kushner, 151-152.
- ¹⁴ Kushner, 152.
- ¹⁵ *Pirkei Avos* 1:3 (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1989), 9.
- ¹⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness!* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 11.
- ¹⁷ Martin Buber, *Hasidism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 72.
- ¹⁸ Cheri Huber, *The Key* (Murphys, CA: Keep It Simple Books, 1984), 1.

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- ¹⁹ Pema Chodron, *Start Where You Are* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 96.
- ²⁰ Kempton-Smith, 17.
- ²¹ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond: Adventures in Hassidic Thought* (New York: Maznaim Publishing, 1981), 56.
- ²² Louis Newman, *The Hasidic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 427.
- ²³ I learned this from my teacher Shelley Trimmer. In fact the inspiration for this article came from him.
- ²⁴ Huber, preface.
- ²⁵ Jeffrey Gold, "Spiritual Zionism," *Dialogue & Alliance* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 59.
- ²⁶ Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras* I: 2.
- ²⁷ *Siddur Hadash*, ed. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg and Rabbi Jonathan D. Levine (New York: The Prayer Book Press, 2000), 80.
- ²⁸ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), 21.
- ²⁹ Shunryu Suzuki, 22.
- ³⁰ Lao Tzu, *Tao-te-Ching*, tr. Wing-tsit Chan (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 149.
- ³¹ Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), 21.
- ³² *Mark* 10:13-16 and *Luke* 18:15-17.
- ³³ See Samuel Dresner, *The World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1986), 99-100; Jacob Minkin, *The Romance of Hassidism* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1955), 166; and Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (New York: Summit Books, 1972), 109.
- ³⁴ Interestingly, *Da-at* is the mysterious *sefirah* that is the balance point between *Chochmah* and *Binah*.
- ³⁵ Mattis Kantor, *Ten Keys for Understanding Human Nature* (New York: Zichron Press, 1994), 34-37.
- ³⁶ MTV, Music Television, is a popular cable television channel in the United States.
- ³⁷ For an expanded treatment of the symbolic interpretation of the exodus story, see Jeffrey Gold, 52-65.

