Dedicated to walter kron who believed it was a mistake on abraham’s part to agree to make the sacrifice as god’s test of his faith

"arami oved avi." (Deuteronomy 26:5) "my father was a wandering Aramean,"

What if we were to consider Abraham and Isaac as refugees? Weren’t they, like joseph, like all of us, children of those who left their homeland and started anew. Weren’t they put in danger? Didn’t the bombs blast over their heads?

When Abraham climbed up the mountain, his son’s hand in his own, the stone and knife in the other, Isaac loaded with the kindling, wasn’t he fleeing the fighting, hoping to find another place for his family where they could be safe, where his flocks would have water and pasturage, where his children could grow and have a decent education, where the Cossacks couldn’t reach him, where the Nazis would be oceans away, where the czar and fuhrer wouldn’t be threatening them forever. For as long as he could remember. Where the inquisition had come to an end, and they wouldn’t have to pretend they were catholics? Or flee to Turkey?

What was the price they would have to pay? First, simply crossing the desert meant paying for handlers who procured them places on a truck. When it reached the border between Niger and Algeria, they had to get out and pay more if they wanted to go on. The driver had lied. When they passed into Morocco, it was another blackmailing, and so on, to the borders of Melilla and Ceuta on the coast of Morocco, where barbed wire and guards lay between them and Spanish territory. So they paid to get spots on a freighter, a boat meant to carry 300 people, but was loaded with 900. Despite hearing stories about women and children being locked in the hold, they took their places, and hoped to make it to Spain, or Italy, or Greek islands.

Later they thought, they could have followed the Syrians through Turkey to Greece, and on to Hungary, before getting to the promised land, to Germany, where Merkel said Germany would take 800,000 of them: Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, Eritreans, Yeminis, Somalis, Sudanese. Today’s children heading north to be safe from the wars. 800,000 in Germany this year, with 20,000 the past week alone. Hungary didn’t want them to come, and so built a wall to keep them out; Macedonia had armed guards to keep them from crossing from Greece. The Greeks were desperate to stop them from coming from Turkey, and in Athens held them in a camp where conditions were barely livable.

So they put them on a ship, and sent them to the United States, but they were turned back, and wound up in the camps where they all died. We wept for Walter when he left Germany, waving to his parents on the pier. We wept when he told us of his return to his village after the war, when he finally learned of his parents’ deaths. We wept when he told us his classmates, all young Christian boys when he last saw them, had died during the war, leaving him, the wandering Jew, the only survivor. We wept, too, when we lost our Walter, our guide to moral judgment, to history, to plain-spoken decency, and to Jewish thought. Jewish thought could not have accepted the images of this past week, the small boy found dead on the shores of Turkey, the thousands of Syrians desperately marching through Hungary, to get to Austria, to get to Merkel’s Germany, now 70 years since the death of Hitler and the end of the 1000 year reich. When will we stop our weeping? And how can we weep for ourselves if we cannot also weep for Walter’s 9 classmates, the Syrian refugees, the children, above all, who have to trail along this new trail of tears. Where did Abraham go when he left Mount Moriah with Isaac? It wasn’t back to the servants and home: that was just the story he told to the authorities in order to convince them that he, the man with the knife, was not another middle eastern terrorist.

Abraham took Isaac’s hand, his son, his beloved son, and climbed the mountain, having lied about what was happening. We’ll be back, he told the servants; God will provide the sacrifice, he told Isaac. Why was he to be rewarded, after this? He knew there was never again to be a reward after all they had been through; never again would the family know the joy they’d had before the war, when they had tents and flocks and land. Now there was only the smoke of war behind him.

By the time they got to Calais the money from selling the sheep was gone; the passage could have been bought with several thousand dollars a person: that would hire them a car and driver, with false papers, and that could get them into England. There they would have 35 pounds a week to live; like 50 euros a week in France, but with fewer chances for a quick deportation if they were not granted refugee status. They didn’t speak the language, but the kids could learn quickly, and there were other Jews there who had been lucky enough to escape the Holocaust, and who would help. But money was short, options were poor. You could pay a trucker to hide you in the back, but inspections crossing over were frequent, the cost was also too high. You could try to sneak onto a truck, when it slowed, cut the covering and hide inside with the goods. Too hard with a kid; too risky. Or you could try getting into the Chunnel and run for it.

Some made it; many died. Many lost their kids on the way.

You could also look for the ram in the bushes, and ask god to take it in Isaac’s place. How many more children could you have, if you lost this one, this beautiful boy who was so quick at languages, whose smile charmed the hardest and cruelest of the handlers. Walter was now lost; we couldn’t risk losing Isaac as well, our darling boy, our only hope.

Abraham climbed the mountain steadily, he thought. But really it was getting too steep, he was getting too old for this, Isaac already had to carry the load for him. And asking him questions, where is the sheep for the burnt offering. He had already sold the sheep. When he told the servant to await their return, he already had known they would be descending on the other side, and not coming back. Later he would hope he could send for Sarah. The journey was too difficult for all of them to go, and she was getting old.

Behind him he could see the smoke where their settlement had gone up in flames. The sound of the horses was still in his ears. All he could grab was his knife and the flintstone. How could they afford the fare all the way to England, where they would be safe? Or should they try for Germany? The very sound of the name gave him the shivers.

What was he to do when they reached the mountain heights. It was dry, water was hard to locate, the food he was able to bring was slight. Abraham and Isaac walked up Mount Moriah, seeking a pass through the peaks, so they could reach the other side safely, but it was a very dangerous route, and no one took it unless they were desperate.

On the boat off the coast of Libya, he dreamed of what they would find when they landed in Lampadusia, only 24 hours according to the ship’s captain. Most of their money was gone, and hundreds of frightened people crowded up on the deck. Everyone had heard of the two ships that had gone down two weeks earlier. Would they make it across the ocean, with Nazi submarines, Americans now hostile to Jewish immigrants? Their neighbor was a slim youth named Walter. They had seen him waving goodbye to his parents on the dock. Where did he say he was headed? A place called New Haven, in Connecticut. Papa’s friend was in New York City. Come on, he said, tailors are in demand here; you can bring Clara and baby Elizabeth. I’ll find you a place in the Lower East Side. There’s work. Even Chinese people are working here. We can do it. I can’t wait to see you. Just be careful on Ellis Island; they try to ask trick questions to see if you are an idiot. What did they say? If you are washing the stairs in the house of your employer, do you start at the bottom or the top? Do you believe it? Sarah wanted to say, I didn’t come to America to wash stairs. I told her, keep quiet, it’s only till I can get a job. We’ll be safer there. I hear good things. Look at the statue of liberty. We are almost there now. Please god, we’ll make it this time.

But the French are chasing the Rom back to Romania, where they are treated like dirt. Don’t say you are from Romania, they won’t understand grandma; she married grandpa brodek, who was from somewhere else, Poland, Austria-Hungary. His name was Adolph, but that was before the war. Grandma’s name was Sara. She died with diabetes, and her family wound up in Brooklyn. I am an American, not an immigrant. What does any of this have to do with me?

Who are we? A wandering Aramean was my father. Don’t ask, Abraham told Isaac; god will provide the sheep my son. The sheep for the burnt offering, Isaac thought, and shuddered—not knowing he was to be the sheep this time. What will we tell them when we arrive, he asked Abraham, they will want to know where we are from, why we have left, how we got here. Tell them this, said Abraham, knowing Isaac would have to speak for him, and this is what Isaac said:

“We arrived at the place of which God had told my father, Abraham. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound me, his son Isaac and laid me on the altar, on top of the wood.”

Isaac stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The custom’s official looked at Abraham, wondering what this crazy story was all about. Hadn’t he heard something like it before? Isaac continued, “And father Abraham picked up the knife to slay me, his son. 11 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" Father answered, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." 13 When father looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of me, his son.”

The custom’s official now laughed. Ha, good one he said. I see the knife, I see the firestone, but where is the sheep?” He laughed again, and let them through. What the hell, another two won’t matter. Wait till he told the missus about this one tonight. What won’t they dream up next time?

In Islington in London, there was a dry goods shop they had been told about. The owner employed a dozen Jewish refugees to help him run the shop. It was there that Abraham and Isaac appeared one day. They had learned a little English; on the way Isaac read the paper to his father, the Sunday New York Times, where it said, “But perhaps not since the Jews were rounded up by Nazi Germany have there been as many images coming out of Europe of people locked into trains, babies handed over barbed wire, men in military gear herding large crowds of bedraggled men, women and children.” Abraham asked Isaac, what does “bedraggled” mean? Isaac said, I think it means rich, but he wasn’t sure. There were many who had bought their way there. How could they have done so, unless they had had many sheep to sell?

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven.

This time there was no answer. There was only smoke.

I asked Walter what it meant, but he only smiled, and said, Shena Tova.

Ibrahim had no money for food for his family, so he took his son, his only son, his beloved Ishmael, and headed for the coast. Where are the sheep for the trading, Ismael asked him; god will take care of us, Ibrahim told him, and gave him the wood to carry for the fire that night. When they arrived, the shipowner approached them, along with the others encamped along the shore. People were weeping, and their children were being led off, some screaming. It was a frightening scene.

Why are we here, says Ishmael? Ibrahim didn’t answer, but lifted his beard to the sky and looked grim, miserable.

Ishmael wasn’t dumb. He fled from his father, and returned home to Hagar, weeping, angry, belligerent, ruined.

Where is your father, asked the village elders. Ishmael told them what had happened. The elders met. We can’t have our children disobeying us, said the chief. Ibrahim was only doing what god had commanded. This boy must be punished; and then had him bound and carried off to the mountain where prisoners and slaves would be sacrificed for the king. The king gave the villagers a flock of sheep in payment for the handsome youth. He was carried off to the south, and served a wealthy official.

Some years later it emerged that he had profited from the proximity to the ruler, who had decided to keep him to become his head councilor. The country prospered under his rule for 7 years, at the end of which time he was able to travel to the coast and purchase a full-fare ticket to England. He was there when Abraham and Isaac were making an illegal crossing. They had barely escaped with their lives, repeatedly, and the refugee apartment they were granted had 10 other men living in it as well, half of whom had not been granted refugee status and were no living illegally in the country.]