Abraham and Isaac

We walked home from the synagogue after Saturday evening prayers. My father held my hand to make sure I wouldn’t run away. This was hardly necessary. I couldn’t have run if I tried. I could hardly walk because I had on my mother’s high-heeled shoes. This happened because in the afternoon a friend (Moishe) and I went swimming in the nearby river instead of staying in the synagogue reading the psalms of David. This was clearly a sin and God’s punishment was swift. Several gentile boys suddenly appeared and threw our clothes in the river. We recovered everything but our shoes.

It was nearly time for the sundown prayer and I managed to sneak into the house with the aid of my mother just as my father and two older brothers left for the synagogue. Of course, I was expected to be there, but here I was with no way of hiding what had happened. Powdering my face with dust to take the shine off my cheeks (a technique I used successfully in the past) was of no avail. My clothes and cap, though squeezed dry, still told the story; and, of course, I had no other shoes.

I quickly got into my mother’s high-heeled shoes. By lowering my pants I managed to get to the synagogue without attracting too much attention. When I got there I found my father and Mosihe’s father (Moishe was not there) in whispered conversation. The story was out. My father seemed both pleased and surprised to see me. Nothing was said at the time and we proceed to pray as if nothing had happened.

My father always assured me that unless I mended my ways I would grow up to be a “woodchopper” or “water carrier”. My father wanted something better for his son.

As we were walking home for my punishment, I was thinking of Abraham and Isaac, another father and son walking to a sacrifice. When God tested Abraham’s loyalty by asking him to sacrifice his son, Abraham was far from willing. Although he knew which son God meant, he asked God which son was to be sacrificed, saying “I have two.” “The one you love”, replied God. “I love them both”, said Abraham. “Isaac”, said God. When on the way to the place of sacrifice Isaac asked “Where are we going, father?” “To offer a sacrifice to God”, said Abraham. “But we have no ram”, said Isaac. “God will provide one”, said Abraham; and, of course, God did. My father assured me that he was not happy about the punishment he would administer, but he made no provision for a ram.

At home, after the prayer of “Havdallah” (the prayer which escorted out the poetry of the Sabbath and ushered in the prose of the week), my father administered the usual punishment. My mother was by my side and got most of the blows on her arms with which she shielded me. After several more blows my mother shouted “Enough! You ought to thank God he wasn’t drowned.” My father said “Yes, thank God for that!’, and I was released.

By David B. Schreiber

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