



The Bonding of Isaac: Stories and Essays About Gender and Jewish Spirituality

Joel Lurie Grishaver

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The moment when Abraham's hand holds the knife over his bound son remains one of the most horrifying and difficult moments in the Bible. In *THE BONDING OF ISAAC: Stories and Essays About Gender and Jewish Spirituality*, Grishaver uses the Midrashic tradition, a Rabbinic mode of Biblical interpretation, to weave a new story—the title story—around the Biblical text. Chapter 22 of Genesis suddenly becomes the story of a lonely, half-crazed father, attempting to initiate his son into manhood.

What starts with Abraham, the father, thinking 'The boy must die so that the man can be born;' ends with God, speaking in Terah's (Abraham's father) voice, saying, 'Jewish fathers must never kill their sons, not in reality, not in ritual, not even with words, not even with silence. They must give them life.' Through this title story, the Bible confronts Robert Bly, and the meaning of becoming a man is reconsidered on Jewish terms.

THE BONDING OF ISAAC is not only a Jewish men's book, nor is it a simple Jewish rewrite of the extant pop works on gender, either. In his newly published book, Joel Lurie Grishaver reaches beyond the same old women-are-all-heart-and-men-are-all-head theories to give us a refreshingly open and personal male perspective on how all of Torah—and therefore all the world—is based on the male and female aspects found within God, and therefore found within each of us, too. Grishaver takes the similarities and differences found between the genders and takes them through psychology, into theology, and then into the soul.

THE BONDING OF ISAAC also speaks to and about women. Grishaver reexamines such timeless pieces of writing as *Eishet Hayil*, the 'Woman of Valor' poem found in Proverbs that is traditionally recited by husband to wife upon ushering in the Sabbath. Many feminists now view this poem as an expression of male domination/female subjugation, but Grishaver finds it instead to be a man admiring his wife for being a 'valiant soldier' and the expression of her strength and independence. In another chapter entitled 'The Mamas and the Papas: Beyond a Politically Correct Gender-Balanced Liturgy,' Grishaver breaks down the Amidah, the central prayer of Judaism, in terms of its gender dualities, and explains how and why the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, not only should be included, but how the tears of our mother Hannah are already at the core of this chain of prayers.

Although Grishaver investigates all the 'tough' issues, including brit milah (circumcision), belief in God, spiritual loneliness, aging, and death, he does so in such an engaging and provocative way as to make *THE BONDING OF ISAAC: Stories and Essays About Gender and Jewish Spirituality* anything but a tough read. This collection offers gender/spiritual insight into both men and women, and will be eagerly read by all, as much to learn about one's own gender as the other. It also offers a chance to learn a lot of Torah, Talmud, and Midrash during the journey.

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