THE JOURNEY TO MORIAH

By William J. Robbins

I.

Let us sing of the famous father, cry for the famous son,
Chant of the demanding god and wail for the forsaken mom,
Recall the journey to Moriah and all that came undone.

Shall we praise this parent of a people numerous as sand?
His conduct's not forgotten, but its merit, where do we stand?
On that fateful trek, we wonder, did he once hold his son's hand?

And of the thundering, man-grabbing god, what now do we think?
The voice that would be Sinai's El there was at a moral brink,
His words those of bloody Baal, frightful idolatrous link.

It was a time of camelled journeys, a time of tented rest,
Of pillared salt, of hurried meals for weary unknown guests,
A time after the flooded chaos and the dove's twice-flown test.

It was not best, it was not worst, but, some might say, it was cursed,
A time of beginnings, a time of ends, of hopes that were burst
And hopes that were sprouted, a time of terrible divine thirst.

II.

Sun, the great day-dominating orb that El had created,
Praised El each morning, when rising up hot and golden-plated,
And each night, when lying down, horizon's soft bed awaited.

So, too, shape-changing Moon, the sky temple to El nightly graced,
At month's start, a slim sliver alluring as Troy Helen's waist,
By mid-month, a plain and perfect circle, unadorned and chaste.

The mountains sang to El, and island chains raised up in His praise,
Oceans roared to delight El, jewels for Him their sparkling sprays,
From the skies, thunder claps and lightning bolts were for El bouquets.

Heavenly angels' choruses intoned verses of acclaim,
Majestic tributes trumpeting El's so everlasting fame,
"Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Hosts," harp players did exclaim.

Yet, El found this not enough, a human offering desired,
Proof of total devotion by the man He'd picked was required,
The man by whose conduct at Sodom El Himself was inspired.

So, when in a deep, sweet and prolonged slumber Abraham lay,
A vision appeared, a voice rent the night, and sleep slipped away,

The voice that at Ur had called him to become an émigré.

El Himself, not a seraph, no angel wrestling for a prize,
Not a glib, deceiving, fallen angel walking in snake's guise,
El alone, Adon Olam, His power and glory king -size.

With curly-locked, raven-black hair, in garments dark as red wine,
In royal and bejeweled crown, arm in tefillin entwined,
With a visage in which at once youth and age were both combined.

The El of Shofarot, with commands, not music, the thunder,
Words more piercing than any notes, and driving lives asunder,
Did it inspire fear or deep faith, we now sit and wonder.

"Take your son" – Tekiah – "your favored son, Isaac, whom you love,"
A burnt offering to me, he'll be, El continued from above,
Showing His hard iron fist beneath His soft satiny glove.

And El-challenging Abraham, sharp questioner at Sodom,
To complete and quiet surrender then said hello ("shalom"),
Did he know that, doing so, in searing silence he would roam?

Silence from the sheep for El, the threatened son who'd end up saved,

Silence from his lifelong wife, horrified by how he behaved,
She would welcome death, silencing death, lie buried in a cave.

He was not simple nor someone who did not know how to ask,
Was he wise or wicked in just accepting El's awful task?
Did he think, by that, in the light of El's glory he would bask?

III.

The rosy fingers of dawn sweetly caressed the morning sky,
Abraham arose and, with his mission, set out to comply,
His mind was firm, but what of his heart, there, was something awry?

He took his son, a saddled ass and two servant boys quite young,
He ordered wood placed on the beast's back, otherwise held his tongue,
And off they went, this group of four, on their journey just begun.

As they went, did they stop, bathe their feet, take a morsel to eat,
Act like angels on a task, look for travelers they might greet?
Or just rush ahead, lest El-demanded death they might cheat?

Child of laughter, so Isaac had been, this boy now grown to man,
At old Sarah, frisky as a filly, laughs throughout the land,
She, too, had laughed when overhearing a son's birth was at hand.

And Abraham laughed, though, man of tact, it was only in stealth,
Fearing that showing open doubt of El might threaten his wealth,
Wealth of cattle, sheep, silver, gold, acquired slaves and many wells.

But not a laughing matter now, this horrid and awful task,
A task that Abraham was deeply shocked El had even asked,
Not asked, as he well knew, but ordered, El's ruthlessness unmasked.

Father and son "walked off together," the Bible's poignant phrase,
Together in place and stride, perhaps, but not in other ways,
The son thought of the practical, the father was in a daze.

Pillar of silence between them by day, kept knowledge away,
Knowledge of what was soon to come if El were to have His way,
Same pillar at nights' fires, to keep at bay what El had to say.

"With you I am a father, but for you a servant of El,
As father, bound with you by love, and always wishing you well,
As a servant of El, tossed and turned, my life a living hell."

So he wished to say to Isaac, but those words just would not come,
And he continued down the fraught path on which he had begun,

The El-marked path from which he believed he should not stray nor run.

On they went toward Moriah, a many days' journey away,
El should quickly rescind His order, is that for what he prayed?
From the dreadful task near at hand, did the father's mind soon stray?

Stray it did, to another son, his older son, long banished,
The Egyptian Hagar's son, for sight of whom he was famished,
Who, between Sarah's hate and his love, had been tightly sandwiched.

Child of lust, not of laughter, and circumcised by him for El,
Lowly maid's child, mocking and unworthy, so did Sarah tell,
And El had said: "In our covenant this boy cannot dwell."

"Son of the covenant, that is Isaac, Sarah's old-age child,
Through him the nation's future is to grow," and Sarah had smiled,
And ordered Hagar and son be sent into the desert wilds.

He thought of this past, the child he'd lost, now just a memory,
Felt Sarah's ire at the boy had been sprinkled with treachery,
And as he walked and thought fell further into reverie.

He dreamed that though he had banished Hagar and her son by him,
He'd shielded her from her death watch for the boy, when hope was slim,
And it was he alone who heard the grim reaper's awful hymn.

He heard a voice calling him, seeking to know if he were there,
A child's voice from under a bush wilting in hot desert air,
No sign of food or drink, not near or far, not anywhere.

He sat at a distance from the child, a long bowshot away,
For he thought "Let me not look as the child now passes away,"
He was rooted to the spot, love and agony made him stay.

For he recognized the child's face, that of Ishmael it was,
A child he adored, a face that made his best emotions buzz,
Made him regret the terrible harm a father sometimes does.

"Father." A quiet, simple word, yet a profound call for connection,
For a gentle touch, a brushed kiss, some sign of affection,
A supporting hand, some wise words, guiding sense of direction.

And Abraham responded: "Hineni, here I am, my son,"
As on that pair of child and father beat down the blazing sun,
Then, a burst of harsh reality, and his head sharply spun.

He was not in Beersheva's wilds, but nearing Moriah's hills,
The child who'd called to him "Father," sending down his spine a chill,
Was not the one he thought he saw, but the one he'd brought to kill.

Then Abraham's thoughts turned once again from the son by his side,
To the other son's mother, in his tent, lying by his side,
Dark-skinned Nubian, gift of traders who traveled far and wide.

She, too, had known El, in the desert called him "El Who Sees Me,"
When from the frightful sight of death's dark house El had set her free,
Her son as well, and then El had told her what her son would be.

And Abraham wondered if El ever saw him in that way,
With care and grace, concerns erased, hope for the future conveyed,
Giving sight to see what had been unseen, driving doubt away.

A traveler from afar will see an oasis with palms,
And dream of lounging respite for his so weary legs and arms,
Of supple women, with their silk-veiled and golden bangled charms.

And Abraham, tired as he was, saw Moriah from afar,
But had nightmares of there fulfilling El's demand so bizarre,
So unlike El, the creator of the heavens and the stars.

Altar of faith this rocky ridge soon might very well become,
But any thoughts of charm or respite or beauty were struck dumb,
Leaving but grim recognition of being under El's thumb.

El, who'd filled the void with teeming life, would rob his son of breath,
Just to test his devotion to El, to gauge its width and breadth,
El demanded the soldier of faith carry the flag of death.

And the man of faith and his son, together these two went on,
To the mountain top picked out by El mysteriously drawn,
Choosing not at all to revolt, but merely to act as pawns.

They reached the place of which El told, and he built an altar there,
He laid out the wood that would be lit, create a human flare,
Bound and laid his son on top of the wood, on the altar there.

On that highland peak, to feed him to El from the rocky crag,
A sacrifice of his best, like lambs and rams and goats and stags,
Oh El, my El, Father of Israel, of this do You brag?

IV.

Then from out of the mist emerged enormous, persistent Doubt,
Spear in hand, knives in belt, and from his mouth came blood-curdling shouts

That brought floods of terror and to blind faith instantly gave rout.

Doubt, who over the years, had thrown down the gauntlet to all men,
From Adam on Eden's paths to Sodom's unfindable ten,
And to Noah, as ark builder, who asked "If not now, then when?"

Abraham fell back, fear and trembling in body and in soul,
His resolve, firm as an iron rod, became like a cracked bowl,
And in his limbs, his every limb, he felt so very old.

But just as a mother bird will swoop down to protect her young,
With flapping wings and mobbing calls and a fierce fury unstrung,
So, too, El, from his vast and lofty realm above, now quickly sprung.

He forged a huge, mighty shield to surmount Doubt's arrows and spears,
Strong armor and fearsome helmet to allay the father's fears,
And, those in hand, rushed to his soldier of faith through heaven's spheres.

And Abraham armed himself as on Moriah's heights he kneeled,
As fully as mighty Achilles had at Troy's bloodied fields,
With armor and helmet and blackened straps and enormous shield.

Armor fashioned not by vaunted cripple, but by El Himself,

Armor removed for the first time from El's high, heavenly shelf,
Armor just as elegant and blue as porcelain from Delft.

A helmet tight on his head as Jericho would be shut up,
A helmet crowned with rays of light that some, with horns would mix up,
A helmet to instill fear and dread on which foes' minds might sup.

A blackened strap around his head, another wrapped down one arm,
With knots that shone in opponents' eyes, their courage did disarm,
Reminders that following El's words would protect him from harm.

On the shield, some images of glories El had created,
Of earth and sky, birds that fly, stunning sleek horses fast-gaited,
Of mothers thick with child, and of mothers by births elated.

Of Eden's garden, with flowing river and grasses so green,
Of fields ripe with wheat and barley, in which corners Ruth would glean,
Of study halls where wise men read and discussions were routine.

These the father needed to battle crafty, persistent Doubt,
Who worms his way into men's minds, first with whisper, then with shout,
Whisks away, as if wispy clouds, walled strongholds of the devout.

Doubt that sapper-like might lay mines to destroy Abraham's faith,
To transform his will to follow El into ghost-like wraith,
And in hesitancy and distrust his killing arm would swathe.

'round the bound-down son, Abraham and Doubt fought with brutal force,
Like the Trojans and Achaeans did beside Sarpedon's corpse,
While El and angels, good and bad, watched from lofty heavenly courts.

Abraham, though girded by El, withdrew before Doubt's advance,
But then turned, went back, resolved on the battlefield still to dance,
And thereafter, to retreat from Doubt no longer gave a glance.

Doubt, famous and furious warrior was the one who fled,
His double-edged spears repeatedly fell far from Abraham's head,
And Abraham, from fighting Doubt, now turned to El's task instead.

He picked up his knife to slay his son, to slaughter parents' smiles,
Both fear and reasoned thought he had somehow managed to beguile,
And Death was there to take his son, not wait for even a while.

Tears flowed from the father's eyes, as water in a mountain stream,
Not winter's intermittent drops, bitter cold and crystal clean,
But like spring's torrent, a thundering roar under sunlit gleam.

For which son did these tears so roll, for which life no longer whole?
Who the mother to pay the toll, whom he could never console.
Try hard as he might, conjure up tricks as he may, to cajole?

The hands he touched, that his knife brushed, were those of the younger son,
The constant voice heard in his head was that of the older one,
Both boys, taken by El, there would be no birthright to be won.

The hands were the hands of Isaac, the voice that of Ishmael,
A legacy of confusion of sons that years would not quell,
On which another father, too – son now – would have cause to dwell.

For the tears that fell were tears that seared, seared Isaac's staring eyes,
Dimming them so that, in years to come, to see took many tries,
And Isaac, guileless Isaac, became victim of disguise.

V.

In Ilium, in death's grasp Olympian gods' sons were caught,
To Moriah's altar, chosen son of chosen man was brought,
And the women, oh the women, always they were left distraught.

When Abraham took Sarah's son, and she was asleep in bed,
Surely, he woke her, told her what was planned, his task ahead,

Alas, no, this man of words chose the path of silence instead.

The siren song of El distracted Abraham from his wife,
He set off, with no word to her, gifting her anguish and strife,
No thought at all of how what was to come would destroy her life.

Satan came to Sarah as she sat tented in mid-day heat,
Wondering where her men might be, on what paths they'd set their feet,
To hilltop shrine or desert cave, the mystery was complete.

He was alone, his sandals shredded, his beard unkempt and red,
By a long, torn and tattered rope, a braying donkey he led,
And Sarah told her servant girls to be sure this man was fed.

Satan reclined, drank and ate, all at a most leisurely pace,
Of the wines and meats, the breads and figs, there was left not a trace,
Then, with words sharp as blades, a vision in Sarah's mind he placed.

A vision of her husband tightly binding her only son,
Standing over him, arm raised, knife unsheathed, its descent begun,
And by his side El applauding the sacrifice he had won.

Anger shattered Sarah's peace of mind, broke it fully apart,

Terror hurled its ash-hard spear with pointed head toward her heart,
And despair, meddling guest, toward endless darkness gave Sarah a start.

Weeping lodged with Sarah at night, but no joy came at morning,
Weeping tarried with her night and day and, too, wails of mourning
For her son, captive of his father's blind faith madly churning.

What good her beauty now, dazzling as a bride throughout her life?
Beauty that once led her husband to call her sister, not wife,
For fear the enamored Pharoah would soon end that husband's life.

It was powerless to save her Isaac from the killing knife,
It was powerless to save her psyche from despair run rife,
Powerless to keep her heart from breaking, shattering her life.

And what of her dreams now, those images in her mind deep-pressed?
Gone with the wind, consumed by El's fearsome test,
By Abraham's acting as slave to his master's will and quest.

Dreams of a spouse for Isaac, a beauty, fertile with new life,
And grandkids, swarming like honey bees, but calm and without strife,
Watching them grow from young to old, and dance to drums and fife.

And this wife to Isaac, like a daughter to Sarah might be,
Who would fill her days with waves of love like gently lapping seas,
And idle talk to lightly brush her thoughts like a summer's breeze.

Then Sarah recalled another mother, at one time her maid,
Who also was filled with hopes and dreams for which each day she prayed,
Hopes and dreams Sarah had selfishly dashed, not at all dismayed.

Shattered mother herself, Sarah now felt guilt for what she'd done,
For hatefully expelling Hagar and Ishmael her son,
And aroused a daydream that for sweetness was surpassed by none.

She and Hagar sat close together, equal daughters of El,
Smiling alike as each on her son's splendid future did dwell,
And the two boys played nearby, their joy and happiness unquelled.

And Sarah spoke with Hagar, as sisters in creating life,
As women in a trying world where patriarchy was rife,
As sympathetic souls who knew inheritance meant strife.

Sarah's goodwill flowed with force like current in a riverbed,
Her words glowed with a beauty as great as any flowerbed,
And, with arms draped around Hagar's shoulders, this is what she said:

“ I have a dream that one day the crooked places of blind faith
Will be made straight and questioning and reasoning support faith
So that in El’s glorious light all may then happily bathe.”

“I have a dream that from Moriah, mountain of my despair,
Those to come will hew out huge stones of hope and rocks of repair
Which sons and daughters of both Isaac and Ishmael shall share.”

But daydreams rarely last an hour, let alone a full day,
So, Sarah’s honeyed fantasy all too quickly passed away,
Replaced by nightmarish reality filling nights and days.

And the angel of mercy snuggled by Sarah in her bed,
Cooed to her, caressed her back, stroked her neck, lifted up her head,
And the angel of death waited nearby, its arms gently spread.

Into those arms Sarah passed, no rod or staff of El to comfort her,
But just the image, ghastly image, image that recurred,
Of the falling knife, pecking at life, like a vicious bird.

VI.

In heaven, El sits in majesty, lord of earth and of sky,
Eternal judge of who will soar, who fall, who will laugh, who cry,

Who will gain, who lose, who have pain, who joy, who will live, who die.

As salmon swim upstream, on currents, past threats from bears, to spawn,
So, voices drift through the sky, into El's broad mind to be drawn,
And, from those voices, El's ideas of how to act might be born.

Now, as Isaac lay bound on the altar, the knife about to fall,
Various voices, great and small, on El's vast mind came to call,
To influence Him about what to Isaac would befall.

Satan, that sly, slithering subversive always fighting El,
Hissed his critique of El, captivating at first, like a spell
That gains its power from words we whisper, not those we yell.

"Here's the true El, murderous, blood-engorging, terror-striking,
Toying with these men like a lion with prey to its liking,
More sovereign of darkest hell than a high in heaven king."

Still other sounds and sights spread through heaven's corners of delight,
Past El on his throne, charting the course of earth's days and nights,
And juggling the balls of men's and women's loves, hopes, dreams and frights.

Past angels whisking to and fro, preparing for earth below,

And visits to prophets who'd not admit they were in the know
Or, like Jonah, avoided going where they needed to go.

The repeated sound of dripping tears, beat of sobs like cymbals,
Sarah's tears and sobs, as her fate was sewed, with thread and thimble,
And she knew there was no escape, though she were quick and nimble.

The sight of Isaac on the altar, unrufled as becalmed sea,
No movement, no twitch, sounds of silence where screams might be,
No prayer out of his mouth beseeching El to set him free.

But in his heart and soul, a silent prayer, this El well heard,
"What gain would my blood be, if I went down to where none is heard,
To the grave, the dust, how could that be an outcome that's preferred?"

"Let me live, to praise You, to declare and show my faithfulness,
To gird myself with song and joy, asleep and in wakefulness,
To change my mourning to dancing, the somber to playfulness."

And commanding El, majestic El, supreme El relented,
With father and son, and what they'd done, El was now contented,
He saw no need to carry out the test he had invented.

Creatures roamed in heaven's fields, made the first week of creation,
Each for a known future purpose, per El's precise notations,
And those unneeded yet on earth, in heaven remained stationed.

Among them a ram – curve-horned, wool-coated,
In El's ledger as "substitution offering" denoted,
As replacement for the son of Abraham the devoted.

Replacement on Moriah's ridge, the altar of devotion,
Replacement as El's sacrifice, offered with grave emotion,
Replacement as the knife descended toward the bound son chosen.

So, El plucked from the heavenly pen where animals were found
Since creation, but whose time on earth had not yet come around,
He plucked a muscular ram that with large, curved horns was crowned.

And El chose an angel fleet-footed as a hurricane's winds
To leave that ram in Moriah's thicket, by its horns fast pinned,
As a sign that the demand for Isaac El now did rescind.

Down through the sky the angel flew, as a bird of prey might do,
But this angel's task was not to kill but preserve life anew,
To thwart the father's sharp knife thrusts before any blood they drew.

The sun's beams, dazzlingly thick as armies' lances in a fight,
Pierced the sky over Moriah's mount and reached its altared heights
Where the chosen son awaited his journey to endless night.

A wind lifted Abraham up and he heard from behind him
A great moving sound of an angel well trained to recite hymns,
Who now said: "Pull back your hand from your son, do not strike his limbs."

But was it real or just imagined, this new, sweet call to halt,
This somersault of El's desire, this shift like geologic fault?
That, if authentic, would give him good cause quickly to exalt.

Unsure, he did not draw back his arm, and his knife remained raised,
The idea to stop just nibbled at his thoughts like sheep that grazed,
His fierce sense of mission like uncontrollable fire still blazed.

But, again a great wind lifted him, as would a forceful storm,
A mighty sound was heard, but mixed within words so very warm,
"Use all your strength to spare your son, for El's path has been reformed."

And son-killing Abraham, as so he had been willing to be,
Turned and looked into the thicket and the ram there he did see,

Where before he had not looked, engulfed by faith's dark mystery.

He took his son down off the pyre, from the fingers of the fire,
There instead he put the ram, to quell El's murderous desire,
And the ram was consumed, as would have been the son, all, entire.

No house of death for this son, but from the altar he arose,
As other son from death would do, it's said, only El who knows,
Here, El's ram taken in this son's place, life is what Isaac chose.

While Abraham prepared and killed the ram, Isaac slipped away,
Unseen, as he wished, for to his father knew not what to say,
But felt his love and trust for that man had been crushed by these days.

Those perished there, at the place the father called "El Will Provide,"
Though the son was saved from death, it's false to think that nothing died,
And safe to suppose that no more did they two stand side by side.

Home that man came with servant lads, not the son of his own loins,
Lacking the wealth of his son's love, left but with the wealth of coins,
Gone his partner ever since Ur, it was emptiness he joined.

Emptiness in his bed at night, emptiness in the daylight,

Emptiness when planning for days to come, searching for foresight,
Emptiness when reviewing what he had done, feeling contrite.

Emptiness he could not shed, that was a weight upon his head,
Emptiness that, on all he possessed, grimly overspread,
And El's promise of future numbers did not bring joy instead.

Emptiness because the living Isaac did not speak to him,
Their lives together now, as family, more like dirge than hymn,
And, stepping into the void, the nagging question: had he sinned?

VII.

Long gone are hilltop altars to El and pilgrimages there,
Patriarchs who conversed with El, shouldered burdens hard to bear,
And, in service to El, rent their families beyond repair.

But through centuries, in the holy and diaspora lands,
Other men and women have shown devotion to El's commands,
In many ways, in different ways, in ways that still expand.

So, let us sing of the two temples, built on Moriah's hill,
Adorned with jewels and gilt, erected with El-inspired skills,
Destroyed by Babylon's and Rome's might, and left in ruins still.

Of Yavneh's and Pumbedita's so famous schools of learning,
Of poets of Spain's golden age and their poems of yearning,
Of Herzl's and of Jabotinsky's Zionism burning.

Of the martyrs of the Crusades, of Hitler and of Stalin,
Of those who in Israel's so numerous wars have fallen,
Of those, armed by Torah, who fight when civil rights are stalling.

Of Hebrew prayers one and the same from Samarkand to Cannes,
Of thousands of sacred Torah scrolls in the world's countless lands,
Of millions of tefillin straps wrapped on heads and arms and hands.

Let us sing of what, in His greatness, El granted to us all,
From kings on thrones so grand to prisoners in dungeons so small,
From those living presently to those from the past we recall.

The power to think, to question, to doubt, yet still to believe,
To debate, to dispute, still respect what from faith we've received,
To know that to expect the perfect, even of El, is naïve.

Let us sing not just of the famous, but the unknown as well,
Dead without memorials, their lives still monuments to El,
Their wondrous, El-given variety, on that let us dwell