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CAN ISAAC SAY NO? THE BINDING SACRIFICIAL ECONOMY IN THE SECOND
CONVERSATION OF YEHOASHUA'S *MR. MANI*

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Mr. Mani's second conversation stages an intertextual encounter not merely among the various sacrifices that each of the novel's five dialogues dramatizes, but also between the model of sacrifice that is inscribed in the Jewish literary corpus of *Akedah* stories and the demand for sacrifice that is inscribed in the traumatic historical site and the identity of its absolute Other—the German Nazi exterminator and its encoded normative “morality” (“הקוד המוסרי” [Mr. Mani 144]). My paper reads this encounter closely and contemplates the crossing of the *Akedah* into an/other—perhaps the ultimate modern, historical, unthinkable Other—normative moral order and national identity formation. I focus on two fundamental, persisting quandaries that inform the text's thematic relationship with the narrative of the *Akedah*, namely, the problematization of the ostensibly masculinist foundation of the sacrificial narrative, as well as the tested feasibility of the filial rebellion against it.

The “Othering” of the *Akedah* narrative in the second conversation experimentally offers different options for its resolution: Egon Bruner rebels against the persistent and enthusiastic maternal demand (figured by Egon's adoptive “grandmother”) to sacrifice himself on the altar of the German fatherland. Efrayim Mani, on his part, volunteers his own version of self-conversion when the assailant threatens to exact a sacrifice (“I was Jewish but I finished being...I've canceled it...” [126]). In place of Sarah's sacrilegious burst of laughter and deadly silence that imprint Isaac's name and narrative of sacrifice, the text conjures a maternal figure that issues the sacrificial command and arbitrates, in competition with the biblical Almighty, its inherited, conferred rewards.

I argue, however, that Egon's and Efrayim's attempted unloading of martyrdom's burdens neither undoes nor disinherits the demands of the sacrificial knife, which still figuratively claims them. Paradoxically, Egon's ideologically reasoned escape from the altar on which German lives are sacrificed on behalf of the national ideal is contaminated with the imposed command of self-annihilation that his defection from the bloody battlefield attempts supposedly to intercept. Egon's “escape” from the sacrificial knife is, therefore, intertwined with his obsessive demand that puts, as Egon explicitly states, Efrayim to “the test” (137)—the test precisely of *voluntary self-annihilation*. Efrayim, who inherited his father's aborted Judaism, paradoxically inherits also Yosef's bound position of the sacrificial victim (Efrayim's hands are bound like his father's, who is “bound hand and foot” [112, 137]). Egon, I argue, ineluctably lays claim to the sacrificial command, even as its victim, and Efrayim is victimized by its unbending demand, even as its disclaimer.

While scholarly commentaries focus on Egon's ambivalent humanistic and Nazi ideological affiliations, I focus instead on Egon's and Efrayim's complicit positions within the sacrificial economy.