

“Therefore”

In the wake of a sermon, lecture or article, a daunting word taunts me. The word is interrogatory: “Therefore?” or more rudely, “So what?” Edification is important, but the pragmatic temper in me asks for more than analysis and quotational Judaism. Knowing is necessary but not sufficient. The liturgy phrases it concisely: “To learn in order to teach, to observe in order to act righteously.” Of what consequence, then, the moving sermon, and towards what does it move the worshiper? The two selected sermons that follow conclude with a significant “Therefore.” They direct the listener or reader to actionable responses. The spoken address intends to move the listener out of the prayer sanctuary into the marketplace. The sanctuary must have a window on the world, not a mirror for prayer. The petitionary prayer asks for more than a verbal “Amen.” The first article centers on the mandate of “Hakarat Hatov,” the recognition of goodness in a world where goodness is interred with the anonymous bones in the grave of history. We single out those Christian rescuers of our people who, during the hellish nightmare of the Holocaust, risked life and limb — their own, and that of their families — to protect a people not of their fate or faith. “Therefore?” Therefore we must search out these Christian moral heroes, raise attention to their courageous narratives, and see to it that in their waning years these rescuers receive the gratitude of our people and stipends to prolong the lives of these heroes with dignity. We honor heroes from the “other side.”

If the first sermon calls for recognition of the goodness of others, the second urges goodness to be enacted in our own lives. If

the first focuses on the unspeakable atrocity of the 20th Century, the second calls urgent attention to Darfur, Sudan — the first genocide of the 21st Century. How can its anguish not remind us of our sacred oath, “Never Again” ? How can we, who witnessed the conspiracy of silence, bite our tongue and feign muteness?

“Therefore?”

“Therefore,” a synagogue-based Jewish World Watch is founded to petition and protest the gang rapes, torture and murder of the people of Darfur. “Therefore” the Jewish World Watch raised monies to build two medical clinics, water wells and solar cooking utensils. The girls and woman of Darfur are raped, branded and murdered when they enter the forests to forage for kindling wood for their homes, and are vulnerable victims of the Janjaweed killers. The solar cooking utensils at home help them escape the clutches of the predators.

Sermons have consequences. They ask us to deepen our values and to exercise their power here and now.

The two articles share many values, but especially their common rootedness in the soil of Jewish conscience. I believe the character of Jewish conscience is unparalleled in world religions. In biblical and rabbinic language what we call “conscience” is translated as “*Yirat Elohim*,” the awe of Godliness. That awe is the unique subterranean wellspring in Jewish moral theology. The distinctive quality of spiritual audacity in the



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Jewish tradition is of ultimate significance in a world where blind obedience to authoritarian powers, secular or religious, is held to be the major mark of piety and patriotism.

The singular nature of Jewish conscience is, to my mind, largely ignored or repressed, untaught and unpreached. I offer two rabbinic Midrashim whose existential implications enhance my faith and for which I can find no parallel in other world religions. These rabbinic, imaginative narrations dramatize the particularity of the Jewish sensibility of conscience. It is conscience that enables an authentic, reciprocal dialogue between Israel and God. It is conscience that serves as the *lingua franca* of the divine human covenant. I paraphrase these two stunning rabbinic insights.



In the absence of Moses, the children of Israel construct a golden calf in the desert. God grows angry with the ungrateful people and angrily declares, “How long shall I bear with this evil congregation that keeps murmuring against Me?” (Deuteronomy 9). God then vows, “I have seen this stiff-necked people. Let Me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven.” God has sworn to destroy this people and “if God, Master of the universe has proposed an oath, who can nullify it?” (Isaiah 14:27)

When Moses heard that God had said “Let Me alone that I may destroy them” and wondered what the cry of a powerful and omnipotent God may insinuate, Moses immediately understood what the outburst, “Let me alone” meant. Moses seized hold of God’s garment and would not let Him alone. “I will not let You

alone until You have forgiven Your people. You, God, cannot go back on Your promise to make of them a great nation. What did You expect of Your people? You brought them into Egypt where they lived as slaves, were raised in an atmosphere of idolatry and superstition and of the deification of Pharaoh. To punish them is unfair – it has conscience against it.” God is convinced, but finds himself in a double bind: “But Moses I have already sworn and taken an oath. I must honor my oath. What can I do?” Moses replied: “Master of the universe, did You not teach us that if someone takes an oath that person can consult a scholar to absolve his oath. Come to me, Master of the universe.”

Moses wrapped himself in a prayer shawl and sat down in the posture of a judge. God stood before the seated Moses who asked God, “Do you regret Your oath?” God answered: “I do regret my evil intent against them.” Then Moses replied, “You are absolved of Your oath. There is no oath and there is no vow.” So it is written, “And the Lord said I have forgiven according to thy word.” God forgives according to man’s word. Man’s word can override God’s oath. Moses changes God’s earlier judgment in God’s name. Conscience moves God (Talmud Brachot 32 and Midrash Exodus 43:4).

The God of the rabbis is not the God of the Grand Inquisitor. God does not say to those who believe in Him, “Obey Me, follow Me blindly, bite your tongue, shut your mouth, bind your hands and bend your knee.” God is not Pharaoh. God created human beings with a free spirit, with a mind and a heart that speaks to God. Believers do not grovel before a Master, but stand before God knowing that they who are created in God’s image are loved.

I call attention to the spiritual nerve in the Judaic tradition because it is not the conventional portrayal of Judaism. In the classes of comparative religion, we are exposed to the God of Judaism as an imperial, inflexible, wrathful Commander who gives orders, and a people who follow orders without challenging their justice. Judaism is reduced to obedience. That is the caricature that the New Testament drew of Judaism, a legalistic system devoid of the spirit of love. From Baruch Spinoza to Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte and or G.W.F. Hegel, a perverse judgment was handed down that Judaism is nothing but obedience. That characterization of Judaism has been internalized even by Jews who think of Judaism at its core as an authoritarian, narrowly legalistic tradition.

Moses' nullification of God's vows is not the first or last time that he or the prophets or rabbis exhibit the heroic spiritual humanism in Judaism. Consider the remarkable rabbinic commentary incorporated in the sacred text of Numbers Rabbah 19:33. Here the conflict is over nothing less than the wording of the Ten Commandments, twice recorded in the Book of Exodus and the Book of Deuteronomy. "I, the Lord thy God visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children unto the third and fourth generation." Through their moral imagination, the rabbis viewed Moses as rising before God pleading dissent: "Master of the universe, Terach, Abraham's father worshipped idols but Abraham discovered and loved but one God. King Ahaz was a cruel king but his son King Hezekiah was a man of great spirit. King Ammon was wicked but his son King Josiah was a righteous leader. Is it fair that the righteous be punished for the sins of their fathers?"

How do the sages imagine God's response? God declares: "By your life, Moses, you have instructed Me. I shall nullify My words and confirm yours. Moreover your instruction will be recorded in your name, in the statement 'The fathers shall not be put to death for the children nor the children be put to death for the fathers. Every man shall be put to death for his own sin.'" [Deuteronomy 24:16].

The implication of this religious genre of confrontation is far-reaching. God does not shut Moses up. The tradition does not consider the moral challenge to God as an act of insubordination, treason, *lése majesté*. Moses reminds God of His morality much in the manner that Abraham reproached God at Sodom and Gomorrah: "Shall the judge of the earth not act justly?" In Moses' dissent God is fulfilled. God's relationship to His people is like that of a good parent. Moses' moral assertiveness is what every father and mother hopes to see in their children. Moses appeals to God in the name of God against God. Moses knows that the God within God will not sanction injustice. God has a conscience. God recognizes in the protesting voice of Moses' conscience His own voice.

Both God and man possess the moral responsibility of conscience. That shared gift enables the reciprocity of the divine-human encounter. Conscience is the common ground of authentic dialogue and more action between the self and the others.

