

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE NIGHT BEFORE HANUKKA: KIERKEGAARD AND RABBI RACKMAN ON HUMAN SACRIFICE

No reader of Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity* is likely to forget the scene where a child leafs through a series of heroic portraits and comes across that of the founder of Christianity. Why is he hanging from a tree? What did he do? The child is told only that this was the most loving person who ever existed, and this was his reward. The child's first reaction is to call on Heaven for revenge. As he gets older, the desire for punishment is replaced by the resolve to struggle for justice as his hero did. And as he grows older, he wishes to suffer as he did. Kierkegaard is careful not to ascribe the child's passion to explicit theological indoctrination. It is an almost natural response to the image of the suffering of goodness.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, who held numerous leadership positions in the Orthodox and academic communities, was also an influential and representative Modern Orthodox thinker. Shortly before his death in 2008, *A Modern Orthodox Life* was published, containing some of his sermons and occasional writings. Let me call to your attention a *Jewish Week* column from 1971, in which he questions the common American Jewish attitude towards Christmas. The problem facing his generation of parents that December, and for all I know still bothering some of us today, is the potential trauma experienced by Jewish children who feel left out of the seasonal merriness and cheer. The standard solution, which Rackman admits affected his own child-rearing practice, was to shower Jewish children with compensatory gifts. Thus the eight nights of Hanukka would outshine the Christmas tree's treasure. Here Rackman expresses misgivings about that strategy.

In Rabbi Rackman's account the spur to reassessment was a question raised with his congregation. He refers to the anguish of a member who wondered whether it is right to tell children about the Akeda: "Is it right to teach children about a God who wants Abraham to sacrifice his favorite son upon an altar to prove his devotion? What kind of a God is that? What kind of compassion does He have?"

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Rackman, in turn, wonders why this question did not trouble Jews before. “Why is it that in thousands of years of pondering the subject no one questioned the wisdom of narrating the story unto children?”

It occurred to me that the reason this question did not bother Jews of antiquity was that they saw nothing wrong in having children understand from their earliest childhood that to live Jewishly means to sacrifice; to live Jewishly means to be prepared to do without.

Rabbi Rackman is proposing two distinct theses. The theme of his article is the first. It can be summed up in the statement just cited: “to live Jewishly means to be prepared to do without.” Hence the culture of profuse Hanukka gifts to children is a misleading introduction to Judaism. It creates the delusion that Judaism does not require the readiness to do without.

The second thesis, subsidiary to the first, is more curious. It is that a child’s having accepted the readiness to do without in some way makes telling the story of the Akeda to the child less horrific, or at least that the child’s educators may reasonably think so.

Imagine the Jewish child, like Kierkegaard’s child, who is exposed to the image of Abraham and Isaac. Who is this old man and why is his knife upraised to slay his son? He is a righteous man who has followed God for many years, under trying circumstances. He is a man who exemplifies *hesed* (loving kindness). (Let us omit the particularly Jewish theological factor in the story—that this old man and his son inaugurate the career of God’s chosen people.) The command to kill his only son, the son of his old age, the son who would sustain the ideals that motivated his life—that is the culmination of his devotion! To be sure the story has a fortunate denouement—the old man is not compelled to carry out the divine command; the angel stays his hand. But for the three days between the command and its suspension, this was the destiny Abraham lived with and lived toward... Rabbi Rackman’s congregant was distraught at the thought of the child encountering all this severity, as the reader of Kierkegaard cannot help being shocked in contemplating what the Christian message must mean to the untutored thoughtful child.

Rabbi Rackman claims to take this challenge seriously, yet in the essay he chooses to change the subject rather than respond to it. Instead of discussing how the child might or should respond to the story, or how adults should introduce him, or her, to its import, Rackman explains why he thinks the question would not have arisen in an earlier, and presumably more wholesome, unspoiled and realistic age. What Rackman avoids

saying, but seems to imply, is that if only the child had learned at an early age that living Jewishly means being prepared to do without, the story of the Akeda would not be traumatic. It would not give rise to anything like the seismic repercussions Kierkegaard imputed to the child discovering the crucifixion. Rabbi Rackman is prudent not to say this explicitly because it is incredible. The sacrifice of deferred or renounced gratification is not commensurate with the potential human sacrifice of the Akeda, nor is it commensurate with the innumerable actual human sacrifices to which Jews, simply by refusing to give up their singular religious mission, have willingly submitted throughout their history.

Offhand, then, Rackman's appeal to the Akeda succeeds in highlighting the gulf between living Jewishly and the "eight nights of Hanukka" culture of profuse gift giving. But while Rackman opposes to that culture the necessity of sacrifice defined rather gently as "being prepared to do without," his reference to the Akeda unleashes a far more thorough call to sacrifice, one that threatens to tear loose all that is most essential to ordinary worldly existence. "And you shall love God, with all your heart, and with all your soul—even when He takes your soul."

The conflict between Rabbi Rackman's moderate rhetoric and its radical implications may be a logical weakness. I regard it, nevertheless, as a practical strength. To confront a materialistically oriented culture of gratification with the demand of absolute commitment would invite incomprehension and summary rejection. To such a culture it is possible to preach only a doctrine of sacrifice that is phrased unthreateningly as "doing without," without specifying exactly what is to be done without, and without betraying the fact that readiness to do without risks not merely the foregoing of things desired but the positive undertaking of acute and chronic suffering.

In the end, the doctrine of gentle sacrifice cannot articulate and motivate thorough commitment to God. If earlier generations, by contrast with our own, indeed had no reason to keep the Akeda from their children, it is not just because the children had learned about doing without, but rather that they had intuited, from a young age, that Jewish life, for all its hardship and suffering, is a life lived in the presence of God. The word *korban*, usually translated as "sacrifice," literally means "drawing close." The kind of sacrifice that expresses and forms a life of religious commitment cannot merely be a readiness to "do without." It is the offering up of the human being, through the *korbanot* offered in the Temple, through prayer, through devotion to the requirements of other human beings, through the endless toil of Torah study, and the readiness to suffer and

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die for His service. These are acts of drawing close to God because they are not merely gestures of renunciation or deferment but manifestations of reckless love and incomprehensibly joyful commitment. Every vision of religious commitment and sacrifice, however moderate and mundane, has the Akeda as its background. Its presence in Rabbi Rackman's piece is not accidental.

II.

If Rabbi Rackman fails to emphasize the robust passionate element in sacrifice, the same cannot be said of Kierkegaard's endorsement of Christian suffering. There is nothing half-hearted or compromising here. Precisely for that reason each stage in Kierkegaard's vignette demonstrates the pitfalls of this orientation and leads us to reassess Rackman's paler, more indirect approach.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard's child, initiated into the contemplation of the crucifixion, graduates from a desire for revenge to a desire to fight for justice to a gospel of suffering. One is tempted to deploy Kierkegaard's own polemic against Hegel and say: the story in *Training* is a plausible one, but in a contingent world of human freedom, it is not an inevitable story. The development can also go in the opposite direction: an ideal pious commitment to religious suffering may deteriorate into a political ideology or even into a gospel of resentment and revenge.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard traces a move from social ethical activism—the desire to struggle for justice—towards a purely inactive religious suffering. Is this indeed an ideal development or is it merely making the best of a bad business? Without denying the possible religious value of suffering, is it really preferable over preventing further injustice? Or is it merely a consolation? Is it not important to hold fast to our desire to rectify injustice instead of being satisfied with our ability to give religious meaning to the ensuing suffering?

Even more important, Kierkegaard's account, like the New Testament's, isolates the suffering exemplified by the crucifixion and thus inflicted by human beings. Now it is true that the greatest evils of life are those done to us by other people. It is not for nothing that David prays to fall into the hands of a punishing God and not into the hands of human beings. In our reading of Jewish history the pain and suffering inflicted by the *goyim* is everpresent; perhaps these themes occupy too central a place in our self-identity. Yet we cannot gainsay the danger that such a focus encourages misanthropy and resentment and makes all the more likely the

reversal mentioned a moment ago, where pious suffering turns into the desire to take revenge of those who are to blame for our suffering. In the Akeda there is no human adversary. The full religious implications of absolute sacrifice are not mingled with the resentment almost inexorably associated with human evil.

Religion values suffering as a component of our relationship with God. There is a crucial distinction, however, between the suffering of love, suffering that is redeemed and given meaning when borne with dignity and a sense of purpose, on the one hand, and suffering that is perversely enjoyed, on the other hand. Reading Kierkegaard, or any of the great Christian theologians, one wonders whether Christianity, with its institutional and personal concentration on the image of the crucifixion, guards sufficiently against the threat of spiritual masochism masquerading as authentic, wholesome spiritual passion. One wonders whether the institutions and practices of Judaism do better.

III.

Brutal realism about the place of suffering in human life and in religious existence is not confined to Kierkegaard and other robust Christian thinkers. It is, of course, integral to traditional Judaism. Among Jewish thinkers who spoke the language, and appreciated the profundities of Kierkegaard, Rabbi Soloveitchik, of course, stands out. No student of his work can be oblivious to his intense attention to human suffering, and to the imperative of absolute commitment as the necessary path to religious existence. And yet, to take just one point from our discussion of Kierkegaard, the Rav repeatedly and forcefully preaches the duty of struggling against evil, be it the natural evil of illness and destitution or the consequences of human wickedness. Such struggle is arguably the chief means by which suffering is invested with dignity and religious value. For all the Rav's stress on the inevitability of human defeat and on absolute commitment to divine commands that, from time to time, require that we sacrifice legitimate human goals and suffer the consequences, it is inconceivable that he would view the transition from social activism to religious quietism as a positive development.

Rabbi Rackman's discussion started out with the calendrical coincidence of Christmas and Hanukka. For nominal Jews and Christians, both holidays are celebrations of secular American values, of which conspicuous materialism is the least common denominator. Jewish parents, unable to dominate the public square numerically, and lacking the sentimentalist

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resources associated with the Nativity and with Santa Claus, can compete only in the monetary arena. This is the state of affairs that Rabbi Rackman finds disheartening and questionable. Our critique was that Rackman, in effect, does not go far enough, that he presents sacrifice as “doing without” instead of preaching sacrifice in all its robust and absolute passion. At the same time, we discerned many reasons to be wary of the kind of robust passionate doctrine of suffering inherent in Kierkegaard’s account.

How can we sustain the Jewish ethic of sacrifice, “And you shall love God, with all your heart, and with all your soul—even when He takes your soul,” while avoiding the pitfalls we have considered? A moment’s reflection on Hanukka may suggest the right frame of reference.

One theme of Hanukka is that Judaism requires the willingness to sacrifice one’s life rather than give up Jewish practice. The narrative of Hanukka contains stories of defiance and martyrdom. These stories are found in the apocryphal books, Maccabees II and IV, but they also enter rabbinic literature. Some of these exemplary stories, most notably that of Hannah and her seven sons, describe a joy in martyrdom unalloyed with expectation of worldly compensation. Most, however, celebrate a militant defiance that aims not at suffering but at triumph. The prayers and *halakhot* that mark Hanukka commemorate the eventual triumph of the Hasmonians against military odds and the rededication of the Temple service. The necessity of martyrdom and self-abandonment is assumed and extolled but it does not exhaust the meaning of the holiday. Just as the Akeda is best known from the Rosh Hashana lectionary, where it provides the background for the day dedicated to the kingship of God and His judgment of humanity, the poem of the ten martyrs is one strand in the Yom Kippur *Musaf* service, attached to the recital and reenactment of the *seder ha-yom*, the Temple worship ordained for that singular day.

A life anchored in normative Jewish practice, thought and experience is ever conscious of the ideals of *mesirut nefesh*, total commitment even unto suffering and death, but such a life is not obsessed with suffering and martyrdom. It is still possible for the practicing Jew to succumb to the temptation to make a cult of suffering: to relish one’s unredeemed suffering and miserableness for its own sake, to cultivate a destructive resentment of others with whom we associate our misery, and to treat unredeemed feelings of suffering as adequate or preferable alternatives to the vigorous action and dignified religious response that redeems suffering from its ugliness. Yet the individual who has internalized normative Jewish practice, thought, and experience will find it a little harder to surrender to these temptations.

Rabbi Rackman's initial judgment remains correct. The besetting vice of our community is not too much passion but too little, a spiritual vacuum that our religiously impoverished culture attempts to fill, transiently, with expenditures and toys. Our children and many of our adults have shunned the lesson that meaningful existence requires sacrifice, and hence have little conception of the absolute grandeur, the profound joy, the sheer closeness to God that are the mark of the sacrificial life. The corrective for a petty, passionless mode of existence is not to stand it on its head by embracing the gospel of suffering uncritically and exhaustively. For this one-sided embrace brings with it its own peculiar destructive vices. Rather than gaze upward at the vision of suffering, as Christians look upon the crucifix, it is our vocation to situate the ideal of human sacrifice within the thick experience of a halakhic life devoted to redeeming and ennobling our mundane ongoing existence, informing our steps always, filling our horizons only under exceptional circumstances.

On Hanukka, we light candles and recite *Hallel* to celebrate the triumphant renewal of Jewish living. The readiness for absolute sacrifice that makes Hanukka possible does not require a special festival and distinctive rituals. To the contrary, it flourishes in silence and intimacy, and accompanies us on all the indelible days and nights that precede the triumph of Hanukka.

Shalom Carmy

