

he speaks not his own words, but those of God. How many atrocities have been enacted in the name of revealed truth?

The talmudic rabbis revered Torah but understood that God is not Torah. God transcends Torah, and therefore may be appealed to in the name of moral conscience. It is with this understanding, for example, that the rabbis radically reinterpreted the literal biblical dictate of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” to mean that the injured person is entitled to monetary compensation for pain, medical attention, and unemployment. In this manner the rabbis frequently reinterpreted dictates to free the community from “laws that were not good” (Ezekiel 20:25).

Couldn't the rabbis have simply abolished biblical laws they found ethically objectionable?

The rabbis did not feel authorized to declare biblical laws null and void, so they used their legal acumen to soften the hardness of the law. For example, they erected so many legal roadblocks to capital punishment, it was *de facto* impossible to impose. In murder cases, the rabbis admitted no circumstantial evidence. Furthermore, to be convicted the accused would have had to have been forewarned by two sworn witnesses before the court (*Sanhedrin*) that what he was about to do was a capital offense, and he would have had to acknowledge that he understood their forewarning. Moreover, the forewarning had to be made immediately before the act, and, if the act were delayed, a new forewarning was required. In this vein, the rabbis wrote in the Mishnah (Makkoth 1:10) that “a Sanhedrin which executes one person in seven years is called a destructive court” and Rabbi Tarphon and Akiba declared, “Were we members of the court, no man would ever be executed.”

If we rely on our own moral reason, wouldn't that lead to the slippery slope of moral relativism?

There is a risk in being guided by conscience, but no less a risk than following the voice of “commandedness.” Martin Buber once wrote, “Moloch [an idol to which children were sacrificed] imitates the voice of God.” How can we discern

the voice of God knowing that Mephistopheles is a ventriloquist, skillfully projecting his voice onto others? A “slippery slope” is to be preferred to being cemented in the ground. On a slope I may be able to grasp a tree or rock. But in cement, I am immobilized and subject to the threats of the wilderness.

In the Sodom and Gomorrah story, Abraham questions God's judgment. In the Akeda story (the binding of Isaac), Abraham blindly obeys God, sacrificing his moral sense and reason. What lessons are we to draw from these contradictory biblical episodes?

I see no conflict within or between these two narratives. In the instance of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is Abraham's moral sensibility that challenges God: “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike” (Genesis 18:23). As for the binding of Isaac, if you read Chapter 22 closely, you'll find that the term “*Elohim*” is used exclusively as the name of God in commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son. In the eleventh verse, another Divine voice is heard, that is of the Angel of the Lord, or *Malach Adonai*. I identify the name of God, *Adonai*, as moral conscience, for it is the voice that restrains the hand of Abraham in opposition to the command of *Elohim*. “How dare you do such a thing!” *Malach Adonai* admonishes, “Do not stretch out your hand to this lad and do not harm him.” The angel, the conscience of Abraham, overrides the edict of God. To me, this episode illustrates that within the Bible itself, an initial Divine imperative does not hold the final word. Change is neither un-biblical nor heretical. The duty to obey does not stifle the duty to dissent.

How can parents instill in children the moral courage to disobey when conscience so dictates?

Conscience is developed in our formative years. Children frequently ask about the justice and fairness of a decision or an act, questions that serve as the birth pangs of conscience. Whether or not these children continue to ask such questions depends upon whether and how they are answered.

If children ask, “Why can't I stay up late?” or “Why can't I go out with my friends?” and the answer is the blunt and naked “because”—“because we said so,” “because the Bible said so,” “because God said so”—this crushes the seed of conscience. Children's dignified questions deserve dignified adult answers.

We teach conscience by answering questions fully. Questioning is a sign of human liberation, as slaves do not ask questions and masters do not offer answers. Subordinates know only the unquestioning duty to obey.

Is that why Pesach seder honors the questioning of children?

Yes, the seder is a great model of the central role of the question in building moral character. Perhaps that is why the four questions open our celebration of freedom. The sages who wrote the *haggadah* understood that there are different questions asked by different kinds of people, and each is to be answered respectfully, according to the questioner's ability. What better way to transmit moral conscience from generation to generation?

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do-style rescues. While Rabbi Loew has good relationships with King Rudolf and the fair-minded cardinal, Jan Sebastian, the Jewish community is constantly threatened by the evil machinations of a local anti-Semitic priest named Thaddeus. The golem, dispatched by Rabbi Loew, foils the evil designs of this latter-day Haman.

Golem stories have a powerful connection to Passover. Most often, the golem is summoned to defend the Jews against “blood libel” accusations. The myth that Jews needed Christian blood to make their seder matzahs endangered Jewish communities up through the early part of the twentieth century. Sometimes bodies were planted in Jewish houses in order to incite popular rage. In these stories, Rabbi Loew and his loyal golem unravel such false accusations one by one. They also assist romances, prevent forced conversions, and right other mistakes that could disturb the cosmic order.