CHAPTER ONE

YOU ARE YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER: THE RELIGIOUS ETHIC OF NONINDIFFERENCE

For I have singled him [Abraham] out, so that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what the Lord has promised him. (Genesis 18:19)

ABRAHAM'S WAY

A teacher of mine used to love to tell the story of a famous Hassidic master who was walking along a cobbled street in Eastern Europe some two hundred years ago, when he heard the cry of a baby coming from his student's house—a cry that pierced the night. He rushed into the house and saw his student enraptured in prayer, swaying in pious devotion. The rabbi walked over to the baby, took her into his arms, sat down, and rocked her to sleep. When the student emerged from his prayers, he was shocked and embarrassed to find his master in his house, holding his baby. "Master," he said, "what are you doing? Why are you here?" "I was walking in the street when I heard crying," he responded, "so I followed it and found her alone." "Master," the student replied, "I was so engrossed in my prayers that I did not hear her." The master replied, "My dear student, if praying

makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something flawed in the prayer."

The Hassidic master's critique of his student reflects a core commitment of Jewish tradition to the centrality of the ethical—put simply, seeing and responding to the needs of others—that is too often lost in a haze of presumptive piety. Indeed, the centrality of the ethical to Jewish tradition is established at the outset of the story of the first Jew. Offered as the reason underlying Abraham's selection for a special relationship with God—his mission to do "what is just and right"—the Bible locates ethical behavior as the cornerstone of Jewish religious life. But what is the content of this calling? This chapter will explore one of Judaism's central answers to this question: the obligation to "not remain indifferent" (Deuteronomy 22:3), to see the needs of others and to implicate oneself as a part of the solution. In so doing, the chapter provides the critical background for understanding the susceptibility of Judaism's ethical core to the autoimmune disease of monotheistic religious faith.

The narrative context for this chapter's epigraph is a moment of divine self-reflection in which God decides to share the divinely ordained plan for the city of Sodom with God's chosen covenantal partner. The election of Abraham is founded on the understanding that to walk in "the way of the Lord" is to do the "just and right." It is almost as if God communicates Sodom's imminent demise as an object lesson in how these values are to be practiced.

Abraham's response—his impassioned argument calling upon God to live up to the divine essence of justice—"Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25)—so often dominates the reading of this story that a key underlying feature is largely forgotten: that Abraham refused to remain indifferent and consequently saw himself as responsible and compelled to intervene on Sodom's behalf. Abraham had every justification in the world simply to look the other way. These

were not his people: What business is it of mine? They were part of a depraved and corrupted culture: Maybe they deserve it after all? Moreover, the ruling on their punishment was the revealed judgment of God: Who am I to know better than God? The judge of the earth will certainly deal justly!

However, rather than absolving himself with a Cain-like ethic of "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9), Abraham chooses the path of responsibility and positions himself as the defender of Sodom. When confronted by injustice, he follows an ethic of nonindifference and in so doing provides a model for what it means to "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right."

DOWN BY THE WELL: FOLLOWING ABRAHAM'S PATH

The most prominent of biblical matriarchs, Rebecca, and the greatest of Jewish leaders, Moses, are each singled out for this very trait. At critical junctures, both faced situations in which they could either be indifferent or choose to see and respond, a test of character that subsequently serves as a turning point in their lives, if not a cornerstone of the favor they find in God's eyes.

In both instances, these pivotal moments occur by a well, which in the Bible is a microcosm of the public sphere, a place of meeting for both locals and travelers. Owned by no one individually, shared by all, the well is designated to serve everyone's most basic needs, friend and stranger alike. However, precisely because it falls within the public domain, it is susceptible to abuse by those with power, making it a hotspot for local politics and struggles, for self-aggrandizement, disenfranchisement, and abuse. In the biblical well narratives, ancient Israelite heroes meet others who have come to fill their basic material needs, and in the process find themselves in need of kindness, protection, or both.

Rebecca is deemed to be of special moral character and a fitting wife for Isaac, by virtue of her care for a stranger in need (in

this case, Eliezer, Abraham's emissary). "'Drink, my lord,' she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand, and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, 'I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.' Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels." (Genesis 24:18–20) Eliezer, on a mission to find a wife for Isaac, set the criteria for a prospective bride as follows: "Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac." (Genesis 28:14) Eliezer, a stranger in a strange land, implicitly poses the question, who is going to see me the way Abraham chose to see Sodom?

Moses does the same, coming to the aid of a group of women being pushed away from the well by male shepherds who were preventing them from feeding their flocks. When he travels to Midian as a lone stranger—one of the most precarious positions of antiquity, making him fair game for all manner of harassment—Moses chooses to involve himself in the affairs of vulnerable strangers. "The priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock." (Exodus 2:16–17) Rather than minding his own business and exercising understandable caution to protect his own precarious status as stranger, he chose to see the injustice around him, rejecting the safer path of indifference, and to stand with those being wronged.

THE PATH OF MOSES

The quality he displays at the well is the defining characteristic of Moses's life and leadership. We must recall that Moses grows up in the palace of Pharaoh, wanting for nothing, a free and powerful man ensconced in the only home he has ever known.

Why is this person—a man in no obvious need of redemption, totally at home in Egyptian culture—chosen by God to become the leader of the Jewish people? What quality does he embody that merits him to give them the Torah and to become, alongside Abraham, the most significant figure in Jewish history? The answer is that, like Abraham, he is quintessentially a person who takes responsibility for the protection and well-being of others.

Moses's character is established by the Bible the moment he is introduced as an adult. Despite being accepted as a privileged Egyptian, he is characterized as the type of person who chooses not to remain in the insulated and protected environment of Pharaoh's palace but to go out and be among his kin; notwithstanding the fact that to embrace his Jewish identity was in severe contradiction to his self-interest. "Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinfolk and saw them in their suffering." (Exodus 2:11) His first intentional act is to leave the palace, walk among his brothers and sisters, and witness their pain. "And he saw an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew brothers." (Exodus 2:11) In defense of his brother, he rises and kills the Egyptian. While the tradition debates whether his actions were justified, what cannot be ignored is that from his perch of royal power, he chooses to see, and like Abraham he can neither ignore nor rationalize away what is in front of him. He witnesses injustice and acts to repair it, even when to do so is likely to hold dire consequences for him personally.

Ultimately, Moses's relentless nonindifference leads him into confrontations not only with Egyptian taskmasters, Midianite shepherds, Pharaoh, and the Israelites themselves—but, like Abraham, with God as well. When God, in the midst of bestowing the Torah to Moses as the Jewish people's emissary atop Mount Sinai, notices that they have despaired of Moses's return and built a Golden Calf as an idol to worship, the response is swift and severe. God cuts off the unique revelatory moment with the words, "Go down," and informs Moses of a

new divine plan to wipe out the Children of Israel and begin a new people with Moses as the founding patriarch.

Moses does not consider the suggestion for a moment. He immediately begins to argue with God and pleads for a reversal, offering the ultimatum: Forgive their sins, "and if not, erase me, please, from the book You have written." (Exodus 32:32) God has promised to exempt Moses from the suffering and sin that surrounds him, to make him royalty as he was in his youth—this time in a palace built in partnership with God. Moses's response is unequivocal: If you want me, then you have to know that I am not the type of person to remain indifferent to the suffering of my people.

Generations later, the rabbis of the Talmud drew this scene in even sharper relief, amplifying the fearlessness with which Moses confronts God: "Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment and said before Him: Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them." (BT Berakhot 32a)

The same sense of obligation that motivates Moses to see and respond to the plight of Jews under their Egyptian slave masters is what subsequently leads him to defend them against God's wrath. No matter what is offered him, whom (or Whom) he must confront, or the risk of such confrontation to him personally, Moses is defined by the inability to avert his eyes from the plight of those people, however flawed, with whom he shares a collective bond.

It is this quality that the tradition uses to explain one of Moses's signature acts: smashing the first set of tablets he receives from God after witnessing the sin of the people in building the Golden Calf. The rabbis wonder how he could have acted so boldly (seemingly sacrilegiously) on his own authority. These were the Tablets of God, after all, and nowhere was he given direction or permission to break them. Where could he possibly have found the hutzpah? Their answer is that Moses smashes