

Learning to Love our Fellow Jews

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Two stories. First¹, the story of an *apikorus*, a self-proclaimed atheist, who boasted that he could confront the local *rebbe* with incontrovertible evidence that God did not exist. The villagers warn the *rebbe* of the impending confrontation. The *apikorus* enters the *rebbe's* chambers, expecting to silence the *rebbe* with his strong arguments. But the *rebbe's* opening word silences the *apikorus*. What does the *rebbe* say in response to the heretic's claims? "*Efshar*. Perhaps." The *apikorus* was thunderstruck. All his arguments against God, all of his certainty, melted away. The unexpected gentleness, kindness and non-judgmental approach of the *rebbe*, stunned our heretic into silence.

What exactly happened here? Did the *rebbe* begin to doubt his faith after his encounter with the *apikorus*? No. Did he think that his opponent had a valid argument? Highly unlikely. But what did happen was that the *rebbe* saw the human being behind the opinion he rejected, and recognized that his, the *rebbe's* attitude, could go a long way to bring the heretic back closer to the fold. He won the encounter not because he convinced the *apikorus* to believe, but rather, because he refused to hate him, to denigrate him, to abuse him, to embarrass him. Expecting rebuke, hostility and rejection, our *apikorus* was received with love.

Our second story takes place in the yeshivah of Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, the *Hafetz Hayyim*, the revered Polish religious authority of the early part of the twentieth century. The student was caught smoking on the Sabbath, which, in the yeshivah, understandably, had the makings of a major scandal. What did the *Hafetz Hayyim* do? He summoned the student to his study after *Shabbes*. Everyone assumed that

¹ Harold M. Schulweis, *In God's Mirror*, 2003, p. 26

the renegade student faced expulsion from the yeshivah. But what happened was quite different. After just a few minutes, the student emerged from the study a changed individual. From that moment on, his piety no longer came into question. That smoking incident was the last time that any lapses would be seen in his religious observance.

The other students wondered what the Hafetz Hayyim had said to the student to so change him in so short a period of time. But both the student and the rabbi kept silent. Only years later would the former student reveal what happened to him that day in the rabbi's study. "This is what happened," the student reported. "The Hafetz Hayyim grabbed hold of my hand, clutched it with all his strength, and uttered simply one word over and over again. '*Shabbes. Shabbes. Shabbes.*' He said it with such feeling, though, as if it meant more to him than everything else in the world." Then, the student reported, the rabbi began to cry as again, he repeated the word, in a trembling whisper "*Shabbes. Shabbes.*" That was it. End of discussion. End of rebuke. The Hafetz Hayyim ushered him out of his study.²

The rebuke had taken place The Hafetz Hayyim had reproved his student. But so gentle, so sincere, and so loving was the rebuke that the student, rather than being humiliated, devastated or expelled, was drawn closer, reached, won over, redeemed.

Both our rebbe encountering the *apikorus*, and the Hafetz Hayyim dealing with the Shabbes-violator, could have responded differently. Realistically, one could have assumed that the reaction in each case would have been harsh, and the rebuke rendered, severe. But both religious leaders understood that responding out of love, patience and understanding would be far more effective than reacting with anger and hostility.

² Shlomo Riskin, *A Tale of Two Rabbis*, Jerusalem Post, Feb. 20, 2014

Look. Were one to ask which one of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, left behind the least impressive resume of the three, the expected answer would be Isaac, brought by his father Abraham in today's Torah reading to the sacrificial altar in the startling episode of the *Akeidah*. It would surely not be Abraham, who brings knowledge of God to the world, nor would it be Jacob, who builds an altar on what we are told would be the future site of the Holy Temple, who passionately responds to his frightening dream of the ladder, who wrestles with the angel on route to becoming Israel, who fathers the tribes. It is Yitzhak, Isaac, who ostensibly is the least impressive of the three. He says little, other than asking Abraham about the missing ram in today's reading, brief interactions with the Philistines, and, toward the end of his life, asking Esau to prepare his dinner, while falling prey to the deception in his attempt to offer Esau his blessing. All in all, seemingly not an overwhelming story of success.

But our sages view it differently. In a remarkable Talmudic *Aggadah*³, we read how God, at some point in the future, would turn to Abraham and say: “בניך חטאו לי – Your children have sinned against me.” Avraham's response is terse, to the point: “Ribono shel Olam – ימחו! – obliterate them, get rid of them, show them who's boss.” We are told that God, understandably, is disappointed in Abraham's harsh response, and turns to Jacob, skipping Isaac, who, evidently, it is assumed, will have nothing of substance to suggest. Jacob, God reasons, will be more sensitive, because he had abundant *tzuris* with his own children. So God says to Jacob what he said to Abraham: “בניך חטאו לי – Your children have sinned against me. And Jacob, the Talmud tells us, replies in the exact same way as his grandfather Abraham: “ימחו! – obliterate them.”

³ TB Shabbat 89b

Disappointed in His two choice patriarchs, finally, in desperation, God turns to Isaac. “Yitzhak, בניך חטאו לי – Your children have sinned against me.”

Isaac immediately rejects the premise of the question. “בְּנֵי” he says, “My children?! ולא בניך – they are my children, not your children?!” And Isaac is just getting warmed up. God wants to punish the Jewish people and Abraham and Jacob concur, but it is Isaac, simple, unassuming, unheralded Yitzhak, who takes up their cause.

The negotiation detailed in Tractate Shabbat is incredible. Isaac reasons with God. “How much could they have sinned?” he argues. “Let’s say their life spans would be seventy years. The first twenty years don’t count, since we don’t punish for wrongdoings in those formative years (those under twenty – don’t listen!). So that leaves us with fifty years. Take away twenty-five years, night-time, when people are asleep. Subtract twelve-and-a-half years, accounting for time spent at prayer, eating, or בבית הכסא, in the washroom! That leaves twelve-and-a-half years where potentially, one could sin.”

Here, Isaac negotiates. “Okay, God, hopefully You can bear the burden of 12 ½ years, and not punish the people. If not, let me take half of their sins, and You take the other half. If You won’t even do that – if you want to say כולם עלי – they are all on me – fine, punish me, just don’t harm a single Jew.”

It is Isaac, the patriarch whom even God, according to the Talmud, initially skips over when approaching Abraham and Jacob with his dilemma – it is Isaac, unassuming, minimally accomplished Isaac – who emerges as the one prepared to put his life and reputation on the line, out of his relentless love for his people, no matter what wrongs they may have committed, no matter how extensive their imperfections may have been.

Bruce Feiler, in his book *Abraham*, offers this description of Isaac:

Isaac is by far the least compelling of the patriarchs, and one of the least formidable major characters in the [Torah.] Abraham is the father of the world, Jacob is the father of [the people] Israel, Isaac is merely the father of twins. The only memorable things about Isaac are what he wasn't: he wasn't displaced, he wasn't sacrificed. As for what he was, well, he was teased by his brother, he was coddled by his mother, he was nearly killed by his father, and after Abraham's death, he was deceived by his wife and outwitted by his second son, Jacob.... He's a simple man, whom everyone takes advantage of.⁴

This summer we were deeply saddened by the passing of Elie Wiesel, who inspired survivors of the Holocaust to tell their story, who reminded us of the need not only to remember what happened to our people, but also, to use those sacred memories as building blocks to a strengthened commitment to Jewish life and Jewish learning. It was Elie Wiesel who heightened our awareness of the plight of Soviet Jewry, who rallied communities and international leaders to take up their cause, who stood firm for fundamental human rights. Twenty years ago, Elie Wiesel honored us with his visit to our congregation, when we dedicated the magnificent Raab *Mizrah* window and *Aron Kodesh*.

Elie Wiesel was a great fan of Isaac, whom he viewed as the original survivor in our tradition, the precursor of all those who would endure and overcome massacres, pogroms and eventually, the *Shoah*, in our history. In Wiesel's words: "All the pogroms, the crusades, the persecutions, the slaughters, the catastrophes, the massacres by sword and the liquidations by fire – each time it was Abraham leading

⁴ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*, 2002, p. 86

his son to the altar, to the holocaust all over again.”⁵

After all of the experiences of our past, all of the challenges of our history, and all of the myriad of tensions of today, how are we to face each day, as Jews, how are we to react, to what extent are we to engage with those around us? What does Isaac, the first of survivors, do? Again, Elie Wiesel:

What did happen to Isaac after he left Mount Moriah? He became a poet – author of the *Minhah* service [according to Talmudic tradition] – and did not break with society. Nor did he rebel against life.... Instead he settled on its land, never to leave it again.... He married, had children, refusing to let fate turn him into a bitter man. He felt neither hatred or anger toward his contemporaries who did not share his experience. On the contrary, he liked them and showed concern for their well-being. After Moriah, he devoted his life and his right to immortality to the defense of his people....

It will be Isaac's privilege to remain Israel's *Melitz-Yosher*, the defender of his people, pleading its cause with great ability. He will be entitled to say anything he likes to God, to ask anything of Him. Because he has suffered? No. Suffering, in Jewish tradition, confers no privileges. It all depends on what one makes of that suffering. Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer and love rather than into rancor and malediction. That is what gives him rights and powers no other man possesses. His reward? The Temple was built on Moriah. Not on Sinai.⁶

It is Isaac, who, in the Talmudic account, stands up for his descendants, and is willing to bear any divine sanction for their wrongdoings, rather than see them suffer. It is Isaac, who, in Elie Wiesel's magnificent words, transforms his own

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, p. 95

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 96, 97.

suffering into relentless, determined love for his people. Just as our anonymous rebbe, and the Hafetz Hayyim chose love over harsh rebuke when confronting Jews who had wandered from the fold, Isaac, the unsung, seemingly least accomplished of the *Avot*, of our Patriarchs, achieves eternal recognition for his simple, yet resolute refusal to abandon his people.

We know that it is not always easy to love, or to defend our fellow Jews in every situation. We all have our moments when we can be hard to love. A visit to Sobey's the week before Pesah, rumored to be the setting for the forthcoming horror film, "Jews Gone Wild," can remind us that sometimes, loving our fellow Jews can be an uphill climb. And you don't have to wait until Pesah. Come by here, in shul, next week, on Erev Yom Kippur, as almost all of you will. And get here early! You know, sometimes, when people ask me why I chose to be a rabbi, I answer: "Because my seat, *Kol Nidrei* night, is reserved." We all understand the importance of loving our fellow Jews. But that becomes more difficult when that fellow Jew is spreading out his gargantuan *tallis* over the ninety seats that he wants to reserve.

But thankfully, in general, we do love our fellow Jews, even though, at times, our opinions and our shopping carts at Sobey's may clash. Thankfully, our internal conflicts tend, more often than not, to be verbal, intellectual, rather than physical. Rabbi-turned comedian Jackie Mason, notes that Jews don't fight, but, he writes: "They almost fight. Every Jew I know almost killed somebody. They'll all tell you. 'If he had said one more word... he would have been dead today.' One more word. What's the word?" Mason concludes: "Nobody knows."⁷

Unfortunately, there are more serious examples of Jews clashing with their people, where any feeling of warmth or identification dissipates because of the depth and the dynamics of the confrontation. We see that unfolding with increased

⁷ Jackie Mason, *The World According to Me*, p. 42.

frequency, when it comes to our beloved Israel, and Jews who choose to identify with those who would seek Israel's destruction, and not with our brothers and sisters in our homeland. I am not speaking of those whose opinions differ from Israel's current government, or those who may hold left-of-centre views on Israel's settlement policies, where such divergence of opinion is commonplace in Israel and a welcome feature of Israel's vibrant democracy. I highly recommend a visit to Washington's relatively new *Newseum*, which tells the story of media and news-gathering, where a display highlights Israel as among a very small group of nations on earth with absolute freedom of the press. Those who hold right-wing political perspectives, and those to the left, can still claim to love their people as long as their bottom line is the safeguarding and maintaining of the one Jewish state in the world, even if they disagree on a game-plan to achieve that goal.

Sadly however, we see too many examples of Jews who write letters to the editor of major newspapers, using beginning with a confession that "I am Jewish, but...." followed by a loveless condemnation of Israel, even at times a denial of Israel's legitimacy as a country, and a repudiation of the organized Jewish community, who, the letter writer will inevitably note, "don't speak for me." And we're not talking about political debates that divide Jews in Israel and elsewhere on specific policy decisions, but rather, about the need of some to demonstrate to the world that they stand apart from the Jewish totality, even on matters vital to our strength and future as a people.

Perhaps it is not surprising that those, in many cases on the fringes of Jewish involvement, would harbor limited tendency for *Ahavat Yisrael*, for love of the Jewish people, when the Jewish people, Jewish life are far removed from their day-to-day realities. But even troubling is the absence of *Ahavat Yisrael*, of love of one's fellow Jew, from those deeply steeped in Jewish tradition.

We have seen horrendous examples of hatred emanating from extremist religious elements in Israel, that have led to curses being uttered, chairs literally thrown over the *mehitzah* at the Western Wall, because women had the temerity, respectfully and with dignity, to form a *minyan* in the women's section on Rosh Hodesh. We have seen a female worshipper who wore a tallit at the Wall in the women's section, arrested for her action, because of the reluctance of authorities to counteract the hateful, and, I would add, un-Jewish behavior of the extremists who hide their hatred for Jews whose practice differs from theirs, under the mask of piety.

The rebbe and the Hafetz Hayyim of our earlier examples, and Isaac in the Talmudic tradition, remind us how little exceeds love of one's fellow Jew in importance. So we need to love the Jew who does fewer *mitzvot* than we do, just as we need to love the Jew who does more. We need to love the Jew who *davens* at *Shomer Shabbes* just as we need to love the Jew who prays at Holy Blossom, and they need, as well to love each other as a matter of highest principle.

In an early episode of the classic television sit-com *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker confronts his wife Edith's mood-swings, due to her entering her "change of life" phase. Out of character, Archie has to respond to her volatility with kindness and has to restrain his frustration. He manages to control his temper for a while, but finally, unable to contain himself, Archie shouts: "If you're gonna have the change of life, you gotta do it right now. I'm gonna give you just 30 seconds. Now c'mon and change." Edith responds to Archie's outburst with a smile, and says: "He loves me!"

I have thought of this episode, which aired more than forty years ago, when I received a phone call from a prominent rabbi in the Orthodox/Hareidi community, with whom, over the years, I have had pleasant encounters, and whom I respect

enormously. In his customary respectful tone, he proceeded to criticize me for a program in which I was involved, because of its potentially problematic theological implications.

The more I reflected on the phone conversation, and subsequent similar calls, the more I have come to appreciate the rabbi for having called. Caring enough to criticize reflects meaningful relationship. It would be easy for one in the Orthodox/Hareidi world to ignore happenings in more liberal quarters of the Jewish community. The expression of concern, even criticism, reflects a love of *amkha*, of the total Jewish world, a love that has the potential to break down walls of separation that too often prevent interaction.

No, love doesn't mean being afraid to criticize. But it does mean finding the right tone, and the appropriate messaging in order to encourage the target of our criticism to move in what we may consider to be a more appropriate direction. And even when no change may result, offering that message, that comment, that suggestion, that criticism, gently and lovingly, still can build relationship and reinforce connection, something not to be taken for granted in an age when alienation and disconnect are so commonplace and so troubling.

In the magnificent compendium of rabbinic values, Pirkei Avot (1:12), Hillel the Elder comments: “הוֹי מִתְלַמְּדֵי שֵׁל אֶהְרֵן, אֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת – Be like the students of Aaron, love peace, pursue peaceful relationships, love your fellow Jews, and by virtue of your love for them, you will draw them closer to Torah, to their fellow Jews, to the traditions and values that we share and that we have cherished and sustained for so long.”