

Independent Ethics?

Rabbi Dov Linzer

Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School

I. Human Ethics and Divine Ethics

A. Obedience

1. Genesis, 2:16-17; 3:4-6, 22

Chapter 2] 16. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Chapter 3] 4. And the serpent said to the woman, surely you shall not die; 5. For God knows that in the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. 6. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit, and ate, and gave also to her husband with her; and he ate.

22. And the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, what if he puts forth his hand, and takes also from the tree of life, and eats, and lives forever.

בראשית ב:טז-יז; ג:ד-ו; כב

פרק ב' (טז) ויצו ה' אלקים על האדם לאמר מכל עץ הגן אכל תאכל: (יז) ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות

פרק ג' (ד) ויאמר הנחש אל האשה לא מות תמתון: (ה) כי ידע אלקים כי ביום אכלכם ממנו ונפקחו עיניכם והייתם כאלקים ידעי טוב ורע: (ו) ותרא האשה כי טוב העץ למאכל וכי תאוה הוא לעינים ונחמד העץ להשכיל ותקח מפריו ותאכל ותתן גם לאישה עמה ויאכל...

(כב) ויאמר ה' אלקים הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע ועתה פן ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים ואכל וחי לעלם

2. Genesis, Chapter 1

4. And God saw the light, that it was good...

10. ... and God saw that it was good.

12. ... and God saw that it was good.

18. ... and God saw that it was good.

21. ... and God saw that it was good.

25. ... and God saw that it was good.

31. And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good...

2:18. And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help to match him.

בראשית פרק א'

(ד) וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב

(י) ... וירא אלקים כי טוב

(יב) ... וירא אלקים כי טוב

(יח) ... וירא אלקים כי טוב

(כא) ... וירא אלקים כי טוב

(כה) ... וירא אלקים כי טוב

(לא) וירא אלקים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד...

(ב:יח) ויאמר ה' אלקים לא טוב היות

האדם לבדו אעשה לו עזר כנגדו:

3. Michael Wyschogrod, "Sin and Atonement in Judaism"

There is no concept in which the contrast between the secular and the religious attitudes is more sharply reflected than in the concept of sin. Sin is violation of the command of God. It is this that distinguishes sin from wrongdoing. The wrongdoer feels that he has done something against what is right. The analogy is to a wrong mathematical calculation. To add up a column of numbers incorrectly is to get the wrong answer, to have done the problem wrongly. To have done a morally wrong deed is not identical with doing a mathematical problem wrongly. There is a sense of guilt in the moral case which is probably absent in the

wrong mathematics, where the sense is more of regret than guilt. The similarity between the two, however, is the sense of violation of a certain objective order which occurred when the wrong was committed. But such violation does not constitute sin.

Sin is possible only when the transgression is a violation of the command of a divine lawgiver. In its pristine form, sin presupposes a command which has no persuasive ingredient other than the authority of Him who issues the command. He (man) is to obey God in order to obey God and for no other reason. And when he disobeys God, he has not violated a law that has an autonomous claim on his conscience and which therefore puts him in the wrong in an objective sense, but he has rebelled against God, whose command he has broken. The violation is, then, directed at God. And because it is directed at God, it constitutes a break in the relationship between God and man which requires remediation.

Man's first sin is thus an act of disobedience whose aim is to obtain a knowledge that will make man God-like. Without this knowledge, man is dependent on God's commands for his knowledge of good and evil. With this knowledge, man is able to make his own moral judgments and thereby becomes God-like because he no longer needs God's commands. Prior to his having tasted the forbidden fruit, he does not yet have the knowledge in question. Because he is not yet God-like, he only has the divine prohibition. His choice, at that point, is whether to accept God's prohibition of an act which he does not know to be inherently evil or to reject the prohibition because it appears to him to be a capricious exercise of the divine authority. By opting for the latter, man not only disobeys God but signals his determination not to accept permanently the status of a creature of God dependent on God for instruction as to what is permitted and forbidden. He is determined to make his own judgment as to what is good or bad and thus become God-like. The inner meaning of sin is not simply an act of disobedience against God but an attempt to overthrow God by making man into a God-like creature.

What is at stake in man's first sin, then, is a morality based on obedience to God versus a morality based on human recognition of what is right and wrong.

B. Autonomy

1. Genesis, Chapter 4:9-10

9. And the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel your brother? And he said, I know not; Am I my brother's keeper? 10. And He said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground.

בראשית ד:ט'-י'

(ט) ויאמר ה' אל קין אי הבל אחיך ויאמר לא ידעתי השמר אחי אנכי (י) ויאמר מה עשית קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן האדמה:

2. Genesis, Chapter 6:5-7

5. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6. And the Lord repented that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. 7. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the birds of the air; for I repent that I have made them.

בראשית ו:ה'-ז'

(ה) וירא ה' כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ וכל יצר מחשבת לבו רק רע כל היום: (ו) וינחם ה' כי עשה את האדם בארץ ויתעצב אל לבו: (ז) ויאמר ה' אמחה את האדם אשר בראתי מעל פני האדמה מאדם עד בהמה עד רמש ועד עוף השמים כי נחמתי כי עשיתם:

3. Genesis, Chapter 9:4-6

4. But flesh with its life, which is its blood, you shall not eat. 5. And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. 6. Whoever

בראשית ט:ד'-ו'

(ד) אך בשר בנפשו דמו לא תאכלו: (ה) ואך את דמכם לנפשותיכם אדרש מיד כל חיה אדרשנו ומיד

sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God he made man. 7. And you, be fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply in it.

האדם מיד איש אחיו אדרש את נפש האדם: (ו) שפך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם:

4. Genesis, Chapter 18:17-19; 23-25

17. And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; 18. Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19. For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him.

23. And Abraham drew near, and said, Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24. Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city; will you also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25. Be it far from you to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, be it far from you; Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

בראשית י"ח:י"ז-י"ט; כ"ג-כ"ה

(יז) וה' אמר המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה (יח) ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ (יט) כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען הביא ה' על אברהם את אשר דבר עליו:

(כג) ויגש אברהם ויאמר האף תספה צדיק עם רשע (כד) אולי יש חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר האף תספה ולא תשא למקום למען חמשים הצדיקים אשר בקרבה (כה) חללה לך מעשת כדבר הזה להמית צדיק עם רשע והיה כצדיק כרשע חללה לך השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט

C. ... And Back to Obedience

1. Genesis, Chapter 22:2-3; 12

2. And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you. 3. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him.

12. And he said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me.

בראשית כ"ב:ב'-ג'; י"ב

(ב) ויאמר קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק ולך לך אל ארץ המריה והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך (ג) וישכם אברהם בבקר ויחבש את חמרו ויקח את שני נעריו אתו ואת יצחק בנו ויבקע עצי עלה ויקם וילך אל המקום אשר אמר לו האלקים

(יב) ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני

2. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, problem I

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac – but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is...

Abraham's situation is different. By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher telos outside it, in relation to which he suspended it. For I certainly would like to know how Abraham's act can be related to the universal, whether any point of contact between what Abraham did and the universal can be found other than that Abraham transgressed it. It is not to save a nation... Therefore, while the tragic

hero is great because of his moral virtue, Abraham is great because of a purely personal virtue. There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son.... Insofar as the universal was present, it ... must cry out with Isaac's mouth: Do not do this, you are destroying everything.

Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and – the two are wholly identical – for his own sake. ... What ordinarily tempts a man is that which would keep him from doing his duty, but in this case the temptation is itself the ethical ... which would keep him from doing God's will. But what then is duty? Duty is precisely the expression of God's will.