

A Tale of Two Sons

On December 3, 2011, Reham Elnory, an Egyptian Muslim, and Hayyim Rothman, an Hasidic Jew from New Jersey, would exchange conflicting narratives of the life of Abraham, a pivotal figure in their respective religious traditions, by creating a webpage the two stories would share. Their exchange would then spill out into the comments section on this webpage in the form of a substantial dialogue, sustaining conversation for another five days. Following this, nearly seven years after their initial exchange, Hayyim and Reham would sit together to reflect upon this experience and its impact on their lives since.

This document was produced as part of Guestbook Project's "Exchanging Stories – Changing History" initiative, and serves as both a record of Hayyim and Reham's exchange and supplement to their 2018 video, *A Tale of Two Sons*, produced in collaboration with Liam Weir. The "Exchanging Stories – Changing History" initiative creates opportunities for young people from communities that have been divided by religion, race, ethnicity, or culture to come together to trade stories and create media. For more information on how to participate in a Guestbook Project initiative or submit one of your own, please visit guestbookproject.org



GUESTBOOK PROJECT

EXCHANGE STORIES CHANGE HISTORY

On December 3, 2011, Reham Elnory, an Egyptian Muslim, and Hayyim Rothman, an Hasidic Jew from New Jersey, would exchange conflicting narratives on the life of Abraham, a pivotal figure in their respective religious traditions, by creating a webpage the two stories would share.

Reham Elnory

December 3, 2011

Taking its cue from the Qur'an, Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam, largely depends on stories to convey important spiritual principles. Sufi stories, replete with recurring motifs, revolve around the twin axes of seeking and sacrifice.

The spiritual seeker sets out on a journey of self-discovery. To unveil her true self, she has to shed not only her outer possessions, but her innermost ones as well, by casting off the restraints of her ego. Motivated by a searing, all-consuming love that leaves no place for other loyalties, the seeker journeys to the beloved—'God', or 'the Real'—through paths of ever increasing difficulty. She is thoroughly tested to determine the level of her submission to and acceptance of (Islam) the Real. The tests become harder and harder for the ego to accept until it finally dissolves in love, leaving the seeker free to continue the journey unimpeded.

Abraham is a spiritual seeker; in fact—judging by the amount of attention given to him in the Qur'an—he is the seeker par excellence. The stories told in the Qur'an of his incessant questioning, his refusal to accept anything but the truth, his withstanding the fire of Nimrod, and his leaving behind all he knew as he is forced to flee his homeland, demonstrate his determined willingness to be a servant of love.

Chapter thirty-seven of the Qur'an presents a rapid overview of Abraham's life, bringing together all of the Abrahamic stories, mentioned in greater detail elsewhere in the Qur'an, into one narrative. After smashing the idols of Nimrod and his people to force them to admit their powerlessness, they cast him into the fire:

They exclaimed: "Build a pyre for him, and cast him into the blazing fire!"

So they sought to do him harm, but We [frustrated their designs, and] debased them.

And [Abraham] said: "Verily, I shall [leave this land and] go to my Lord; He will guide me."

[And he prayed:] "My Lord! Grant me the gift of [a son who shall be] one of the righteous!"

So We gave him good tidings of a gentle boy, ready to suffer and forbear.

And [one day,] when [the boy] was old enough to walk and work with him, [Abraham] said: "O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I am slaughtering you. So look, what do you think?" He said: "O father! Do as you are bidden: you will find me, if God so wills, steadfast, patiently enduring."

Then, when they had both surrendered, and he laid him on his forehead (to slaughter him),

*We called out to him "O Abraham!
You have already fulfilled the vision!"*

Thus do We reward those who do what is most beautiful.

For this was a manifest trial.

And so, We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice, and left him thus to be remembered [in blessing] among later generations: "Peace be unto Abraham!"

Thus do We reward those who do what is most beautiful,

For he is surely one of Our faithful servants.

And [then] We gave him the good tidings of [the birth of] Isaac, a prophet, and one of the righteous,

And We blessed him and Isaac.¹

Abraham bears great hardship for his love: from the world around him, and from the object of love himself, God. "When God tried Abraham with (His) commands, and he fulfilled them, [God] said: 'Lo! I have appointed you a leader of humanity.'² Abraham, old and childless, is not content with this rapidly vanishing leadership. Tremulously, he asks of God: "And my progeny? (Will I have any descendants? Will they be leaders of humanity?)" God eventually responds positively, and abundantly. Granting Abraham's request, He doubles it, bestowing upon him two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and two sets of descendants.

¹ 37:97 - 113

² Qur'an 2:124

This motif of doubling persists throughout the story of Abraham and Ishmael, and culminates in Ishmael's descendant, the prophet Muhammad.

The story of Abraham unfolds elsewhere in greater detail. When Abraham prays over and over again for a son, Sarah eventually despairing of giving him a child herself, grants him her handmaiden, Hagar. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, when Abraham was eighty-six years old. Abraham is overjoyed, but he would not remain so for long. When Ishmael is still nursing, God commands Abraham to take Hagar and Ishmael to the barren valley of Mecca,³ 700 miles southeast of Hebron in Palestine, where Abraham was living with his family, and leave them there.⁴

Abraham, governed by love, obeys. Leaving them in the middle of the desert with a skin of water and a leather bag full of dates, he begins rapidly walking away. An anxious Hagar runs after him, calling out, **'Abraham, where are you going, leaving us in this valley where nothing is in sight?'** Ducking his head, Abraham hurries on, silent. A distraught Hagar persists in questioning, **'Has God asked you to do so?'** Only then does Abraham stop and turn back: **'Yes!'** Slightly mollified, Hagar traces her way back to little Ishmael and waits. Soon, however, when the water and dates are gone, Hagar's desperation increases, unable as she is to quench her thirst or breastfeed her baby. Leaving Ishmael under a tree, she climbs the rocky incline of a nearby hill to search for water: **'Maybe there is a caravan passing by.'** Looking for signs of water or help from passers-by, she runs between the two hills of Safa and Marwa seven times. Eventually, fatigued and distraught, she hears a voice. Looking wildly around, she sees the angel Gabriel standing next to Ishmael in the valley between the two hills. He digs into the ground next to the baby, and water comes gushing out. **'Do not be afraid of being neglected,'** Gabriel says, **'for this is the House of God, which will be built by this boy and his father, and God never neglects his people.'**⁵

This, however, is not the only danger faced by Ishmael. He miraculously survives it only to face another one. Abraham, having left his wife and baby in Mecca as commanded, is finally given permission to go see them after ten years. The joy of reunion, however, is soon interrupted by a vision, the ultimate test of his faith. He is commanded to sacrifice his

only son, the son who is the result of years of prayers, the son he had just met after a decade of separation.

The Qur'an does not mention by name the child to be sacrificed; however, it is clear from the structure of the verses quoted above that it is Ishmael. There is a clear temporal and causal narrative structure of the verses quoted above that is Ishmael. There is a clear temporal and causal narrative structure in Abraham's story as recounted in them: Abraham is rewarded by a son when he passes the test of enduring the fire, and his son, his most precious possession, and is rewarded with Isaac, his second son. Further, we know from the Bible, Genesis 22, that God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son, and Ishmael, as Abraham's firstborn, was his only son for thirteen or fourteen years.

Thus the difficulty of the test Abraham the seeker is subjected to. He is asked to give up his only child *twice*—once when he is ordered to cast him, helpless, into the desert and walk away, and once when he is ordered to slaughter him. The motif of doubling is highlighted: Abraham goes through the agonizing difficulty of a double sacrifice, and Ishmael goes through a redoubled return from the abyss, miraculously making it through two divinely-ordained dangers. This is echoed in a saying of prophet Muhammad, who referred to himself as "the son of two sacrificed," alluding to Ishmael, his ancestor, and his paternal grandfather, Abdullah. The latter was to be sacrificed as a result of a promise made by his father to the pagan gods and was spared at the last minute.

And so the message to the seeker is clear: If you want to enter the hallowed circle of Love, you have to give up what you most love. The sacrifice is not

³ Unlike the Judeo-Christian traditions, the Qur'anic account does not relate that this was a result of Sarah's jealousy and rage over Ishmael laughing at Isaac. In fact, it makes clear that this happened when Ishmael was still a baby, completely dependent on his mother for sustenance. Since by all accounts Isaac was born when Ishmael was thirteen or fourteen years old, the banishment could not have happened as a result of Ishmael—now around seventeen years old—laughing at the toddler Isaac.

⁴ Ironically, Hebron, the sight of current violence between the Palestinian Arabs and the Israeli Jews—who are intimately connected, genealogically and spiritually, to Abraham through Ishmael and Isaac—means 'friend', 'alliance' in Hebrew. In Arabic, Hebron is called *al-khalil*, which is taken from Abraham's name, intimate friend of God.

⁵ From *Sahih al-Bokhari*, one of the major collections of the sayings of Muhammad, which expands, comments upon and interprets the stories and divine rulings in the Qur'an. The house of God referred to is the Ka'aba, which was built, at God's command, by Abraham and Ishmael, in the spot where Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael.

physical—for Ishmael does not die— but is completely egoic. It is Abraham’s willingness to go through with the sacrifice, to cast off his heart’s desire; his ego, that is exemplified and highlighted, not the sacrifice itself.

So Abraham is taken as the example people are to follow; and God’s promise to Abraham to make him and his descendants leaders of humanity is fulfilled. It comes to full fruition every year in the performance of the pilgrimage (*hajj*). The rituals include circumambulating the Ka’aba, built by Abraham and Ishmael, running to and fro seven times between the Safa and Marwa, and reenacting the father and son’s submission and trust in God by slaughtering sheep at the end of the pilgrimage. The doubling movement of return and repetition in the circumambulation is a spatial and temporal reenactment of the doubling motif active in the narrative. With every concentric circle, with every return, something new is gained. The spiritual lineage extending from the seeker, to the prophet Muhammad, to Abraham is further enforced everyday, five times a day, in the concluding supplication offered at the end of each cycle of prayer: “O God! Exalt Muhammad and his true followers as You did exalt Abraham and his true followers; and bless Muhammad and his true followers as you did bless Abraham and his true followers.”

A word of introduction: the following piece is my own reworking of the Abraham story drawing liberally from the midrashic tradition in Judaism (homiletical interpretation of scripture). The nature of this tradition is that it is highly malleable; Judaism as a legal tradition is fundamentally concerned with behavior and, therefore, has relatively free approach to interpretation so long that it does not bear on practice. As such, stories tend to get reworked over and over again through the generations so as to serve new needs facing the community. A key feature of this storytelling tradition (at least in my view) is that it presents God as being on trial just as man is on trial. As it were, God judges man and man judges God. (An anecdote to demonstrate this idea: there is a story that during the Holocaust a rabbinical court was assembled in Auschwitz to bring God to judgment. People testified for and against God and, in the end he was found guilty. Nonetheless, after the trial the courts and the onlookers conducted the afternoon prayer service)

What I have done here is attempted to use the theme of "God on trial" and the moral problem posed by the binding of Isaac to point to one—among many—fundamental theological conflict facing post-Holocaust Jewry. Finally, a note on Jewish humor. The schlemiel is a classical character, he is the oblivious bumbler who somehow, in his foolishness, uncovers the truth about others, the world, God, what have you in a manner that us serious folk cannot hope to attain. Here I have cast Abraham in the form of this character type.

Poor Abraham just didn't understand that God was not the benevolent being He was taken for. It's not as if God hadn't tried to break the truth to Abraham gently, he did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah after all, and with such fanfare! (And, really, if the place was so wicked as to merit such treatment I know many places equally deserving. No, it's not that they couldn't have been saved, God just didn't feel like it at the time—though its certainly possible He has changed his mind since. Abraham was simply too soft-headed to grasp this point. He actually believed God just!) It was a stroke of luck, really, for God. He never actually expected Abraham to agree to the "test", it was more of a passing whim, a wry cruelty of

the every day sort. But defying all expectation, Abraham took the bait and it was altogether too tempting to see where things might lead.

Truthfully, God had hoped that Abraham would back out after a decent night's sleep, but Abraham rose at the crack of dawn to pack his things and get on his way. To his credit, God set the appointed place at a distance of three days in the hopes that Abraham would gain some insight on the way. Still, seeing as Abraham had not shown himself receptive to subtlety until this point, the angels decided to intervene so as to save God from his own vanity and Abraham from his own foolishness. The satan himself agreed to take up the mission.

He first disguised himself as an old man and disappeared to Abraham. "Where are you going?" he said.

"To pray at the mountaintop."

"For what then do you need this knife and that pile of wood?"

"We may stay there for several days and will need them."

"Then why haven't you brought other supplies!? No, you are going to sacrifice your son; you will be called a murderer. Stop now before it is too late!" And Abraham replied, "God has commanded it and I will obey."

The satan then appeared as a young man to Isaac and said, "your father is going to kill you, flee while you are still able!" But Isaac replied "God has commanded my father and I will not hold myself back."

Lastly, the satan appeared as a deep river, but, oblivious, Abraham walked straight through until the water reached his nose and he could no longer breath and, yet, continued walking. Powerless before Abraham's idiocy, Satan shuffled his way back to the heavens in shame.

Finally the duo reached Mount Moriah and climbed to its summit where Abraham tied up his son, raised the blade and, at the last instant, a great burst of laughter exploded from on high. God could not restrain

the mountain and raise him up' I said! 'Raise him up,' not 'sacrifice him' you fool, you utter simpleton! Ha, ha, ha! Don't touch the boy! But Abraham, still uncomprehending, asked humbly, "can't I just draw a small drop of blood?" This was altogether too much. God bent over laughing hysterically. With slightly more scruples, the angels attempted to hold back as long as they were able, but soon they, too, joined in the hilarity; even the satan could not help but let out a giggle. And, so, the entire divine entourage carried on laughing and stomping about until suddenly the heavens shattered, sending them crashing to earth.

Naked and hungry, they came to Abraham who, tramping through the thorns to receive them, had discovered a ram caught by its horns. With its flesh, he fed them. With its wool, he clothed them. And with its horns he fashioned shofrot with which his children would summon them back to the heavens when such time comes as God will be worthy of man's praise.

Their exchange would then spill out into the comments section on the webpage their two narratives shared, sustaining the discussion for another five days.

Hayyim Rothman

December 4, 2011
4:49 am

to begin the discussion briefly – b/c I am in the midst of an incredible amount of work for the end of the semester – a few things arose for me immediately in an admittedly cursory reading.

First, a technical point. Reham cites the passage in genesis referring to the “only son”. There is actually a midrashic account in which Abraham sort of messes around with god and haggles over the wording of god’s meaning here. the whole passage is “Take your son, your only son, Isaac”. So in response to “take your son” Abraham says “well, i have 2 sons”. So god gets more specific “your only son”, to which Abraham says “each of them is the only son of his mother”, and then, finally, god says “Isaac” to which Abraham can give no reply.

so, here, both sons are “only sons”. i think this is important.

second – i am curious as to reham’s response to the following idea. i was actually aware of the discrepancies in the identity of the one to be sacrificed (yishmael or yitzhak) and the place it was said to occur (moriah/yerushalayim or the kaaba) btwn the Torah and the Koran. reading anachronistically, it seems to me that the just as now the 2 sons fight over the same sacred place, there is also a fight over the same sacred story. who owns the story of the binding? who owns the sacred land? It bothers me and I have thought, at least with regard to the story (and this is where i would – please – like to keep the discussion) that we both lay hold of a common story, the form of it, and fill in the facts to bring it home to our own communities... perhaps a way of validating both stories and not having to decide either way on its empirical “truth”, which is by its very nature antagonistic?

last – same problem occurs for me in the koranic story as with the torah story, the problem i tried to look into with my rendering of the satan’s challenge. yes, i understand the notion of self transcendence and submission. this is the way that the notion is developed in many jewish theological analyses of the story as well. in a sense, i would argue that the sufic and the jewish theological approaches developed in tandem out of a common elite philosophical/theological culture that was – for the standards of the time – extremely egalitarian. but this does not solve the problem for me. i cannot transcend myself on someone else’s dime. and i dont think that the simple fact that yitshak/yishmael were not sacrificed in the end really helps. abraham truly believed that he would be killing his son for god. he therefore believed that the good is good because god says it is good whereby murder can become good. he therefore became depraved and guilty. and god became moreso guilty for making abraham depraved. ... and if the judeo-islamic tradition has anything to say it is that one is never above the law. no? i dont see any place for a teleological suspension of the ethical in judaism or islam.... christianity is different b/c it rejected the law on principle already with paul

Reham Elnory

December 6, 2011

6:48 pm

First, my response to Hayyim's account:

I was fascinated to read this account, as it was a completely new interpretation for me. I am fascinated with the notion of God being on trial, but I have a hard time conceiving of the consequences. If God is tried and found to be guilty, what then? Who/how do we find God guilty? Collective humanity? What is the penance God is supposed to pay to atone for his sins, and do we have the power to enforce it? What does it mean to find God guilty, and yet to continue worshipping him? What was the reasoning behind the court and onlookers praying in Auschwitz—certainly millions of times more horrific than the Abrahamic sacrifice—after God was found guilty?

It is significant that, at least in my reading of the Abrahamic story, Abraham did understand that God was not merely benevolent. His continuous trials proved that. In the Islamic tradition, the qualities of God are always balanced: the divine Names of God, denoting his qualities, are equally split between Names of Beauty—the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Generous—and Names of Majesty—the Invulnerable, the Compeller, the Destroyer. Abraham believed that God was just because He was just; just as he visited him with great trials, He also bestowed upon him his heart's desire, sons and descendants.

My conversation with Hayyim revolved around the theme of laughter; Sarah's laughter; the reasoning behind Isaac's name, but we didn't venture beyond that to the laughter of God and the angels. To Muslim ears – maybe to Christian ones as well? – the notion of God as a prankster is a puzzling one. What is the point of the prank He played on Abraham? What is the point of Abraham being a bumbling idiot? What role does this narrative play in the practice of later generations? What relevance does it have for a practicing Jew living today? What does it mean to you? God has a sense of humor, that much is apparent from certain narratives in the Qur'an, but it is an ironic sense of humor, targeted towards highlighting certain episodes, or underlining certain points. In fact, God repeatedly says in the Qur'an, that God is al-Haqq, the all-truthful, that he is not to be taken lightly, for he does not play around with our intellects. A major quality of God that is emphasized over and over again is his being utterly serious, not a prankster, for how can you take a prankster seriously? How can we still believe in and practice a law that was revealed by a prankster?

Reham Elnory

December 6, 2011

7:02 pm

Next, in response to Hayyim's comment:

Both sons are only sons to their mothers, but only one is an only son to Abraham, who is the axis the narrative revolves around. Interestingly, some of the early commentators on the Qur'an, following Judeo-Christian traditions, claimed that the son sacrificed was Isaac. Does it make a difference which son was sacrificed, though, if Abraham and his response is the pivotal point of the narrative? Well, according to the level of interpretation you're working on, it could matter. On the one hand, the pertinent pivots of the narrative are not affected: Abraham is faced with a difficult choice, he responds according to his spiritual station, and the story is presented to us to make of it what we may. On the other hand, the spiritual continuity evoked by Ishmael's presence as well as the intensity of the trial; the set-up of the rewards and the doubling motif would not be the same, hence the structure of the narrative itself and what readers, listeners get from it is not the same. Nevertheless, it is an...

...interpretation, and interpretations have the beauty of flexibility; an ability to adapt themselves to the storytellers and those being told. My question here to Hayyim here would be, what difference would it make to your narrative if Isaac was not the son sacrificed?

This brings me to my second point. I totally agree that the power of interpretation is the ability to work on many levels, and the ability for listeners or readers, no matter who they are, to identify with the persons in the narrative. In fact, that is the point behind having a narrative and not a rigid historical account. Do I think all interpretations need to be reconciled so that one interpretation is the correct one? Certainly not: it would not relate to as many people and would lose the ability to work on many levels. I am not sure exactly how narratives work in the Tanakah and the midrashic accounts, but in the Qur'an the same narratives are told in different chapters with something added new each time, or taken away. I believe the point of this is to show us that narratives are meant precisely to revolve, not to stand rigidly still: instead of closing up, they are supposed to open up ways of access. The Islamic tradition has always acknowledged that there will be as many different interpretations (as many different paths to God) as there are souls. I too find the notion of an empirical truth extremely problematic. For no matter what claims of authenticity we bring one empirical fact remains solid: the fact that we cannot ever lay claim to empirical certainty, for we simply weren't there. And so we have our interpretations, to bring forth whatever spiritual realities they may.

Finally, your last point – I can only answer it on a very personal level. To me, it is not only about self-transcendence and submission, it's about the power of seeking and self-transformation. This is why it is a narrative and not a command: we are not asked to do what Abraham did, and transcend ourselves or submit; we are only given a story, maybe to help us realize or even analyze certain things going on in our lives. Just as in Aristotle's poetics, a drama unfolding before our eyes is kathartic because it helps our understanding of universal issues. It also helps us live out and purge our fears and pity for Abraham: what if that were me? Will I ever be tested in such a way? How will I respond? The beauty of the narrative is, you never really have to answer, but you live someone else's answer, someone else's response.

Reham Elnory

December 6, 2011
7:17 pm

One last point and question(s):

As for murder becoming good, I would like to point out that there is a difference between murder and sacrifice. The law is, thou shalt not kill; not thou shalt not sacrifice. In fact, I believe some parts of the Talmud are devoted to the very topic of sacrifice and its importance?

Question: when you say Abraham was guilty of transgressing the law, guilty to whom? Who is the judge of guilt? It cannot be God if it is God who asked him to transgress the law. And if not God, then who does the law belong to, and who does it benefit? Who will extract Isaac's due from Abraham, if Isaac was willing?

Yet another question. In Judaism, are ethics and law the same thing? Is the law created or invented by God, or did it always exist so that it applies always? If it comes from God, how can he be held accountable to it?

In Islam, ethics and the law are not the same thing, which is, in and of itself, a...

...problem, for we have a sophisticated body of laws, and no clearly laid out ethical law. There are, however, definite instances when the law does not, and could not apply. For example, like in Judaism, there are strict dietary laws Muslims should conform to, but it is understood that you have an obligation to break them if it will save your life. The notion of the ethical is also much more malleable and more encompassing than the law: there are three levels of practice: 1) the level of the law; 2) the level above that, called the level of faith; and 3) the highest level, called the level of doing the most beautiful. For example, Islamic law requires Muslims to fast during Ramadan—fasting from food would be the first level. To fast more than the required number of days because you feel a spiritual benefit, or because you feel you are able to give up more, would be the second level. Finally, highest level would be to remain in the spiritual state fasting bestows upon you continuously.

Is there anything comparable in Judaism? Are there different rules of adherence to law in Judaism, and do they denote different ethical levels? Finally, a question: are the ethical and the spiritual comparable? Which I guess is to ask, are the spiritual and the legal comparable? Because, in Islam, oftentimes they are not.

Hayyim Rothman

December 6, 2011
9:00 pm

ok. a lot to respond to.

the trial – which seems connected to the law, so i will try to treat both together. first thing to understand is that classically – and here, I mean talmudically – the concept of truth per se is put out of play. the question of truth in some absolute sense is not a question that the most basic jewish texts address. what this comes out as is the possibility of mutually exclusive positions being adopted as equally “true”. As the saying goes “these and these are the word of the living God”. because of this, you have in jewish tradition a multiplicity of perspectives that are all accepted as valid. it is actually quite difficult to say what the “view of judaism” is on anything at all, one gets caught in an infinite regress of interpretations.

this brings me to the topic: have you ever read Kafka’s Trial? toward the end of it there is an exchange btwn a priest who is a representative of the “court” and joseph k. they argue about the parable about the man who comes to learn the law and find themselves dragged into a discussion where objectivity dissolves and the text of the parable as text takes over. insofar as each interpretation is an extension of the text and the text is the only criterion of validity all become equally possible and joseph k. cannot argue his way out.

same thing with the trial as a whole. joseph k.’s fundamental error is that he believes that he can win his case just because he has unveiled the injustice of the judges. but this is a mistake. the question of the trial is not one of justice, justice is put out of play from the start. in a sense, he loses his trial because he constantly wins it and fails to understand that the only way to win it is to lose – that is, to recognize that there is no way out of the trial. the trial is and it is universal. man cannot win or lose, nor can God, the trial simply is and they are both eternally under judgment.

there is a thread in the jewish mystical tradition that locates the origin of the law in the divine essence itself and, in this sense, it is not a creation of god but of his very...

...being. god could not violate his law because he IS his law. but this would, of course, raise the question of when god does violate his law – does he then cease to be god? and who is god when he is no longer god? and if the law is such that god is, in fact god as the commander of the law, then how, in violating the law and so not being god is it that god also abides by the law and remains god?

how to find god guilty and still pray to him? b/c it is the law.

i am skipping around here, so forgive me. i will try to address everything, though in a confused and disorganized manner.

as to ethics. there is a certain sense in which pragmatic ethics stand outside of and above the law. the same instance you cited as to halal applies to kosher as well. so, the “saving of life” comes before the law... but generally speaking the difference is blurry. in medieval judaism this difference was made a lot more clear, but it is not clear to me that this is inherent to the tradition or, instead, indicative of the attempt made by jewish intellectuals to accomodate judaism to the philosophical tradition. i think that in essence, the law is ethics in judaism and that this is a troubling thought with which jews have struggled in various ways over time

Hayyim Rothman

December 6, 2011
9:15 pm

as to the question of laughter, god as prankster, and abraham as schlemiel

here this is most certainly a modern view, not ancient and it speaks more to an honest account by man of what it seems god is like. to a community like post-holocaust jewry can one think god without also giving thought to the great joke? can god be anything other than a jokester? this is not to say that god is not also all the other things you have called him, but that he is a jokester cannot be excluded.

more to come but have to go to class

Hayyim Rothman

December 7, 2011
4:05 am

next installment (there is so much to respond to). on to avraham as the schlemiel. there is a wonderful essay by hanna arendt about the schlemiel that i would call you attention to b/c it has influenced my thinking on this matter. i disagree with her conclusion, but whatever. i find the image of the schlemiel attractive as a jew b/c it fits very nicely into what i think franz rosenzweig described very accurately as the sense of eternal exile. to be jewish is to be in exile. the jewish narrative from its very inception is one of being out of place, being expelled from place. what the schlemiel is, is a person who is not at home in himself or others, he is clumsy and stumbles, but his stubleing is a true stumbling in that what he stubles over is place itself, man's sense of en-placedness that is the foundation of his hubris

someone once asked me why i think heidegger became a nazi. how, she said, can someone who emphasizes “gathering” become a nazi? wouldnt gathering seem to lend itself to the gathering of man, our togetherness? not our brutality? I answered that he was at home and not in exile. for heidegger, the gathering is a gathering in which one is at home in the gathering and this at-homeness is hubristic because,...

...in a sense, the earth belongs to god. we are only sojourners.

this displacement lies at the core of jewish culture and self-identity. in this sense, the jew is the schlemiel par excellence. Hence, in seeing avraham as a jew i see his displacedness, his clumsiness, his being a schlemiel and in being so uncovering the truth about what it ought to mean to be human.

Reham Elnory

December 10, 2011
6:12 pm

Of Trial and Truth: I spent a couple of days rereading your responses, until I finally realized that what bothered me were the consequences of the point you illustrated so beautifully with a retelling of Kafka's Trial. My problem, quite simply, is this: I don't understand what "the trial is and it is universal. man cannot win or lose, nor can God, the trial simply is and they are both eternally under judgment" means. I think I don't understand it because there is no narrative. There is no beginning, middle, end. There is no narrator and no-one narrated to: there is only the fact to be narrated: God and man eternally under judgment. Maybe it is better to say of it that it is an incomplete narrative, like its illustration: like Kafka's other novels, the Trial was never completed. Despite the execution of Jospheh K., it is an actually incomplete narrative. It reaches no katharsis because it reaches no goal: no point or meaning is really conveyed, other than there is no point/meaning to be conveyed. This I find unsettling for several reasons.

We need stories to explain who we are, and where we came from: but in that, what we really need is for them to project meaning as something to move forward to, or at least to help us get up when we stumble, much like a bobbing target on the horizon. As long as we see it, we think we might reach it, and that motivates us to try. If no stories exist, if no meaning exists, we still invent stories, and invest them with meaning. Like the fort/da game Freud's grandchild invented to explain the absence of the mother. Like the fairytales and myths—stories of heroes, of quests, of journeys undertaken—we listen to spellbound when we're children to help us process the continual challenges we face as a consequence of finding ourselves in the world. No matter how petty the challenges, no matter how fantastical the story, we forge links and imbue them with meaning and a sense of purpose in order to be able to go on.

Ricoeur claims that narratives open up possibilities of ethical action. By acknowledging that the history of an event involves a conflict of several interpretations, we open up the future, because different future projects presuppose different interpretations of the past. What kind of narrative act will help open up possibilities of ethical action? Exchanging, empathizing, purging; hearing another's story as one's own and learning to tell and retell one's own story better. But the structure of the narrative, a point I believe Frances made earlier, also matters: some form of a narrative has to be retained for it to hold and convey meaning. To what extent can reinterpretations and retellings of a narrative be pushed about before it unwinds and stops functioning as a narrative? Narrative is important, not because of its content (alone), but because of its form, because it is narrative. The minute its narrative form disintegrates, meaning unravels, followed by our selfhood and our responsibility towards others. Such formless forms render us helpless to do anything.

Reham Elnory

December 10, 2011

7:23 pm

What makes conversations or dialoguing effective? We can tell stories till we're blue in the face and get nowhere if there is no empathy felt for the other. Merely listening to a narrative that reworks elements of some familiarity is not enough. Something more is needed. But how can we get to empathy? How do I gain the ability to temporarily suspend my sense of self and my beliefs in order to be able to pull upon me the burden of the other? One way of suspending is retelling a common narrative over and over, but not so we get competing narratives which duplicate the conflict. The challenge of a building a shared narrative is not to erode conflicts but to be able to see the other unveiled, and have empathy. On such a level truth-claims no longer matter because realizations that fictionalized retellings can come closer to what really happened than a historical recounting of facts, because fictions go directly to the meaning. But there has to be meaning for that to occur; and for meaning to be there, there has to be a narrative in the form of a narrative.

Which brings me to a final point about ethics.

Narrative Ethics vs. Command/Legal Ethics: I don't think the ethical role narratives play is limited to opening up possibilities of future actions. Instead, I think they open up an alternative realm of ethics, through instilling empathy. That can only happen when there is an affective dimension involved: a dimension which is never involved in command ethics, in an ethics derived through the law. I spent a long time being bothered about the fact that there was technically no systematic ethical theory in Islam, but only systematic laws and legal theory. But I just realized that the different levels I mentioned in my last response are culled from what is called 'akhlaq'. It translates as the rather innocuous-sounding 'manners'—but it covers a much wider range of things than politeness. It is a manner of being in the world; with God, with self, with other; a certain attunement that solicits very particular responses to the world. Where/how do we get this attunement? From the stories in the Qur'an and in the hadith: narratives that portray people living in a certain way, responding in a certain way. The stories in the Qur'an outnumber the command/ritual law verses by far, and are usually followed by the formulaic 'or are you not possessed of intellect' i.e. do you not understand. In one verse, the formulation is: "or are you not possessed of hearts to understand with?" The word for understand there is the Arabic word for intellect, 'aql. The seat of the intellect then, according to the Qur'an, is not the mind, but the heart. So thinking, understanding, involves a necessarily affective component, the component that is activated in narrative ethics, an ethics based on empathy.

On a more personal level. I was deeply struck by your sentence: "to be a Jew is to be in exile." It's funny because there is a hadith—a prophetic saying—in Islam that says: "give glad tidings to those in exile; those who are strangers." Strangers in the world, strangers away from the beloved, perpetually out of place. Feeling strange is a good spiritual sign: in fact, if you fit in, if you ever feel comfortable in the world, that, as Sufis say, is a warning sign that you have strayed from the path. It's funny, really: to be on the path, you have to constantly be lost. So Abraham as a seeker and Abraham as schlemiel are really looking in the mirror at the same reflection.

Hayyim Rothman

December 11, 2011

2:36 am

on narrativity and empathy and the need for beginning, middle, end. etc. I will return to kafka on this one primarily because at least personally his stories and parables do speak something exceedingly deep to me. in one of his parables, "the imperial messenger" he talks about this ever-growing expanse between the man summoned to the king and the king himself who ends up dieing in the process of the man's efforts to get to him. the story only ends because it has to... meaning, that this sort of story is by its very nature indefinite and any ending is arbitrary. theoretically, since the expanse is ever growing, one could narrate each detail, but there would be no point in doing so. it wouldnt add anything because what is being narrated is not the trip but the impossibility of the destination and the fact that the trip must be taken up despite the impossibility of ever arriving where one is going.

i think that these impossible stories are precisely the most human, not the absence of empathic possibility. where there is a turn one can make that will lead to success, where there is something that can be done, achieved, accomplished... this is the sort of situation that precisely does not arouse our compassion and empathy ... or at least not in any overwhelming manner. where we feel the greatest empathy is were life reaches its limit and we face the impossible, where there is no solution... this is the properly human crisis and in one form or another it is universal.

i think it is specifically this sort of story that we must be able to lead all our other stories towards in order to have empathic exchanges. in a slightly different register, where i think fundamentalist threads of religious traditions (i.e. my own, but i am sure you can find analogues in yours) is the completeness of the story. the story is somehow regarded as whole and absolute and even if it may have infinite ramifications, this is a circumscribed infinity that allows the fundamentalist to, so to speak, hold it up and grasp his body of truth and from the vantage of this knowledge, judge his fellow man. it is the circumscribability of the story that allows for this. but if you pop the bubble of the circumscribed and admit of the story that infinitely runs off the paper, one that has an infinity of loose ends that will never be woven into a coherent fabric but, instead, will develop loose ends of their own... this is the human condition... this is what it means, to me at least, to tell a proper story in which my tragedy is given over and in which the listener can participate.

if you have ever seen a page of talmud, there is the main text and it is flanked on all sides by commentary and commentary of commentary. I have always had this vision that really, to have a jewish book in the true sense of it, it would have to be one massive page with the whole torah written on it and then ever expanding waves of commentaries and commentaries on commentaries and so on all orbiting each other in this sort of dance that is wholly incoherently coherent. to me, this is a good story. stories with beginning, middle, and end are nice, but they are not tragic because they are not unsettling enough.

to have empathy one must be swept off his feet and to be swept off one's feet there must be a death of god where god is the explanatory principle (this is what i think nietzsche meant by the death of god, not god per se, but coherence. that is why he hates the "market atheists" they are not sufficiently atheistic, they are really just deists in disguise and so are deeply distasteful because they cant worship... only a true atheist in the nietzschean sense is capable of worship)...

...as to law/command... i dont think that ethics is about empathy. one can do wrong and be perfectly empathic. we read of this earlier in the course where the nazi soldiers were, in fact, deeply troubled by what they had done and steps had to be taken to manipulate their emotions and turn them into remorseless killers. ethics is about what one does. and ultimately this comes down to a fiat: you may do x and you may not do y. it is a fiat precisely because human experience is so infinitely complex it is impossible to establish any sort of standard without doing so arbitrarily. obviously i am not attacking empathy, but i think that empathy establishes only the common human condition wherein commands can be commonly applied, i.e. where- in ethics can begin, it is not itself ethics.

Reham Elnory

December 11 , 2011
3:09 am

On second thought, reading your comment above, I would have to say I agree that impossible stories are very human, and also agree to the dangers of totalising narratives that seek an artificially neat procession to a completed end. Maybe I was too hasty in making the link between a specific form and meaning. Kafka's work-his short stories especially-do hold meaning for me, too. Maybe the crucial part in the structure of beginning-middle-end is not the act of delineation or reaching the goal, but the movement, the act of movement, as opposed to a suspension or a freezing; a cessation of movement, a bogging down. It's the movement that has to do with meaning, the mere progression forward, and not the specific steps in a specific structure. The movement can be cyclical; it doesn't have to be linear, but there has to be movement. And to me, the main problem with the idea of an eternal trial was the impression that it stood still; it would not go-it was never going-anywhere. So- yeah. There is a similar circular infinity of commentaries on traditional texts too-including the legal texts.

As for empathy, I still think meaning is central: through it's presence or it's absence. Abraham as seeker/shcleimel are both lost, are both relatable because of two sides of the same thing: there is an arbitrariness to a command from the beloved that requires the deliberate severance of everyday-world meaning but that the exigencies of love propel you to obey [suspension of meaning in things surrounding you therefore cause you to be lost in deep recesses; you are lost where you are standing, because the signified-signifier landscape has altered], and a pseudo-command as part of a meaningless prank that is ironically followed as a real command by a bewildered, stumbling [lost] Abraham.

As to ethics. I see your point about doing 'wrong' yet having empathy. But this confuses me further. There is no totalizing truth but there is still a right and a wrong? How can there be a right or wrong without an explanatory principle? Where does the standard of measurement, of determining right from wrong, come from? I guess my question really is, how can there be a law without an explanatory principle? What function does it fulfill without a goal? Also, maybe an absolute ethics has to rest on a fiat, on doing. But an intersubjective ethics-i.e. a REAL ethics-cannot function without empathy.

Reham Elnory

December 11 , 2011
3:10 am

By an intersubjective ethics, I meant an ethics that incorporates otherness.

Hayyim Rothman

December 11 , 2011
11:39 am

i agree with you on the impossibility-in-flux idea. I would think this is where the hope for the messiah/mahdi comes in. even if the messiah/mahdi never comes, the hope for the messiah/mahdi propels the story forward.

as far as ethics and meaning, i cannot accept an ethics that means something precisely because it will then be reducible to that meaning, which means that ethics will no longer be absolute, which means it will always be manipulable. i acknowledge that the paradox you point to is a real one. but i still hold by the two axioms of which it is made: there is no totalizing truth and yet there is absolute right and wrong, and also there is right and wrong in the absolute sense because there is no totalizing truth and right and wrong can have no larger determining meaning.

for me, at least, the truest truths are not necessarily logically consistent. there is a discussion in shestov's "athens and jerusalem" to this effect (his interpretation of the story of the expulsion from eden – it is the belief that something must be knowledge, must be consistent, to be true that marks the fall)

Hayyim Rothman

December 11 , 2011
9:37 pm

Taking this back to the origin of the discussion – at prof. kearney's request, but also b/c its a good thing to come back to the beginning before setting out again – Abraham. in the story as i told it abraham is to herald god back to the heavens with a shofar made of the ram's horn. this is playing off of a midrashic account wherein the horns of sacrificial ram were used for 2 historical events. its right one to announce the sinatic revelation and its left one to announce the coming of the messiah. so, for me, the impossible story is always tied up in its opening toward the messiah. not because the messiah will come (perhaps, perhaps not) but because time is pregnant with the messianic. it is this pregnancy that holds the flow of time at bay and lifts abraham from belonging in the flow of time and also what carries this suspended, exiled, story/character/loose thread of loose threads etc forward. not to go anywhere.... the promised land is always promised, never fulfilled, the exile is eternal, but to – as reham pointed out... and i am grateful to her for making this explicit for me – make it human.

Nearly seven years after their initial exchange, Hayyim Rothman and Reham Elnory sit together to reflect upon the experience of their narrative exchange and its impact on their lives since.

*The following is a transcript of their 2018 exchange, available on video at:
guestbookproject.org/a-tale-of-two-sons/*



A Tale of Two Sons

English Transcript

2018

RE Hello, I'm Reham Elnory. I am a Muslim from Egypt and a student of philosophy.

HR And I'm Hayyim Rothman. I'm a Hasidic Jew from New Jersey and I'm also a student of philosophy.

RE We first met about seven years ago in a class on narrative and during the class we revisited a story from both of our respective traditions—Muslim and Jewish—that is different for both of us. And this is the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice—being asked by God to sacrifice his son. Now in the Qur'anic and Muslim narrative, the son is Ishmael, while in the Judaic narrative, the son is Isaac.

HR According to the Jewish version of the story, as Reham said, the son that Abraham was told to sacrifice was Isaac. Although Abraham did have a conversation with God about who his who his only son was.

RE In the Qur'anic account, Abraham receives a dream and in this dream he sees a vision of him sacrificing his son. Now at the time he only had one son which was his firstborn, Ishmael, who was the eldest. He repeats this vision to Ishmael, who then acquiesces. And as Abraham is about to kill his son—his only son—he receives a divine command to stop because he has fulfilled his vision. Because he was willing to give up his all at the time, God rewards him with Isaac, a second son.

HR So what we found is that we have two competing narratives of who was involved in Abraham's sacrifice, and realizing this when we started the conversation, I was very apprehensive about doing this because I didn't want to get myself involved in a conflict, and I was very afraid that competing stories about the legitimacy of our respective traditions would lead to that.

RE I was also hesitant in the beginning. I mean, I was actually conflicted because on the one hand realizing that, not only Hayyim, but a greater part of the world through the Christian and Judaic traditions were familiar with the story of Isaac as the sacrificed son. I felt this immense amount of both pressure equaled by hesitation to kind of enter into a fray about legitimacy, but I did feel that the legitimacy of Islam itself somehow came into question. As we spoke further, however, we realized that regardless of who the identity of the sacrificed son was, the the underlying structure was the same, and it was about seeking, and sacrifice, and willingness to sacrifice in pursuit of something greater—spiritually greater. And throughout the discovery, throughout our conversations, we actually developed a very deep and lasting friendship.

HR What we discovered through our discussion is that in our paths of seeking, we were actually quite similar, and that in my own life there was a period of time where I had developed very extreme views and both through my own independent growth and through my discussions with Reham, I learned a lot more about my place in the world and how I understand the meaning of my own tradition and its role therein.

RE I went through a similar overzealous chapter in my life where I was very concerned with what it meant to be Muslim—especially in today's world, maybe—and sort of took it upon myself to be a perfect Muslim, whatever that meant. And often times that tended towards rather narrow-minded interpretation of what it meant to be Muslim.

However, with age and exposure and conversations like those I had with Hayyim, in watching someone from a different tradition who is a very authentic

and genuine seeker and holds his tradition dear and yet is open to experiencing the world and maybe seeing it from different angles, it also helped me realize that our role as human beings undergoing a path of seeking and learning offered so much more in common than any surface differences might suggest. And, ironically, our relationship which kind of started from a place of competing differences or competing narratives led to a genuine and lasting friendship. And actually, when I went through personal crises in my life, Hayyim was one of the first people to be genuinely there for me.

HR For me, an interaction from which I expected conflict opened up into a meaningful and fruitful relationship which had significance not only personally, but also intellectually. I realized philosophically that it is possible to be authentically part of one's own tradition and also meaningfully engaged with the traditions of others.

This document has been provided by Guestbook Project, an international project committed to transforming hostility into hospitality, enmity into empathy, and conflict into conversation.

An effort has been made to maintain formal elements from the original virtual exchange such as capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. The original conversation is available at:

exchangingnarratives.wordpress.com/2011/12/03/a-tale-of-two-sons-exchanging-narratives-in-the-abrahamic-tradition/

A Tale of Two Sons was produced as part of the “Exchanging Stories – Changing History” initiative, creating opportunities for young people from communities that have been divided by religion, race, ethnicity, or culture to come together to trade stories and create media. Guestbook Project works in collaboration with peace organizations, community groups, innovative schools and cultural workers from areas torn by conflict and injustice.

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