Lot’s Wife Was Never Salt (And Why That Highlights the Greatness of Abraham)

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I.

It is one of the best-known biblical stories. As Lot and his family are fleeing Sodom, his wife, ignoring the instructions of the angels, looks back and is turned to salt (Genesis 19:26). As it is a simple story found within a parashah with other narratives that demand far more attention — the Akedah, for example — it is easy enough to gloss over. “Listen to what others tell you, or else” seems to be its core message.

But take one step back to assess the narrative, and cracks start to emerge. For starters, while Lot’s wife’s transformation is typically understood as a punishment, it is difficult to identify her crime. True, she violates the angels’ command, “Do not look behind you” (v. 17), but her punishment seems an extreme reaction, particularly when we notice that Lot, too, ignores the angels by tarrying in the city (vv. 15–16), yet faces no punishment. Indeed, just a few verses later, he receives a reward: a city is saved so that it can become his future home (vv. 18–21).

And even if we ignore this disparity between Lot’s treatment and his wife’s and accept that she deserves punishment while he does not, the punishment itself is uncharacteristic. Nowhere else in the Torah does God punish via transfiguration. God never threatens to turn an innocent people into stone; no enemy is ever miraculously defeated by being transformed into sheep. Lot’s wife alone suffers this unique fate.

The story demands reassessment. Thus, Radak argues that Lot’s wife is not singled out to be transformed into salt as a punishment per se, but instead is overrun by the destruction sweeping the city. Given that God is raining sulfurous fire upon the land (v. 24) and Lot himself expresses his fear that he cannot outrun the storm (v. 19), it makes sense that, should one member of Lot’s party stop to look back one last time, it would slow that person down long enough to suffer the same fate as Sodom’s other inhabitants. Radak’s comments solve some of the above problems. Lot’s wife does not turn to salt as a supernatural punishment for ignoring a divine command, but as a repercussion of her lack of faith in the angels’ words. Lot’s wife’s death is simply the consequence of her own slowing down.

But a far more fascinating interpretation of the story is offered by Hizkuni (R. Hezekiah b. Manoah, 1250–1310, France). His comment not only changes the entire narrative but also shifts its focus and leads to a deeply disturbing conclusion given the continuation of the story. Nonetheless, it is a comment from which we can learn plenty.

II.

After quoting Rashi’s explanation of the episode, Hizkuni offers an additional understanding, rooted in the ambiguity of verses 25–26, which state: “He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground. Lot’s wife looked back va-tehi a pillar of salt.” Given that Lot’s wife is the most recent subject of the sentence, our instinct is to translate va-tehi as “and she became.” Yet Hizkuni applies it, instead, to the subject of the previous verse, the cities of the Plain:

Alternatively, “Lot’s wife looked back and the entire land had become a pillar of salt.” As is found [in Deuteronomy 29:22] “all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt.”

Hizkuni bases his understanding on Moshe’s warning to the people that should they violate the will of God, they will suffer the same fate as Sodom:

And later generations will ask — the children who succeed you, and foreigners who come from distant lands and see the plagues and diseases that the L ORD has inflicted upon that land, all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing...
Chapter 19 has a curious feature. The entire chapter – all 38 verses – are about Lot, his escape, and Sodom’s destruction, save the three verses immediately following Lot’s wife looking back, in which the narrative abruptly switches to Abraham:

Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the LORD, and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln. Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval. (vv. 27–29)

This abrupt switch of focus is explained by verse 29. The Torah underscores that Lot was not saved due to his own merit but due to Abraham’s. Yet, if this were the sole reason for the interruption, there would be no need for verses 27 and 28. The Torah could just add a parenthetical comment that Lot was saved because of Abraham. Why must the Torah interrupt the narrative to show us Abraham looking down at Sodom’s destruction?

For Zvi Grumet, these verses help us understand Abraham’s state of mind. The last time we encountered Abraham was during his negotiation with God to spare Sodom. Though we have learned Sodom’s fate, Abraham has not. God never told him that even ten righteous people were not to be found. Abraham has gone to sleep that night, says Grumet, believing he has saved Sodom. Verses 27 and 28, then, allow us to view Abraham’s reaction. This is when he learns his begging and bartering with God has failed. He also has no knowledge that Lot has been saved. “The morning after his valiant effort,” Grumet writes, “he wakes to the stench of an entire section of his domain incinerated.” This is a dark moment for Abraham.

But these verses also contrast Abraham with Lot’s wife. If we adopt Hizkuni’s view, verses 26–28 provide us with two figures both looking at the same scene before them, yet drawn to different things. Lot’s wife is drawn to the sulfur and salt, while Abraham is drawn to the smoke rising from the land. This is not just a temporal distinction. It is not simply that Lot’s wife witnesses the sulfur raining down in the moment, while Abraham seeks the smokey aftermath. It is that each is drawn to a very different aspect of the destruction.

That God should destroy Sodom with sulfur and salt is important. It suggests a specific tactic with a history in the ancient world: to destroy the economic success of a region. Sodom, the Torah has taught earlier, is the most beautiful region in the land, “like the garden of the LORD” (Genesis 13:10) – indeed, that is what draws Lot to live there. While sulfur and salt will undoubtedly destroy people, too, its specific intent is to damage the land itself. A land sown with salt cannot produce vegetation. Sodom is not just destroyed for a brief period of time; it is destroyed forever. No one will want to settle in an uninhabitable place.

In the moment that Lot’s wife looks back – during the destruction of her hometown – she is drawn to the sulfur and salt coming to devastate her town’s growth. She is consumed by its lushness fading away, its economy dissipating forever. Never again will Sodom sprout forth what it has in the past. In the words of Hizkuni, she fixates on kol ha-aretz, “the entire land.” Sodom’s soil is worthless. It will cease to be a center of growth and wealth.

Yet Abraham notices something different. He is drawn to the fire. The smoke. It is an image that evokes a more blatant vision of death. His concern is not for the flora that gave Sodom its glory, but for the people he tried desperately – in vain, as he has just learned – to save, despite being told they were evil. Despite having no reason to either love or care for them.

Lot’s wife does not see her neighbors dying. She does not care for their screams. All she sees is a rich land being destroyed. Only Abraham notices the charred remains of Sodom’s inhabitants. Hizkuni’s understanding may spare Lot’s wife’s life, but it leaves alive a disturbingly callous person.

IV.

In truth, the idea that Lot’s wife has no care for other humans is hardly alien. Rashi’s explanation (quoting Genesis Rabbah 50:4) as to why she deserved to be punished by being transformed into salt highlights her selfishness: she was unwilling to offer even salt to guests. And the greatest indication as to what Hazal saw as Sodom’s ultimate crime is found in the Mishnah:

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2 Zvi Grumet, Genesis: From Creation to Covenant (Maggid Books, 2017), 214.
There are four types of character. One who says “what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours” is a typical person. Yet there are those who say that such a person is a Sodomite. (Avot 5:10)

Contrary to the English language, Hazal saw the great sin of Sodom, the definition of Sodomy, as selfishness. A refusal to share with another. And though, at first glance, such an attitude does not seem so destructive – indeed, the Mishnah itself suggests it is the disposition of most people – there are dangers to such a mentality. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has diagnosed the notion that individuals may do broadly as they please with no responsibility to the wider population as the root cause of many of contemporary society’s ills. Defining this notion as what he terms “cultural climate change,” Lord Sacks devotes his latest work, Morality, to an extended analysis of this problem:

Divisive politics, inequitable economics, the loss of openness in universities, and the growth of depression and drug abuse are the result of what I call cultural climate change. They are the long-term consequences of the unprecedented experiment embarked on throughout the West a half-century ago: the move from “We” to “I.”

All countries and cultures have three basic institutions. ... [The third] is the moral system, which is the voice of society within the self; the “We” within the “I”; the common good that limits and directs our pursuit of private gain. It is the voice that says No to the individual “Me” for the sake of the collective “Us.” Some call it conscience. Freud called it the superego. Others speak of it as custom and tradition. Yet others call it natural law. Many people in the West speak of it as the will and word of God.3

Lot’s wife is the ultimate Sodomite. She never sees the “We,” but only the “I.” And so, when God rains destruction upon her town, she does not care about the people, because that was not the mentality of Sodom. Only Sodom losing its lusnhness matters. Only those parts of the town that benefitted her matter, either as the source of her own wealth or providing her with enjoyment. This is what Abraham stands against. The Abraham from whom the obligation of hesed is learned.

The Torah interrupts the narrative of Lot’s escape from Sodom immediately after Lot’s wife looks back to contrast her focus with Abraham’s. To underscore, emphasize, and highlight the abhorrence of her mentality. And to provide us with the correct model for our own lives: Abraham, sensitive even to the loss of those God saw as meritorious.

V.

With Lot’s wife still alive, the narrative’s already disturbing conclusion becomes darker still. Read traditionally, with Lot’s wife dead, the story of Lot’s daughters’ decision to conceive through him is already tough to read. But read with Hizkuni’s comment, Lot’s wife is still alive. Either she abandoned her family upon her town’s destruction, or she is with them in the cave. (That verse 30 only mentions Lot and his daughters need not imply her absence. Not only does she go unmentioned in scenes earlier in the narrative, but it is a common enough feature of biblical narratives for characters not taking center-stage to go unmentioned, particularly when they are women and children. Genesis 3:24, for example, only describes Adam being driven out of Eden, not Hava, despite the fact that she is obviously exiled with him.)

But, with Lot’s wife in the cave, how can she allow her daughters to go through with their plan? If she is the ultimate expression of Sodom, then her callousness is not so surprising. Why should she care about her daughters? Why worry for her husband? Why concern herself with the future of humanity? That would reflect a concern for other people. It does not impact her. After all, we know her daughters’ wellbeing counts for naught in her eyes. Given she offered no protest when her husband offered them to be raped by a mob, why would this bother her?

It may be one the best-known and simplest biblical stories, but the assumption that Lot’s wife is turned to salt leads us to rarely investigate the alternative narrative path. But when we do so, it leads to a disturbing, yet important realization, and a message particularly relevant for our times. That Sodom’s selfishness was the antithesis of Abraham – and that it is upon us to follow his path and not hers.

A Pediatric Akeidah

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Like most readers of Humash, I feel the irresistible pull back to the extraordinary 19-sentence story of the Akeidah in chapter 22 of Genesis. It is an iconic example of laconic Biblical prose that packs a powerful emotional and intellectual wallop. Again, like others, I have written about the Akeidah from the perspective of Avraham, the recipient of the divine command to sacrifice his son.4 However, the recent publication of Aaron Koller’s exciting new book, Unbinding Isaac (Princeton University Press, 2012) and reading Moshe Halbertal’s book On Sacrifice (Princeton University Press, 2012) have prompted me to approach the Akeidah along a different route, one more consistent with my day job.

Among the many insightful ideas that Koller has about this enigmatic test, a key point is the need to reintroduce Yitzhak into the drama. There are midrashim and piyutim cited by Koller that do, in fact, fill in the gap that Yitzhak occupies in the unfolding story. They create a more detailed back-and-forth conversation in which Yitzhak either goads his father on or mockingly questions his father’s sanity. However, they are the exceptions to the prevailing depiction of

3 Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times (Basic Books, 2020), 11.

Yitzhak as the soft-spoken obedient son. These midrashim portray Yitzhak as a foil to Avraham but not an active protagonist. Koller focuses on Yitzhak’s position in the story. It is one thing to ask how Avraham could agree to follow through on a demand that violated every ethical imperative. He may have met the divine challenge and proven that he was a Kierkegaardian “knight of faith.” Nevertheless, how could Avraham have allowed that demonstration to come at the expense of another person’s life, his precious son’s life? Koller forces us to look squarely at Yitzhak as he climbs Mt. Moriah, an innocent victim on the verge of being sacrificed to God. The threat of violence to a child is an inescapable element of the story.

Halbertal’s book-length essay highlights exactly that feature of sacrifice, the violence that is inherent in the act, regardless of whether it is sacrifice to a higher power or sacrifice for a cause. The profoundly asymmetric and hierarchical power relationship between God and man creates the potential for inescrutable rejection of any human gift to God. This can trigger a furious reaction by man if he perceives partiality towards the gifts of other human beings. Moreover, the need to slaughter an innocent living substitute creates a milieu in which violence is an essential part of the activity. Regardless of whether one accepts Rambam’s idea that sacrifices serve an educational purpose to wean people from paganism (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:45), or Ramban’s view that sacrifice is a symbolic act in which the goat or ram is a proxy for the human being who deserves punishment (Leviticus 1:9), an animal is killed on the altar. Similarly, when sacrificing for something, the glorification of the cause can lead to the justification of murder of antagonists to the cause. What makes the Akeidah so thought-provoking is the demand to sacrifice a child and the possible justification of the act as proof of obedience to God.

In searching for parallels, the only other instance of mandatory violence to a child in the Humash that I can identify is the episode of the ben soror u-moreh (the wayward and rebellious son). This case also represents a most challenging episode, just 4 sentences in length (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). The law entails the execution of a wayward youth for adolescent misbehavior -- petty thievery and gluttonous eating habits. The Rabbis, bothered by the disproportionate punishment, justified the capital sentence because the delinquent activity foreshadowed a future life of much more serious crime and mayhem (see Rashi on Deuteronomy 21:18). Like the Akeidah, it has been subjected to endless scrutiny and analysis by commentators -- ancient, medieval, and modern. Again, what makes the law of ben soror u-moreh so troubling is the killing of a child, a violent act of killing in which the parents are full participants. It is true that parents are not obligated to haul their son (the Rabbis excluded daughters from this law [Sanhedrin 8:1]) into juvenile court whenever his behavior satisfies the criteria of ben soror u-moreh. However, if they do, and the shoe fits, then they must follow through to the pre-ordained judicial conclusion, namely the stoning of their child, and demonstrate their acceptance of the divine legislation.

Reading the episodes of the Akeidah and ben soror u-moreh in parallel, I will locate thematic similarities and contrasts. I will then analyze what the juxtaposition of these two descriptions of potential violence to minors might mean.

The first thing that goes awry in the case of the ben soror u-moreh, is that the son does not hear the voice of his mother and father (Deuteronomy 21:18). This is mirrored by the two voices Avraham does hear during the Akeidah story – the first when God addresses him and issues his test command to sacrifice Yitzhak (Genesis 22:2) and the second when the angel tells him to stop just as he is ready to lower the blade of knife onto his son’s neck (Genesis 22:11-12). The ben soror u-moreh fails to listen to his parents’ instruction while Avraham obeys both instructions.

Interestingly, the son disregards the admonishments of both his mother and father. In contrast, only the father is present during the Akeidah narrative and the son walks along in support of the solitary parent. Perhaps, based on midrashim that depict Sarah’s fatal reaction on learning about the Akeidah (Midrash Tanhuma Vayera 23, section 5), Avraham intuitively knew what his wife’s response would have been had he asked her to accompany him to Mt. Moriah. When confronted with their misbehaving child, the parents have to forcefully grab their son out of his home environment and drag him to the elders at the gate of the city (Deuteronomy 21:19). Their act is one of upholding the rule of law. Avraham also has to leave home and embark on a journey to the location that God has indicated for the sacrifice. However, the destination in Avraham’s case is a mountain top, far from civilization and established social structure (Genesis 22:2). Sacrifice to God, it would seem, is best offered out of the gaze of onlookers to ensure that the motivation is pure. The parents of the ben soror u-moreh are silent and do not speak with their child as they escort him to court. Avraham, on the other hand, has an oblique but tender conversation with Yitzhak, perhaps hoping to prepare him for what lies ahead, perhaps to reassure him that everything will work out well in the end (Genesis 22:7-8). Finally, the end of the stories differ dramatically -- the wayward son is stoned to death while Yitzhak is saved and tragedy is averted. The comparisons between the two texts are outlined in the following Table.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual feature</th>
<th>Ben soror u-moreh</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hearing/listening/obeying</td>
<td>The son does not hear/obey his parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Father and mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Grab the son from home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>City gate and court</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Son is executed</td>
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To this point, the texts seem very divergent. The Akeidah is a story of a shared mission and love of God, the law of ben soror u-moreh is a case of filial rejection, conflict, and rupture. However, there is a deep commonality in the two stories. The moral glue that holds both narratives together is the potential killing of a minor and it is this imminent violence that has caused so much anxiety among readers of Humash.

I propose that we view the chapter of the Akeidah in the same way some read the chapter about the ben soror u-moreh. The Rabbis recognized the moral quandary created by this juvenile law. This is evidenced by the urgency to rationalize the harsh punishment with the assertion that it was justified based on the inevitable outcome, nidon al shem sofo (Sanhedrin 71b). To limit its impact, they turned to the details in the text and created a dense thicket of conditions to limit its potency. Based on midrashim which required the parents to be of the same height, to speak with an identical vocal sonority, which defined to the milligram the amount of food to be stolen and eaten, and limited the vulnerable period to a fleeting moment in the adolescent’s growth, one Tanna, Rabbi Yehudah, concluded that the ben soror u-moreh “never was and never will be.” This conclusion is reinforced by Rabbi Shimon, who asserted that it was implausible.

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that two parents would ever agree to hand over their delinquent son to the court merely because of fears of what he might become in the future (Sanhedrin 71a).

Similarly, I suggest that the Akeidah raises terrifying questions about man’s faith obligation to God. Therefore, it could only occur after a specific 3-day journey by donkey, with father and son walking in lockstep synchrony, covering a distance within a millimeter to a mountain with defined humidity and visibility, using a specific brand of knife and self-kindling wood, in an area with vegetation that can trap rams, and where an angel speaks when the father’s arm is at a defined acute angle. In brief, it never happened and it never will. Instead, the Akeidah could be interpreted in a Maimonidean fashion as a prophetic vision. Maimonides himself states that the command from God and its revocation by the angel were voices internal to Avraham, in line with his general view of prophecy (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:24). However, Maimonides in other places shows a willingness to interpret entire episodes, such as Avraham and the three angels, as prophetic visions (Guide to the Perplexed 2:41-44). This approach can be applied to the Akeidah as well. This vision was necessary for Avraham’s ethical development but was not an actual historical event. Alternatively, one could argue that the circumstances are so circumscribed and the event so singular that it cannot serve as precedent for mundane ethical conduct.

So why do we learn about the Akeidah and the sugya of ben sorer u-moreh? In the words of Rabbi Yehudah, the answer is to study and receive the reward. Nevertheless, we study the texts not simply for vicarious interest. The overall themes of these sections are supremely important and timeless. The perennial dilemma of balancing obedience to God and ethical behavior to man was not discovered by Avraham. The challenge of being a responsible parent and rearing morally competent children is highlighted by the first couple to walk the earth. Adam and Eve must have done some serious soul-searching for how they failed as parents, for reasons why one of their sons could have been so provoked by jealousy to murder his brother.

However, the question remains, namely, why is killing a minor, violence to children, such a central element in the Akeidah episode and in the law of ben sorer u-moreh? Although ancient cultures considered child sacrifice an authentic means of showing devotion to the deity, the Torah unequivocally rejects these idolatrous practices. It repeatedly condemns the practice of offering a child to Moloch as a paradigm of worship of false gods (Leviticus 20:2-5). For us, it is unthinkable to sacrifice a child for any personal reason or private cause. Similarly, pre-emptive punishment of a black sheep child is unacceptable. People are convicted and punished for crimes committed, not crimes anticipated. Furthermore, in both Rabbinic and modern legal codes, minors are judged separately and are spared harsh punishment for even serious crimes in the hope that they can be rehabilitated and lead moral lives as they mature.

There is another commandment that some of the Rabbis included in the category of “never was and never will be,” namely the law of ir ha-nidahat, the idolatrous city.⁶ Again, one reason those Rabbis reached this conclusion was because they created so many boundary conditions, that ultimately the law was rendered inoperative. However, there is an aspect of the law that is discussed in detail in the Tosefta Sanhedrin (Chapter 14, Halakhah 3) and that is relevant to this discussion. There is an anonymous opinion that the children of the idolators are not killed while Rabbi Eliezer asserts that they are. Rabbi Akiva supports the anonymous opinion, claiming that this sparing of children is a manifestation of divine mercy. Rabbi Elchanan Samet has suggested that the requirement to slaughter the minors who lived in the idolatrous city, following R. Eliezer’s opinion, and codified by Rambam in the Laws of Idolatry (4:6), may have represented an insurmountable moral dilemma for some of the Rabbis.⁷ Therefore, it is conceivable that, in addition to the specific reasons outlined in the Gemara, this unsparring prerequisite led these same Rabbis to conclude that ir ha-nidahat could not be an actionable law. This echoes R. Shimon’s reservations about the credibilty of the law of ben sorer u-moreh. The law of the ir ha-nidahat epitomizes the challenges of policing moral standards on a communal level. However, like the Akeidah and the ben sorer u-moreh narratives, the potential for violence to children hovers over the ir ha-nidahat and provoked efforts to limit its force and, for some, even move it into the category of “never was and never will be.”

The extreme tension created by the potential for violence to the pediatric members of society in the Akeidah and ben sorer u-moreh texts serves to highlight the essential educational role of these two episodes in cultures committed to living life in the shadow of the divine. The potential killing of a child or young adolescent serves a pedagogical function. The looming death focuses the mind on these moral concerns that have plagued humanity from day one – how to balance obedience to God and man and how to balance love of family and obedience to the law. Although violence is never the solution to these problems, the possibility is always there. Killing may be unavoidable when the moral fabric is torn or it may tragically be necessary in very rare instances when its integrity is threatened. This is the rationale for self-sacrifice when commanded to murder someone else, commit adultery, or engage in idolatry. It is the defense of just wars. Nevertheless, these are exceptions and men and women need to be cognizant of the destructive force of violence, especially to children, as they form communities of faith and growing families. Avraham’s behavior in response to God’s command to sacrifice Yitzhak and the parents’ willingness to proactively entrust their delinquent son to the court are often viewed as acts of sanctification of God’s name. However, in principle, this supreme sacrifice is only required when a person is asked to commit murder, violate sexual norms, or engage in idolatry and devolves on one’s own self. It was not meant to sanction the sacrifice of another person. If anything, were such a situation to occur in real life, one could argue that Avraham should have offered himself for God to do with as He wished, offering up his own life as proof of his devotion rather than consider sacrificing Yitzhak. Similarly, any parents who voluntarily bring their kid to be tried as a ben sorer u-moreh should be prosecuted for botched child rearing. Regardless, the potential to use other people, especially dependents, as a means to prove loyalty to God or establish parental authority should give people reason to pause and rethink their moral calculus.

In conclusion, we engage with the Akeidah and ben sorer u-moreh narratives to learn how to address ethical dilemmas, large and small, that arise as we strive to lead religious lives. There are multiple moral problems raised by these texts including whether divine commands can be verified, whether they can mandate violation of human ethics, the infallibility and intelligibility of divine law. The complex way that

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⁶ The law of the leprous house was also deemed by some to be a case that was only theoretical. However, I will not take it up because it is not relevant to the current discussion.

the Rabbis dealt with these texts highlights the extremity of the circumstances in these two cases. In this essay, in the wake of Koller and Halbertal, I have explored the mortal danger to children that they signify. I suggest that the potential for violence that permeates both narratives is not meant to be directed at minors per se. Instead, it is intended to raise the stakes by illustrating how innocent children can be caught up in our efforts to demonstrate our faith in God and the Halakhah. People may consider self-sacrifice but should not countenance the sacrifice of another, especially a minor, as an act of divine sanctification or to demonstrate their obedience to law. The narratives remind us of the threat to the viability of communities if men and women fail to pay attention to their obligations to God and to their children and how to keep the two in balance.

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PANDEMIC, PARTNERSHIP, AND PROGRESS: A VISION FOR A POST-COVID MODERN ORTHODOXY

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Introduction

The United States and other countries are facing three once-in-a-lifetime crises almost simultaneously. The most obvious, of course, is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has changed the way we live, work, and play and has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Partly as a result of the pandemic and its effect on the economy, millions of people are currently unemployed, and economic inequality has worsened around the world. Second, triggered by the killing of George Floyd, systemic racism in the American political, social, and economic systems have been at the forefront of protests across the country.

These events have occurred in the context of the third major crisis, an already unstable world order threatened by an impending climate disaster and an American political system that seems hopelessly polarized and unable to govern.

Theology

Major disruptive events such as the Covid pandemic and racial unrest in America demand a theological response. This is especially true for those of us who believe that God controls the fate and destiny of the physical and temporal world. This much-needed theological response can exist on many levels. It is important to begin by highlighting what a proper theological response most assuredly is not. Rav Amital taught that man can never presume to know the reasons for God’s actions. This is a useless endeavor fraught with hubris. Man cannot even pretend to know or understand God’s motivations.

There is one universal response to tragedy and misfortune: teshuvah (repentance). Teshuvah can take place on both an individual and a communal level. I will return to this topic later after proposing a theological framework for dealing with this.

The ferocity and the intensity of the Covid pandemic have left many people feeling powerless and helpless in the face of the death and despair that has come in its wake. I am fearful that Covid may herald a new era in the relationship between humanity and the environment. Not only do new diseases have the potential to spread quickly across the globe, but the impending climate changes threaten to make life more tenuous for many of the world’s citizens. In addition, the scourge of systemic racism, racial injustice, and increasing economic inequality has caused many people, particularly the younger generation, to question traditional values and theologies. An authentic Jewish religious response is urgently needed in response to these new challenges. I propose that the basis for this response can be found in the writings of some of the greatest Orthodox thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein.

Man’s Covenant with Nature

That an appropriate theological response to an environmental crisis should emerge from R. Soloveitchik is somewhat surprising, in light of what he wrote in The Lonely Man of Faith:

Dignity was equated by the Psalmist with man’s capability of dominating his environment and exercising control over it. Man acquires dignity through glory, through his majestic posture vis-à-vis his environment. The brute’s existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence. Human dignity is a dignified one because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence. Hence, dignity is unobtainable as long as man has not reclaimed himself from coexistence with nature and has not risen from a non-reflective, degrading helpless instinctive life to an intelligent, planned, and majestic one. . . . The brute is helpless, and, therefore, not dignified. Civilized man has gained limited control of nature and has become, in certain respects, her master, and with his mastery he has attained dignity as well.

However, in his posthumously published work, The Emergence of Ethical Man, R. Soloveitchik strikes a different tone from the glorification of man’s dominance over nature that emerged from The Lonely Man of Faith. In opposition to Christian theology, which, in R. Soloveitchik’s description, portrays man as being apart and alien from nature, R. Soloveitchik forcefully argues, in multiple places throughout the book, that Judaism views man as part of nature.

"The Hebrew Bible is cognizant of man as a natural being found on the same plane as the animal and the plant. Indeed, such an idea is a motivating force in Jewish ethics and metaphysics."¹⁰

"Let us first analyze the immanence of man, namely his confluence with nature, Mother Earth."¹¹

"Yet the Halakhah identifies man with the biological form of existence - the dynamic organism."¹²

"Halakhah considers this purely vegetated form of life, projected upon an anthropic background, as a manifestation of a personality."¹³

According to R. Soloveitchik, humanity shares many of its essential characteristics with the vegetative world and even more so with the animal world. It is for this reason, he asserts, that the Bible is so opposed to the eating of meat. R. Soloveitchik continues:

Here we grasp one of the most characteristic features of the Jewish anthropological philosophy. The deep feeling of man's basic harmony with organic nature - a harmony emerging from uniformity - is the most salient feature of that philosophical formula. Man may be the most developed form of life on the continuum of plant-animal-man, but the ontic essence remains identical.¹⁴

Not only is man identified with plant and animal life, but he is also intimately connected to his environment:

A man is not allowed to tear away from his natural moorings; in this respect, he is more like plant than animal. He takes root, he is stationary and forms one entity with his environment. And like plant, that environment is the soil: both belong to Mother Earth, and both are part of her. . . . the mitzvah of burial indicates the validity of the demand the earth makes on man. She insists upon the return of a part of her own self.¹⁵

What is the consequence of this tum'ah? As soon as man begins to act in a manner alien to his nature, as soon as he tries to transcend nature's limitations and bounds, she changes her attitude toward him. He has expressed contempt and disdain for his Mother Earth; nature on her part refuses to promote man's interests, which are not hers any more.

We may conclude from these premises the following:

(1) The metaphysical confluence of man and nature is a postulate of Judaism.

(2) This coexistence results in co-responsibility. . .

(3) Thus, man is not a universal abstract being who roams along the infinite lanes of the cosmos without finding any attachment to any part of it. He is confined to a determinate finite world; he must, like the plant, be rooted in an enclosed part of the soil and live together

R. Soloveitchik then asks the obvious question: is not the notion of man's partnership with Mother Earth at odds with the Biblical notion of man's dominion over nature? He answers:

Man's dominion of nature is not that of an alien autocrat over a people subjugated by force, but that of a loving father over his young son, or of a devoted son over an incapacitated old mother. Nature surrenders voluntarily to man's control and rule, she entrusts man with her most guarded secrets. It is more cooperation than dominion, more partnership than subordination. . . There is some sort of covenant between man and nature. The prime condition of such a contractual relationship is man's living up to certain natural standards. By the slightest error, man forfeits his rights to dominate and becomes an outcast. This is man's freedom: either to live at peace with nature and thus give expression to a natural existence in the noblest of terms, or to surpass his archaic bounds and corrupt himself and nature. Man's freedom is embedded in his confinement to his environment, in his coexistence with nature.¹⁷

Man should create new life; he should plant trees and engage in such creative work. The intimate close contact with the environment was recommended and approved by Judaism. The Jew whom God called upon was a worker, a farmer, a shepherd; men who lived in harmony and at peace with nature and saw God not in transcendent heavens, but descending from infinity into finitude.¹⁸

It is obvious that modern Jews living in Teaneck and Bet Shemesh cannot be expected to return to the pastoral lifestyle, but the partnership and covenant with nature that R. Soloveitchik describes can still be a value to strive for. Man is charged with being a protector of the environment as opposed to a destroyer of the environment.

Yoram Hazony has asserted that The Emergence of Ethical Man "has drawn little attention since its publication" and that it is a "bombshell of a book." Hazony worked to draw much-deserved attention to the work, and his efforts have generated discussion about the book in certain quarters. However, the discussion has focused mostly on the second half of the book, in particular its rejection of the supernatural element in religion and its implication for immortality, redemption, prayer, and miracles. I am much more concerned with the beginning of the book and its description of the relationship between man and nature as a partnership as opposed to one of domination. The well-being of man is intimately related to the well-being of nature and the health of the planet. In addition to protecting his environment, man must have the humility to know that he can never dominate nature and to be aware of his own limitations. According to R. Soloveitchik, there is a covenant between man and nature, and we have to make sure we do not break that covenant. The idea of partnership with nature and the environment should also instill in man a sense of humility that nature cannot always be conquered and sensitize each human being to the fragility of his or her environment. R. Soloveitchik's insistence that man is part of nature as opposed to set

¹¹ Ibid., 13.
¹² Ibid., 27.
¹³ Ibid., 29.
¹⁴ Ibid., 47.
¹⁵ Ibid., 52.
¹⁶ Ibid., 57-59.
¹⁷ Ibid., 60.
¹⁸ Ibid., 63.
aside from nature should empower man to be a protector of the environment as opposed to a destroyer of the environment.

The Dignity of Man

The thought of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is also relevant in developing a theological response to the rapidly changing world in the face of Covid and the demands for racial equality. He also uses the first chapters of Genesis to develop his theology. However, as opposed to R. Soloveitchik, he is much more concerned with the relationship between one person and another rather than man's relationship with nature. He asserts that the opening chapters of Genesis are an attack on the idea of universalism and one truth. R. Sacks views the story of the Tower of Babel as a turning point in human history.

It ends with the division of mankind into a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations and civilizations. God's covenant with humanity as a whole has not ceased. But from here on he will focus on one family, and eventually one people, to be his witnesses and bearers of his covenant - a people in whose history his presence will be peculiarly transparent. . . . The question is, why? . . . To this I suggest a radical answer. God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different, teaching humanity to make space for difference.19

R. Sacks continues that "the challenge to the religious imagination is to see God's image in one who is not in our image."20

The greatness of R. Sacks's idea is not the religious but the ethical or moral lesson we should learn from the Torah. Our Torah may be unique and singular, but that should have no impact on how we view our fellow human beings. He continues:

The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his. . . Can we create a paradigm shift through which we come to recognize that we are enlarged, [not diminished,] by the 6,000 languages that exist today, each with its unique sensibilities, art forms and literary expressions?21

This ideology, which R. Sacks professes, can be revolutionary in how we relate to the other and what we teach our children and students. These two ideas of R. Soloveitchik and R. Sacks can be the beginning of a new Jewish theology built upon the twin pillars of a covenant with nature and a recognition of the equality between all people before God. Man's impulse to dominate nature and his environment and the idea of Jewish superiority should not be the basis of a Jewish theology. There should be an awareness of the interdependence of mankind and of the absurdity of believing that man can dominate nature solely through scientific and technological advancement. Instead, we should strive for partnerships with both nature and our fellow man. Ideologies that trumpet ethnic superiority and domination of the environment are not reflective of the current climate and, I would dare say, do not speak to many of our youth.

Notwithstanding the fact that there is certainly room in our tradition for competing ideologies, if a mistaken interpretation of our ideology has even inadvertently contributed to environmental catastrophe or the fostering of racial injustice, then an authentic Jewish response also necessitates communal teshuvah.

Rambam beautifully articulates that teshuvah has three components:22

1. Recognition of the sin;
2. Embarrassment and regret of the sin;
3. Commitment to the future to never return to the sin.

If we, as a community or as part of a community, have broken our covenant with nature or willingly (or unwillingly) failed to see the dignity inherent in every human being, race, or culture, then we need to do communal teshuvah. We have to teach our children how we have sinned, feel embarrassed for our actions or complicity with immoral behavior, and implement concrete plans to ensure that we never return to our old ways. In addition, if sins were committed against our fellow man, forgiveness from them is also required. This may sometimes even include financial restitution.

Ahashverosh's world

The disruptive events of the past year also present an opportunity to reflect on another scourge affecting the Jewish community: the excessive cost of living a Modern Orthodox lifestyle. The astronomical cost of private Jewish education, particularly in the Diaspora, has been a frequent discussion among parents, educators, communal leaders, and philanthropists.23 Many innovative solutions have been proposed with varying degrees of success. Philanthropic efforts have increased substantially, but this may become even more difficult in the post-Covid economic era.

In addition, many Modern Orthodox communities, either by choice or necessity, are located in neighborhoods where home prices are prohibitive for the average working couple. The costs of having extravagant weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs have put considerable financial strain on many families. It is unconscionable that financial considerations should be part of the equation in choosing whether to live a committed Jewish life. Initiatives to decrease the costs of affairs and limit the number of celebrants have been developed, but they have been mostly unsuccessful in the Modern Orthodox community. In addition to weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs, there are the obligations of gift-giving for bridal showers, engagement parties, graduation parties, birthday parties, baby showers, and anniversary parties. All of these expenses can be daunting for a young couple just starting out or a middle-age couple trying to keep up.

The time has come for rabbis and communal leaders to take the initiative and set examples. They, along with the lay leadership, must help communities realistically plan long-term communal financial stability and self-sufficiency. This would include serious efforts to respectfully limit the extravagance of our modern semahot, encourage growth of communities in lower real estate markets, and

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20 Ibid., 60.
22 Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:2.
23 See for example the following two websites: https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-high-cost-of-jewish-continuity-affording-a-jewish-day-school-education/ and https://jewishaction.com/religion/education/tuition-squeeze-paying-price-jewish-education/.
collectively endorse significant change in the economics of Yeshiva tuition. It will not be easy and will require strong leadership, but nothing less than the economic viability of Modern Orthodoxy is at stake. With the Covid recession and many people out of work, the current situation is even more untenable, and brave communal leadership to change the reality is sorely needed.

The spiritual dangers of these pursuits, which are steeped in materialism and hedonism, were already pointed out in a Purim discourse that R. Lichtenstein delivered in 1990. If anything, the situation has only gotten worse since then. The Gemara (Megillah 12a) maintains that the reason the Jews of Shushan were punished is because "they participated in the banquet of the evil [Ahashverosh]." In asking what exactly the sin was, R. Lichtenstein answers:

The claim against Israel for which they were deserving of destruction, “because they partook of the banquet of the evil one,” is based on their immersion in this enjoyment. It is founded upon their absorption into a society of continuous pleasure, a society whose existential character and lifestyle - not to mention the practical ramifications which result from it - are completely removed from creative labor, manual work and activity. This settling into the intensive and all-embracing voluptuousness of Ahashverosh’s banquet is the reason for which Israel was deserving of destruction. What a society; what a world! The extent of the corruption cries out from between the lines describing the “floor of alabaster, marble, pearl and precious stones.” Can a society live like this? Is this what political leadership should be? Is this the face of the ruling cadre of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces? Yet another party and more reveling [sic.], week after week? Is this the example which should be set? This is more than societal injustice crying out for correction; more than a loss of internal discipline and ability of self-restraint; deeper than a settling into wine and licentiousness. The very dedication to a life characterized principally by pleasure seeking, and on such a scale, is the reason for the decree of destruction.

He continues:

Another factor was involved here as well: not just prolonged eating and gluttony, but gluttony in the context of the banquet of such an evil person. This identification with the environment reflects an assimilation into the surrounding society; a moral neutrality regarding Ahashverosh’s world. However, even without this additional aspect - even if they had partaken in a similar banquet hosted by someone who was not evil - they still would have been deserving of destruction. Chazal’s message here is a sobering one, and it makes very stringent demands on the Jewish nation. Chazal’s words are pertinent and applicable to every generation, including our own, in our times and in our place. . . . To our great sorrow, a significant and serious decline has taken place in this area in recent years. The decline from a philosophy and lifestyle of creativity to a world of pleasure-seeking, of “partaking of the banquet,” is a regrettable process, for which we can only hope for God’s forgiveness. This is a process which is overtaking us and which is beginning to characterize our society. . . .

The question concerns our outlook and our aspirations. Do we see labor as a burden, such that our ideal is to minimize it and thereby to reach a maximal level of pleasure (reminiscent of the ideal which characterizes to such a great extent the culture which exists overseas in the western world, to which we are exposed and which influences us)? According to this view, work is boring and one should try to escape it. If this escape were in the direction of a Beit Midrash or a synagogue, it wouldn’t be so bad. But the escape is more often in the direction of clubs and pubs. People try to “forget” the world, and thereby to escape from constructive, creative work to a world of pleasure, desire and revelling. And we know only too well that this pleasure becomes an aspiration; the ideal is to keep work to a minimum and to raise the pleasure level to the maximum. This represents [a] problem with one’s value system. But in addition there is also a moral problem - from the point of view of social justice, which could not tolerate such a philosophy even if Israel ever reached a level of “luxury,” of a great abundance of everything, such that the state would no longer rely on the generosity of the Jews of other countries.

We have to ask ourselves honestly, both in Israel and in America, whether we have enthusiastically and wholeheartedly embraced the values of “Ahashverosh’s world.” Is the lifestyle for which we are serving as role models for our children, in addition to making it financially impossible for them to live a Modern Orthodox lifestyle, a corruption of Jewish values and ideals as R. Lichtenstein admonished thirty years ago? If this is the case, then for this we also have to do communal teshuvah.

**Pikuaḥ Nefesh: The Watchword of Judaism.**

In addition to the issues raised above, an authentic Jewish response to the Covid pandemic is to recognize and reaffirm the importance of *pikuaḥ nefesh* from a theological perspective as well as a halakhic perspective, as R. Soloveitchik so beautifully articulated in *Halakhic Man*:

The teachings of the Torah do not oppose the laws of life and reality, for were they to clash with this world and were they to negate the value of concrete, physiological–biological existence, then they would contain not mercy, lovingkindness and peace but vengeance and wrath. Even if there is only a doubtful possibility that a person’s life is in danger, one renders a lenient decision [to violate the Sabbath]. . . . This law that [saving a life] overrides all the commandments and its far-reaching effects are indicative of the high value which the halakhic viewpoint attributes to one’s earthly life—indeed they serve to confirm and nurture that value.24

According to R. Soloveitchik, this law is the “watchword of Judaism.”25 Being overly zealous and prudent in preventing the spread of Covid is not a halakhic compromise but an absolute halakhic mandate. It is tragic that many in the Orthodox community did not immediately grasp this basic halakhic truth.

Rabbi Meir Twersky, following in his grandfather’s footsteps, has been the most vigorous expositor of this position.

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25 Ibid., 34.
One who makes light of the mandate of pikuah nefesh is not only making light of one isolated halacha. Rather, he is guilty of distorting and perverting the entire Torah. His flippancy depicts the laws of the Torah not, “r’i,” as “merciful, kind and just,” but as vengeful and vicious. It goes without saying that such a distortion constitutes a chillul Hashem.

When the doctors with relevant expertise -- some of whom are observant, God-fearing Jews -- alerted us to the dangers of this extremely contagious, frightening disease, their warnings initially went unheeded, and we did not all immediately listen to their pleading. Baruch Hashem, we did merit that some gedolim and other rabbonim of stature acted to enforce social distancing with all due haste. It is, however, a matter of public knowledge that many prominent, leading rabbonim did not act in this manner. To compound matters, even when we belatedly heeded the calls for social distancing and isolation, we then characterized our compliance with these measures --regretfully!-- as a concession to outside entities instead of our complying with the mandate of pikuah nefesh. This (mis)characterization of our motives also caused distortion and perversion of the Torah.

Moreover, mischaracterizing our compliance with social distancing as a mere capitulation to the standards of outside entities had significant practical ramifications. The standards of all outside entities do not value life as absolutely as does the Torah. Tosafos (Yoma 85a) comment, “’You shall live through them and not die due to them’ [means] that we must under no circumstances allow for the death of a Jewish person.” Woe is to the eyes that saw, the ears that heard, what transpired in our midst. How can it be that others recognized the reality and hastened to save lives, while some of us were avoidant and resistant? How is it that some of us eventually had to be compelled by others to fulfill the Torah’s mandate of "v’chai bohem”? Isn’t our charge “lishmor v’la’asos -- to guard and carry out” mitzvos? What of the Torah’s depiction of a universal recognition (an organic result of scrupulous performance of, and fealty to, the mitzvos) that Hashem’s nation is a wise and discerning one, am chacham v’n’navon? This, too, has intensified the chillul Hashem. In addition to a perversion of Hashem’s Torah, there has been a perversion of the image of Hashem’s nation.

While nothing else compares to the gravity of chillul Hashem, we must not ignore other severe consequences of our failures on this front. The chillul Hashem stemmed from the flippant attitude adopted to an immense danger to life. Who can possibly measure the dreadful ramifications of this attitude? Only God Himself can truly know.

R. Twersky makes a number of salient points: First, the supreme importance of pikuah nefesh from a halakhic perspective; second, the fact that the Torah has a more expansive definition of what is considered pikuah nefesh than secular authorities; third, the distortion of the Torah which occurred because of not truly understanding the Torah perspective; and fourth, the hillul hashem that occurred. These are serious charges, but they highlight the theological position that unapologetically places pikuah nefesh at the top of the pyramid of Torah values.

Conclusion

What will a post-Covid Modern Orthodoxy look like? If we accept the theologies of Rabbi Soloveitchik, Sacks, and Lichtenstein that I presented here, we must be accepting and welcoming of people who are different from us and treat them as equal partners before God in our common mission to redeem and elevate the world. To this end, we must work to eliminate racism and strive for more economic equality and fairness in our increasingly interdependent world. Additionally, we must renew our covenant with nature by working to protect the environment and nature from further human-inflicted damage. We must approach the natural world with humility and respect, and we must work with the world’s citizens to be better prepared for future health and climate catastrophes.

On the communal level, a Modern Orthodox lifestyle must be much more economically viable. Some education, particularly in the older grades and high school, can take place online, allowing less frontal class time and more pooling of digital resources and curriculums. This will lessen the needs for physical space and its associated costs. The Orthodox community must make a concerted effort, guided by its rabbinic and lay leadership, to lessen conspicuous consumption, particularly with regard to the extravagance and number of semahot.

Life during the Covid pandemic has shown us that we can celebrate our semahot with fewer people and less extravagance and still commemorate and mark these important life cycle events. We should not miss the opportunity to exit from this pandemic with adjusted values. Although it may have been a government edict that limited the attendance and invitations of our semahot during Covid, we can use this opportunity to establish a new reasonable, self-imposed limit for our community.26

The prestige and authority of our rabbinic leaders will be enhanced by their concentration on our spiritual, intellectual, and ethical matters as opposed to areas outside their expertise, respecting the expertise of medical professionals in the critical halakhic area of pikuah nefesh. Covid will certainly impact the future practice of Judaism in many ways, and the challenge at hand is to use this opportunity to build a stronger, more committed, and economically viable Modern Orthodoxy for us and our children.

Written in honor of one of the shining lights of our generation, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (HaRav Yaakov Tzvi ben Liba), with the hope that he merits a speedy and complete recovery.

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26 We should learn from our Haredi brethren, many of whom have already taken this step both in Israel and in the U.S. See for example this recent initiative in the following article: https://vosizneias.com/2020/05/20/karlin-rebbe-presents-israeli-simcha-initiative-low-cost-minimalistic-weddings-one-singer/.