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Of sages, prophets, and Politics from the Pulpit

Rabbi Jason Herman

With Election Day tomorrow, rabbis once again face the question of whether to "talk politics" from the pulpit. In the past, rabbis have often felt compelled to speak about political issues when they understood the Torah to have a strong religious, moral, or spiritual voice on the given issue. And often, if an issue were too political, those whose views diverged from the rabbi's would object to his content, arguing that they come to *shul* to be inspired: "Rabbis should not be using their pulpit and power to advance their own personal political views." Others, including journalists and policy experts, would weigh in and urge rabbis not to speak about politics, since it is not their area of expertise. Of course, those who shared the rabbi's political viewpoint were happy to have their own positions validated with a stamp of approval from on High, and, of course, were just as glad for the rabbi to tell their political opponents in *shul* why they were wrong. In short, even when the rabbi felt the need to speak out, he was advised to proceed with caution. The decision to speak out, therefore, in these hyper-partisan times, is all the more loaded.

History notwithstanding, over the course of the past year, the nature of the issue has shifted, with the authors of a number of opinion pieces demanding that clergy speak out about particular issues. For example, one headline in a Christian publication read, "If your pastor isn't speaking about x, find a different church." By the same token, a prominent Jewish journalist, who has previously urged rabbis to avoid political topics due to their lack of expertise, penned a recent piece saying a particular rabbi (whom he particularly respects) would lose his moral authority if he were not to speak out regarding issues this journalist felt were important.

But there is something troubling about this whole scenario:, if you already know what you want the rabbi to say, why do you need the rabbi to say it? Indeed, the push for the rabbi's sermon seems to emanate from those who already know what they think the rabbi should say, implying that the congregant (or journalist) knows more than the rabbi. Is the rabbi just meant to be the congregants' mouthpiece, relaying to the other congregants what the first group already decided is right?

Perhaps there is a better way for us to look at the relationship between Torah (hence, rabbis) and politics, and establish some principles that will help all of us gain more from the Torah's wisdom, even in these divisive and challenging times.

The Torah Is a Political Document

First, we must recognize that the Torah is a political document. It is political in that it is a religious text that envisions how an ideal society should function, and by what rules a God-oriented society should be governed in order to be considered righteous and just. These are fundamentally political positions and the Torah has a clear view of them. Rabbis who have time and training with these texts understand the political import of the Torah's teachings and the need for them to be taught and shared.

Prophet *vs.* Rabbi

At the same time, when rabbis speak politics, they often cast themselves in the role of the prophets. The prophets chastised the people when they went against God's ways, particularly on issues of justice and treatment of society's most vulnerable. Prophets often did so at great personal cost. Jeremiah was thrown in jail for his message. To politically outspoken rabbis, this makes the prophet seem all the more courageous and admirable. Such a rabbi has a cause he is willing to fight for, and is brave enough to speak truth to power.

However, there is a downside to the prophetic mode. In the world of prophecy, the world is black and white. There is no room for ambiguity or dissent. The Bible does not present debates among the prophets, certainly not ones in which each side is upheld as valid. Indeed, a prophet who dissents is deemed a false prophet, and is liable to be killed. Prophets knew exactly what God wanted. Their visions were, relative to leaders in later generations, clear as day.

But the world of prophecy ended, and authority was handed over to the rabbis. And, with the decline of prophecy and the rise of rabbinic Judaism, we enter the world of *mahloket*, dispute, in which each side is upheld as legitimate; "*Elu ve-elu divrei Elokim Hayim*," "These and these are the words of the living God" (*Eruvin* 13b).The rabbis began seeing gray, recognizing that the Torah's ideals must be applied to reality, and that life does not often lend itself to idealization.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the prophetic voice is no longer necessary. It is - to condemn evil, speak out on behalf of the vulnerable and oppressed, and demand justice. But first and foremost, rabbis are rabbis, not prophets. In the words of the Talmud, "A sage is better than a prophet" (*Bava Batra* 12a).

The Torah Is Neither a Liberal nor a Conservative Text

Further complicating the picture, despite being a political text, the Torah is neither liberal nor conservative. In fact, the Torah contains both liberal and conservative values. The Rabbis of the Talmud regularly balanced these values with their opposites, as is often the case when one applies values to the realities of human existence. Thus, in some instances, where liberals might find support for their positions in the Written Torah, conservatives would likely find support in the Oral Law, and vice versa. Understanding the relationship between the two is extremely important to understanding the Torah's wisdom on political issues that are most burning today.

It is in the balancing of the Torah's liberal values with conservative realities and the Torah's conservative values with liberal realities, that the Sages reveal a realistic but faithful political vision.

To illustrate this principle, we will examine three examples.

Protection of the Borrower

The Written Torah is strongly concerned about protecting borrowers from the burdens of debt. Several *mitzvot* protect borrowers and enshrine this value. First, the Torah prohibits the collection of interest. One should extend a loan for the sake of helping, not to make a quick buck off another Jew's misfortune. Second, the Torah cancels all debts once every seven

years, so that the borrower can begin anew. Third, when a lender sues a borrower, the Rabbis understood the Torah to require that the case be heard only by experts in the Land of Israel, a significant burden for lenders outside of Israel who wanted to collect their debts. The values are clear: when it comes to a lending relationship, the Torah strengthens the hand of the borrower.

Yet the Sages of the Talmud recognized that the conditions of the Written Torah made lending a challenge for many people. The expression that appears throughout the Talmud is "*she-lo tin'ol delet bi-fnei lovin*," "to not lock the door before borrowers." The Talmud thus attempts to recalibrate the relationship between lender and borrower in a way that maintains the Torah's core values.

Furthermore, where the Torah prohibits interest, the Rabbis developed the *Heter Iska*, a legal reframing of this transaction, in which a lender is considered to be investing in the borrower's economic endeavors. The Rabbis understood that, without the incentive of interest, too few people would be willing to lend money. The *Heter Iska* might sound like a mere loophole, but it really is much more: it reframes the relationship between lender and borrower so as to allow the lending relationship to continue within the greater context of the Torah's core values. The Torah does not want lenders to profit from borrowers' misfortune, and, under the *Heter Iska*, the lender is transformed into an investor. The Oral Law thus radically transforms how prospective lenders see prospective borrowers.

With respect to the cancellation of loans during *Shemitah*, Hillel introduced the *Pruzbul*, a legal instrument by which creditors transfer the sums they are owed to a *beit din* (Jewish court). The court's loans, as compared to those of a private individual, are not cancelled during *Shemitah*, so the *beit din* can collect the debt originally owed to the borrower, on that party's behalf, even after *Shemitah* concludes. Is this just another loophole that undermines the Torah's intended protection of the borrower? Not exactly. By transferring the debt to the *beit din*, the lender cannot collect in the same fashion as before. The *beit din* needs to do so on behalf of the lender. This allows the *beit din* to examine the loans, look at the borrower's situation, and, if they determine that the debt has become oppressive and unjust, intercede on the borrower's behalf.

Finally, with respect to the requirement that lenders pursue their claims only in front of experts in Israel, the Talmud mandates that courts outside of Israel are agents of those experts in Israel. The lender who is not in Israel is therefore able to collect what is owed without hardship, and the Torah's serious take on lending is upheld.

If we imagine a contemporary discussion about public policy with respect to lending, we can easily envision a liberal rabbi citing all the means by which the Torah protects borrowers, and demanding that government policy do likewise: in other words, coming out in favor of the borrower. Conversely, we can also conceive of a politically conservative rabbi quoting ad nauseum the rabbinic dictum, "do not lock the door before potential borrowers." Neither oversimplified presentation, however, tells the full story.

Seeing the complex dynamic between the Written Law and the Oral Law in this case enhances our understanding of the Torah's values, as well as the realities that we confront when seeking to apply those values in the real world. It also gives us some insight into

political debate. Whereas one side might be arguing for values and ideals, the other might recognize that the real-world application of those ideals results in friction, as well as the need for the ideals themselves to be moderated to fit reality.

Death Penalty

A second case concerns the death penalty. Upon a strict reading of the Written Torah, one would come to a strong conservative conclusion that the Torah favors capital punishment. The Torah is in fact quite comfortable saying time and again that, in God's view, a person forfeits his or her right to live on this earth by transgressing any number of *mitzvot* - from murder, to various acts of sexual immorality, even to violating the Sabbath.

Yet, as is well known and as opponents of capital punishment love to quote, the Sages impose so many restrictions on capital cases that convicting anyone is essentially impossible. In fact, Tractate *Makkot* (7a) calls a court that executes someone as infrequently as once in 70 years a bloody court. In this case, the Written Law is conservative, and the Oral Torah is liberal.

But is that really the whole story? Again, we are moved to look deeper. The Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* (81b) suggests that *Hazal* were not as opposed to capital punishment as we had initially been led to believe. The Mishnah brings several cases in which a (guilty) person could not be convicted of a capital offense, yet *Hazal* prescribed a different sentence: putting the guilty party in a jail and feeding him or her a diet consisting almost entirely of barley, effectively killing the guilty party. *Hazal* thereby carry out the death sentence, but in a very passive way.

What, then, is all the fuss about bloody courts? I posit that *Hazal* are making a profound theological statement. To convict someone according to Torah law is to say that it is God's view that this person should die. God certainly indicates that some actions lead to a death warrant. Nonetheless, when it comes to matters of life and death, *Hazal* are not about to put themselves in God's place. Human life is so sacred that we fallible humans should never presume that God wants this person to die. We may, however, use our own human judgment to determine that we can't keep a particular person alive, leading to the passive death sentence. In doing so, we are not speaking for God. We recognize our fallibility.

Peah

In its concern for the poor, the Torah requires that farmers leave the corners of their fields for the poor. This land actually belongs to the poor and gives them the dignity of being able to work a bit of their own land. One would therefore think that the field owner would not be permitted to block the poor person's access to the corners of the fields, and that doing so would be a violation of the Torah's values and concern for the poor. Yet the Sages understood that people would not want the poor to be a constant presence on their property, and might therefore be at risk of not leaving the corner for the poor at all. The Mishnah (*Peah* 4:5) prescribes certain set times during the day when the poor are permitted to collect from the corner. Again, one might imagine a liberal arguing that the Torah prioritizes providing for the poor, and that doing so must be continual. The conservative would point to the Mishnah and say that the provision has legitimate limitations, and guidelines within which the poor have ample room to operate.

Conclusion

The examples above show a more effective means of not only communicating the Torah's values, but also how those values become integrated into the real world. Rabbis are better being Rabbis than prophets, or, more cynically, players on a political team. Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks summarized the distinction as follows:

> The prophets have always received a better press than the rabbis, for an obvious reason. They were the first and greatest social critics, fearless in speaking truth to power, unafraid to confront corrupt kings and indolent priests, tireless in their call to integrity and justice. Their success was, however, limited. In fact, with the sole exception of Jonah, the only prophet sent to a Gentile city, we know of none who actually brought about social transformation. The rabbis did succeed... The prophets spoke poetry, the rabbis prose; but the rabbis succeeded where even the greatest of the prophets failed. When it comes to realizing high ideals among ordinary human beings, choose non-utopian solutions. They are more effective, and more humane. (*The Home We Build Together*, 177-8)

To answer the question, then, Should rabbis speak politics from the pulpit? Yes, but they are most effective doing so as sages, not prophets, balancing Written and Oral Torah, liberal and conservative values and realities, in a realistic, non-utopian manner. Rabbis should speak as sages, which is to speak with knowledge of fallibility, from a decidedly human perspective, in which space is allowed for disagreement and divergent opinions. By so doing, in divisive times, rabbis can inspire us to live the Torah's values in a manner that is not only effective, but ultimately most civil and humane.

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Peshat and Beyond: How Hasidic Masters Read the Torah

Batya Hefter

In this article, I have three objectives. First, I will illustrate how the hasidic masters read the narratives in the Torah as the unfolding process of *tikkun ha-middot*, the refinement of human-divine character traits. Isaac will be a case in point. Second, following a method that I refer to as "*peshat* and beyond," I will show how these insights, despite their apparently operating on a level beyond *peshat*, are in fact supported by a close reading of the text. Finally, I contend that the case of Isaac is relevant not only to biblical *parshanut* but also to the challenges of our everyday lives.

The hasidic tradition views the Torah as revealing the "inner life of God." This life is comprised of divine characteristics that have analogous human characteristics: anger, love, jealousy, judgment, perfectionism, compassion, mercy, etc. As these divine traits enter the human realm, they become confused and diminished by human imperfections such as desire, personal agenda, and self-interest, and are therefore in need of *tikkun*, repair. The narratives in the Torah are understood to be an unfolding of how God's personality can be known to us. Each patriarch, for example, is perceived as embodying a specific divine trait. The travails of their lives coincide with an inward journey, as each refines his character, following an individual path towards *tikkun*. In so doing, each reveals the godly aspect of his own particular character. Framed in this way, *tikkun ha-middot* extends beyond a personal journey of perfection, and becomes symbolic of a divine drama.

Reading the Torah through a Hasidic Lens

According to the hasidic tradition, the core personality trait and religious orientation that personifies Isaac is *gevurah*, or restraint, which is associated with the emotion of *yirah*, fear of acting in a way that contravenes the will of God. This fear results in a strict devotion to the law, *din*.[1] This pairing of *gevurah* and *yirah* is powerfully portrayed by the familiar midrashic formulation that the Torah was given "from the mouth of the *Gevurah.*" Read symbolically, this means that law was given by God's quality of restraint. While the narratives in the Torah show how Isaac managed to refine his attribute of *gevurah*, we will see how excessive devotion to this trait could have brought about his downfall, instead of his *tikkun*.

Finally, R. Yaakov Leiner, in his work *Beit Yaakov*, teaches that "the entire creation of the world is hinted to within the soul of a human being" (*Commentary to Genesis*, 15), echoing the Talmudic teaching that a human being is a microcosm of the universe.

The assumption of the Hasidic tradition is that the human soul is a reflection of the divine soul, "an actual piece of God" (*Tanya* 1:2), and God is revealed through the human personality and image.[2]

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[1] *Peri Tzadik Lekh Lekha; Mei ha-Shiloah, Vayehi,* s.v. sikel et yadav*; Beit Yaakov, Toldot, 3.*

[2] On the verse 'Through my flesh I shall perceive God" (Job 19:26), *Shelah ha-Kadosh* says that "the reality of God becomes known and revealed through the human personality and image." .

Seen in this broader context, the significance of *tikkun ha-middot* is more than the refinement of personal character traits. Successfully achieved, the human being is a vehicle to reveal God's traits. In this case, Isaac is a vehicle to reveal God's characteristic of *gevurah*. With these assumptions laid out, let's turn to the narrative.

The Case of Isaac

A dreadful tremor shook Isaac to his core. Instead of blessing Esau, his eldest son, he had just unwittingly blessed Jacob, the younger brother. How had this come to be?

The story begins when Isaac, old and with failing vision, summons Esau and asks him to prepare food so that he may bless his firstborn before his dies. Jacob disguises himself as Esau, and deceives his father in order to obtain the blessings. Blind and unsure who stands before him, Isaac enlists his other senses to help him recognize whether it is Esau or Jacob. He attentively inclines his ear to Jacob's voice and he feels the texture of his skin. "The voice is the voice of Jacob," he remarks, puzzled, "but the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22). Still uncertain, Isaac inquiries, "Are you *really* my son Esau" (27:24)? Jacob responds, "I am" (27:24). Isaac asks to be kissed. As his son draws near, he breathes in the smell of his clothes. The fragrance, "like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed" (27:27), fills his senses; he is intoxicated, transported. In this elevated state, lyrical phrases of dew, wheat, wine, strength, and leadership flow freely from Isaac's lips to the son who stands before him. The words of blessing subside, and Jacob takes leave. Just as he exits, Esau, the intended son, enters and demands his blessing. Isaac then begins to grasp his terrible mistake:

> Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him." (27:33)

Isaac is bewildered and shaken, as the gravity of the incident sinks in. And then, suddenly, a complete reversal occurs. He affirms his action and, unexpectedly yet unequivocally, declares: "Now he must remain blessed!" (27:33)

How are we to understand the fact that Isaac is deeply grieved by Jacob's deception, yet reaffirms his blessing in almost the same breath? What accounts for Isaac's abrupt reversal from shock and inner turmoil to benign acceptance? I suggest an answer based primarily on the teachings of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica in his *Mei ha-Shiloah*, and his son, R. Yaakov Leiner, in his *Beit Yaakov*. These works offer a unique lens through which to read our biblical narrative. Although written over 150 years ago, their approach resonates strongly with the modern student of Bible and contemporary religious seeker.

The Patriarchs as Archetypes of *Middot*

In *Be-Sod ha-Yahid Ve-hayahad*, (pg. 199), R. Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik writes:

> The character traits of God descend to the lower world and become cloaked in the personalities of the great figures of Israel, the sages of our tradition. From within the crevices of their souls, a wondrous light shines, splintering into an abundance of colors. They become the dwelling place for the divine presence, their very

> personalities emanate beauty from above and spread a ray of something divine… the great man is sanctified, so that he become a (holy) vessel which can actualize the potential of this holiness… he becomes its symbol and its banner.[3]

The Rav is reiterating the traditional kabbalistic idea that God's *middot* descend to our world and become known to us through the souls of great Jewish figures. The Rebbe of Slonim suggests similarly that the world of *tikkun* begins with the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, who represent two foundational personality traits, which are also divine traits.[4]

Abraham, following this approach, symbolizes universal, unconditional love, the divine attribute known as *hesed.* Abraham has an expansive and inclusive nature; he desires to give to all. This trait is evident as he welcomes strangers and argues on behalf of the wicked people of Sodom. The primary flaw of his boundless *hesed* is that he gives indiscriminately, without regard to whether the receiver is worthy or interested in receiving. In order for his efforts to be sustaining, Abraham must learn to be more discerning in his giving. The hasidic masters thus understand the events in Abraham's life as a series of separations intended to counteract the boundless giving and inclusiveness of Abraham's character: he separates from his birthplace, parents, siblings, and nephew Lot, from his allies via circumcision, which permanently marks him as different, and from his beloved son, Isaac, at the *akeidah.* With each separation, Abraham refines and consolidates his expansive *hesed* until he is able to focus it on the deserving few.

The *Middah* of Isaac

Isaac, on the other hand, as noted, is characterized by *yirah* and *gevurah*, which are expressed by stubborn adherence to law. If we follow the arc of Isaac's life, we see that in many ways, he can be contrasted with Abraham. His father is portrayed as a man of vision and action who leaves behind all that is familiar to him, and boldly ventures out on a new and uncertain life. He is an influential and charismatic leader who forges alliances, whether with Ephron the Hittite, Malki-Tzedek, or the King of Sodom. His expansive nature attracts people to him. Isaac is of a decidedly different nature.
He appears to be less of a man of vision and initiative. Isaac does not do the unexpected. He avoids all uncharted territory, and is very intentional. Ironically, this means that Isaac consciously follows the proven path of his father before him. Digging wells in the biblical narrative often symbolizes forging new territory; Abraham, not surprisingly, was a digger of new wells. But, unlike his father, Isaac redigs and reopens the very same wells, giving them the names his father had already given. Abraham forges new territory; Isaac consolidates. Abraham takes chances; Isaac seeks certainty.[5]

The Sages bring another example that portrays Isaac's actions as more conservative and cautious than his father's. According to the midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 39:16), Abraham inspired many converts to share his love of God and newly discovered truth. However, when he died,

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[3] My translation.

[4] *Netivot Shalom, Taharat ha-Middot,* 1:4.

[5] *Beit Yaakov, Toldot,* 3.

deprived of his compelling presence, these people reverted to their previous habits (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 29). R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin teaches that Isaac, in contradistinction to his father, would not even consider taking a questionable candidate under his wing.[6] Abraham opened his arms to the world, but that love was not sustainable. Isaac was discerning. He focused his energy on a deserving few, and the result of his restrained effort was enduring (*Peri Tzadik, Lekh Lekha 9).*

Understanding Isaac

We cannot escape the circumstances of our birth, or many of our core experiences. Without our bidding, they shape our personalities and provide the lenses through which we see and interact with the world. R. Yaakov Leiner teaches that our personal circumstances are the windows through which we perceive God, each of us according to our specific inclinations (*Beit Yaakov, Genesis* 41).

The circumstances surrounding Isaac's birth are striking. When God tells Abraham in his old age that he will have a child, Sarah laughs in disbelief: "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment, with my husband so old?" (Gen. 18:12) The rabbinic imagination further inflates this biological impossibility by claiming that not only did Sarah no longer menstruate, but she actually had no womb. One could say, as does R. Mordekhai Yosef, that in some sense it was really God who gave birth to Isaac.[7]

The picture that emerges from Izbica-Radzyn is that Isaac, having experienced the *akeidah*, perceives his life as a gift from God. He takes nothing for granted. Having been bound on the altar and had his life teeter on the edge of a knife, Isaac owes his life to God, who withdrew his father's hand. He has known the terror of not-being. Isaac lives conscious of the transcendent space where not-being becomes being. He knows God as the one who traverses that space to give life. Having experienced total dependence on God, it is natural for Isaac to defer to God. His religious life is to be devoted to fulfill God's command with certainty. Living in this state, his existence is testimony to God's command. Thus, Isaac seeks to know that each gesture of his life is aligned with God's command. Constantly in conscious awareness of "The Other," the law-giving God who resides outside of himself, Isaac is naturally self-abnegating. He personifies devotion to the law.

With this reading of the *akeidah* as the defining experience of Isaac's life, we can understand R. Mordekhai Yosef's inclination to interpret Isaac's determination to bless Esau, his eldest son.

Though Jacob may have been the more deserving son, Isaac is committed to blessing Esau because he is the firstborn. Placing aside the promptings of intuition, divested of all self-interest, Isaac submits himself before the law in a non-discriminate way. "Let the law pierce the mountain" (*Sanhedrin* 6b). Come what may, God has determined that Esau is the first born, and Isaac, for his part, must fulfill the law and bless Esau.

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[6] Much like Shammai (*Shabbat* 31a) and Rabban Gamliel (*Berakhot* 28a).

[7] *Mei ha-Shiloah, Vayera*, s.v. Va-tehahesh Sarah. *Beit Yaakov, Toldot 3.*

But despite Isaac's intentions, Jacob enters the tent, deceives his father, and carries off the blessing that was meant for Esau. Esau's presence reveals Isaac's failure to execute the law. His initial response is utter shock; he "was seized with very violent trembling. Who was it then," he demands, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!" (27:33)

Based on what we presented above about the characteristic of Isaac, I would suggest that the following occurred in the space between Isaac's violent trembling and his acquiescence to confirm the blessing. As the words of blessing flowed through his mouth, an altered state of being took hold of Isaac. His hesitations and doubts about whom he was blessing abated as he became a free-flowing, unobstructed conduit of God's words to bless the one before him. When however, Esau entered to demand his due, he was abruptly forced out of his altered state of mind and, in a flash, Isaac's conscious mind was restored. He was seized with a great trembling.

What rests at the depths of Isaac's violent trembling? Isaac has failed to faithfully carry out the law of blessing his eldest son. And since devotion to the law is the only path he knows to be true, his whole way of being in the world stands challenged. In that moment, he must overcome the temptation to hold fast to his known path and transcend the urge to deny what he experienced. This was in fact one of Jacob's fears when he undertook to act out his mother's plan: "I shall… bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing" (27:12).

The illumination that occurs at this pivotal moment in Isaac's life, then, is a transformative moment leading to a *tikkun* in his *middah* of *gevurah*, adherence to *din*. What allows him to relinquish control and entertain a way of seeing otherwise?

R. Leiner has an instructive teaching which outlines the requirements for *tikkun ha-middot:* "There is no *middah* that has any intrinsic value of its own other than what the Holy One Blessed be He has apportioned" (*Beit Yaakov, Vayehi* 6). *Middot* are only limited pieces of the whole divine "personality." As such, clinging rigidly to only one *middah* is a distortion, since it disregards the larger picture. Flexibility is the key to *tikkun*.

The Hebrew translation of the word *middah* means not only characteristic, but also measure, or portion. As such, it refracts and reflects into this world a measure: a portion of God's infinite light, but not all of it. Life is fluid, and so are God's ways of running the world. When God's infinite light shifts course and expresses His will via another *middah,* one must be attuned to the shifting tides and be able to make a change.

Reading this biblical story through this hasidic lens, the crucial question becomes: can Isaac realize the dynamic nature of God in the world? Can he recognize the limitations of his own path?

A central pillar in Izbica-Radzyn thought is that while God is the infinite source of life, there are two different paths to access that source. There is the Halakhah, and there is the will of God, and these two paths are not equivalent.[8] The path to this source which God imparted to

[8] This is considered one of the antinomian aspects of Izbica. This one-sided impression, however, is often misunderstood as supporting or leading to antinomianism. For discussion of this point see *Wisdom of the Heart*,

Isaac is symbolized by rigid adherence to the Halakhah. Restrained and focused, this path embodies constancy and certainty; one devotes himself consciously to doing the right thing. However, we know that our intellects and conscious minds are limited.

The alternative path demands constant and vigilant attunement to the will of God. Access to this much more elusive route requires one to be continually receptive to the flow and vicissitudes of God's will. Even though one knew the law yesterday, one must nevertheless constantly look towards God, being attentive in seeking to determine "which way the law may shift today" (*Mei ha-Shiloah*, *Vayeshev*, s.v. *Va-yeishev Yaakov*). Attuned to the living and dynamic nature of God, this is considered the superior path of enlightenment.

With this understanding in hand, we return to ask what happened in the inner hollows of Isaac's world to allow this shift to occur? How he was able to transcend the law, align himself with God's will, and bless Jacob?

The Limitations of Law

Consciously, Isaac would not be able to make this paradigmatic shift. But there are other ways in which God communicates. In the words of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica, in this story, "God guided him beyond his conscious awareness."

Isaac comes to realize that this blessing, given by bypassing his consciousness, was in fact an act in the service of God. Through his intuitive faculty, ex-post facto Isaac understood that God had been acting through him. While he had never before relied on intuition as a trustworthy source of knowledge, he was brought to the realization that there is another path. The trembling settles as Isaac's experience moves to his conscious mind. Isaac knows that God spoke through him and intended for Jacob to receive the blessing. And so, when Isaac utters the words "he must remain blessed," he shifts from faithfulness to the law to faithfulness to God.[9] This is the transformation of Isaac's *middah.*

Isaac's Blindness

The physical detail which opens our narrative, "And Isaac was old, his eyes were too dim to see" (27:1) is viewed by R. Leiner as the key that opens the door to Isaac's transformation.

Normally we associate sight with clarity and blindness with ignorance. R. Leiner turns this around. Paradoxically, Isaac only perceives the truth in his blindness. Sight, in this reading, is associated with ego-consciousness and intellectual efforts. It is connected with human activity and impact, which only estimate the truth and, in this case, miss the truth.

Ora Wiskind-Elper, pg. XX, and unpublished MA thesis, Herzl Hefter, *Reality and Illusion: A Study in the Religious Phenomenology of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Izbitz*, pgs. 7-8.

[9] Importantly, Isaac does not initiate extra-legal behavior; rather, he recognizes it ex-post facto. As pointed out in the previous footnote, R. Mordekhai Yosef and R. Yaakov Leiner are well aware that this approach of the superiority of the will of God may yield antinomian behavior. See *Mei ha-Shiloah, Vayeshev,* s.v. *Vayeishev Yaakov.*

Being blind and cut off from the clarity of the intellect actually allows the person to access a deeper truth. In his words, "the essence of truth and certainty occurs when one relinquishes his control and turns his face towards God; only then can one be receptive of abundance that has no limit" (*Beit Yaakov, Toldot,* 37). When we are blind to the outside world, we can turn our interior eye towards God.

The extraordinary shift that Isaac was able to make, which led to his *tikkun,* was to put a limit on his restraining nature. Paradoxically, he had to restrain his natural tendency for control and law in order to be receptive to the divine message. In short, he restrains his restraint.

Making it Personal

According to this reading, Abraham is every person and Isaac is every person, and in this way the Torah is eternal. In other words, the eternal value and meaning of the Torah is that the personalities in the Torah resonate within the soul of each of us.

How, then, can this narrative be read on a personal level? We may find within ourselves these very God-given qualities of restraint, self-control, and fear that we find in the personality of Isaac, or perhaps, the expansiveness, love, and indiscriminate compassion of Abraham. Most likely, if we look deeply, we find these tendencies to be manifest in different degrees at different times.

To be on the path of *tikkun ha-middot* is a lifelong investment of watchful self-reflection and thoughtful receptivity. It is to live in a state in which one is conscious and attuned, to have his antennae up and be ready to acknowledge when God has removed his "light" from one *middah* and now shines His light through another *middah*. It requires great flexibility and not a small amount of faith to relinquish control of our predispositions.

Stubbornly, too often we hold fast to what we know and follow the most familiar path. Correct as that approach may be at times, it is nevertheless a *middah*, literally, only a measurement of truth. At times, according to these hasidic masters, what is needed is a shift, requiring a different mode of action or *middah*. On this approach, if, when it is no longer God's directive, one does not have the flexibility to adjust but clings to one's familiar *middah*, then one is worshipping one's self and not God.

Of course, no one has a direct line to God and, more often than not, we are not at all sure when to change course. However, that does not mean that we are absolved from doing our best to refine ourselves. Through trial and error, we make progress. According to these masters, if our efforts are sincere, we are gifted with a higher level of attunement, and the process continues.

It is my hope that inspired by Isaac, when we are called upon to recognize the flaws and limitations of our own *middot*, we will have the faith and inner resolve to turn our gaze inward. Upon reflection, may we be receptive to change so that we too "shall surely be blessed."

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Four Days of Kristallnacht in Hessen

Stephen Denker

These past six years, I have been helping my son-in-law's father, Bert Katz, write his memoirs about his home in Nentershausen, a small rural village in the State of Hessen near the geographic center of Germany. In the Fall of 1940, when Bert's family fled Germany to safety, Nentershausen had fewer than 700 residents. His family escaped Germany through the Soviet Union, Japan and across the Pacific Ocean to Quito, Ecuador. He was 10 years old.

Although many historians have focused on the events that occurred on the night of November 9, 1938, the *Kristallnacht* pogroms were neither one twenty-four-hour event nor confined to cities. *Kristallnacht* began earlier than in other places in the smaller villages of Hessen, and extended over the four days of November 7-10, 1938. [Alan Steinweis, *Kristallnacht* 1938, Harvard University Press, 2009.]

Throughout Germany, violence erupted in hundreds of communities, the vast majority of them small villages with only a handful of Jews. The list of places in which pogroms occurred includes many unknown even to experienced scholars of German history — villages such as Nentershausen. In all these small villages, Germans were prepared to inflict violence upon their Jewish neighbors. The number of rural Jewish families had dwindled since the Nazis had come to power. Unfortunately for the few who remained, they and their small synagogues were easy targets on *Kristallnacht.*

The pretext to initiate the pogroms was the assassination attempt on the German diplomat Vom Rath in Paris. In "response," Nazi thugs set fire and destroyed synagogues and looted Jewish-owned stores and homes. Many Jews were terrorized or beaten, and some were even murdered. In the aftermath of the pogroms, more than 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps, including Bert Katz' father, Willy.

The first destructions occurred late in the evening on November 7, in Kassel. Prompted by a local Nazi official, the riot began when a mob, mostly made up of SA and SS members, broke into and destroyed a Jewish restaurant, then a synagogue, and then some twenty Jewish businesses.

The next night, November 8, 24 small Hessen villages, including Nentershausen, were also the scenes of violence. Mobs led by Nazis in the village entered, looted, and desecrated—but did not destroy—the Nentershausen Synagogue. The prayer sanctuary was ransacked, its contents thrown out into the street. Torah scrolls and sacred books were burned.

The vandals would not set fire to the building itself, as that would jeopardize neighbouring Christian-owned buildings. Instead, they tried to collapse the entire building by sawing through its supporting central column. However, their motorized saw stalled and its blade became stuck during the attempt. With their goal unrealized, the vandals fled, fearing the building would collapse on them.

After trashing the synagogue and desecrating its religious contents, the mob continued their destruction in Jewish homes. They looted and trashed both the Katz' living quarters and their

shoe shop. Inside the Katz living space, the dining room and the kitchen were smashed. The mob looted crystal, pots and dishes. Even wet laundry was stolen.

The mob leader and instigator was the local Ortsgruppenleiter (Nazi Leader) Konrad Raub (whose surname, ironically, means "loot" in German). Raub commanded blacksmith Karl Gebhardt and house-painter Heinrich Windedemuth to engage in the robbing and pillaging, but both declined—"*They would not join such a thing*!"

Earlier in the morning that terrible day, Georg Wettich had boasted to shoemaker Heinrich Stein—who himself did not participate in the violence—that, "*In the evening it would go badly for the Jews."* While leading the plundering of the Katz' home, Wettich opened the drawers of Willy's business desk. Among other objects, he took the shoe business record book and loudly declared in Stein's presence that he would now see "*who had done business with the Jew, Katz*."

The Katz family sought refuge in the attic while the mob looted the house and shoe shop below. Behind the door on the top of the stairs, the family piled furniture and other heavy items. The looters discussed setting the house afire. Had they gone through with the plan, the hiding place would not have helped much. Bert was terrified, recalling a massive barn fire he had seen when he was six years old. Fortunately the mob was talked out of it by their neighbors, whom Bert believes knew that the family was hiding inside the house.

To protect his family in the attic against harm and ensure the mob would not change their mind, Willy went out of the house with his four-year-old twin sons. Once outside, he was kicked by one of his own apprentice shoemakers, Justus Kesten, who also had played a leading role in looting the synagogue, and was beaten by the mob despite the neighbors' protests.

Mayor Schwanz, Nentershausen Police Sergeant Zimmermann, and several neighbors were brave men, especially for 1938 Nazi Germany. They were not afraid to help the distressed Nentershausen Jewish family. (Earlier, the Nazis had created new official police hierarchies and roles throughout Germany. Local police, even those in Nentershausen, were officially under national Nazi command, including Zimmermann himself.)

In his reparations affidavit, Willy wrote, "*That we came away with life itself, we owe to Mayor Schwanz, the shoemaker Ewald Moeller and the carpenter Johann Bergling. Herr Schwanz was so ashamed* [sic] *about this painful act of vandalism to our home and to our furniture he sent a carpenter, who made enough makeshift repairs of our furniture for us to use."*

The day after the pogrom, Zimmermann recovered the shoes that had been stolen during the lootings. The local Nazi Leader Konrad Raub, also a shoemaker and a business competitor of Willy, had over 120 pairs of stolen shoes and other stolen shoe-making equipment in his possession. (Self-aggrandizing theft was a common thread in *Kristallnacht* looting.) They were seized and delivered to the Mayor's office, then returned to Willy.

After *Kristallnacht* in Nentershausen, Bert Katz' parents thought they would be safer in a large city. His father had relatives living in Frankfurt, but did not have an automobile to travel there. Willy therefore contacted his second cousin Norbert Bloch, who had his own

car. Bloch came and drove the family to Frankfurt during the night of November 9, an action which saved his life. Later Bloch found out that he was on a Nazi list of persons to be arrested and murdered on *Kristallnacht,* but the authorities could not find him since he was away rescuing family members.

As the Katz family embarked on their drive to Frankfurt, little did they suspect that *Kristallnacht* would precede them. Bert vividly remembers their family's great shock and grief when they arrived in Frankfurt on the morning of November 10 seeking safety, and instead saw synagogues burning.

Willy decided to return to Nentershausen alone. But close to home, he was recognized and arrested at the railway station and taken to Kassel. From there he was transported to Konzentrationslager, Buchenwald (60 miles east of Nentershausen) and imprisoned. Willy was held there from November 12, 1938 until December 10, 1938. He was released earlier than most prisoners since he had served with distinction and honor in WWI, receiving medals for his valor. When he was released, he was warned that he should leave Germany as soon as possible. "*If he did not, he could be re-arrested. He would not leave Buchenwald alive again.*"

Despite their diminishing numbers, Jewish community life in Nentershausen continued. Then on May 30, 1942, the last remaining Jews in Nentershausen were taken to Kassel. From there they were transported on June 1, 1942 to the Majdanek death camp.

At Peace

After WWII, Willy returned to Nentershausen: to the place he was born and raised, had married and had started a family.

Many long years ago, local farmers had tried to persuade and reassure him, "*Willy, stay here, it will not last long with Adolf, nothing is as bad as it looks.*" But it was.

In 1980, at the age of 82 and living in Israel, Willy made his last visit to Nentershausen. He and his wife Martha still had Christian neighbors and friends in Nentershausen. "*They were good people, very good people.*"

Of course, he had not forgotten who had been the the ringleaders and looters during *Kristallnacht.* He still could recall them all by name. School classmates of Willy had included Konrad Raub. Willy visited the former local Nazi leader, who had lost his only son in WWII, on his deathbed. They spoke for the last time without bitterness.

Back in his Petah Tikvah living room, Willy smiled a little. "*We all have to thank Adolf. I would have preferred to have stayed in Nentershausen, surrounded by sons and grandsons and great-grandsons, speaking the familiar local Hessian dialect.*"

A thousand memories, good and bad, still bound Willy to the birthplace where he knew every tree, every lane and every family. The graves of his mother, grandparents, schoolmates and childhood friends are all in Nentershausen. Nentershausen was his home.

The Nentershausen Synagogue Restored

In her 2007 book *Synagogen und Jüdische Rituelle Tauchbäder in Hessen* (Synagogues and Jewish Ritual Baths in Hessen), Thea Altara counted the number of synagogues that survived *Kristallnacht*. In the early 1930s there had been 439 synagogues in the State of Hessen. Of these, 40 percent were destroyed during the *Kristallnacht* pogroms, 16 percent were demolished after 1945, and only 44 percent of the synagogue buildings still exist, but in degradation or another use.

The Nentershausen Synagogue building had survived, but could no longer be used. Axes had obliterated the gold inscription on the wooden lintel above the Torah Ark. Today this desecrated lintel is on permanent display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

After *Kristallnacht*, local resident Johannes Krause bought the synagogue building from the Municipality together with the adjacent *Hirtenhaus* (shepherd house) for 600 Reichsmarks. He converted the former synagogue into a garage for his trucks, cutting large openings in the street-side of the building to allow the large vehicles to move in and out. His family still owns the land today.

In 1987 the Nentershausen Synagogue building was sold for one Deutsche mark, dismantled, and moved to the Freilichtmuseum Hessenpark (Hessenpark Open-Air Museum) in Neu-Anspach, a city north of Frankfurt. Founded in 1974, Hessenpark is a full-scale re-creation of rural Hessian villages, with grounds that include over 100 original buildings which have been dismantled from their original locations and rebuilt there.

On July 16, 1996, the reconstructed Nentershausen Synagogue with its original 1925 decorations, colors, furnishings and *Mikvah* was rededicated. The dedication ceremony took place in the presence of many prominent German government and religious dignitaries.

The Hessenpark leadership used the opportunity to issue a mutual challenge:

> *Today this small, reconstructed synagogue bears testimony to the Jewish life that once existed before the pogroms of the Nazi era. Although it is in its original form but not used as intended, it will help others learn about the reasons that led to this diminished reality.*
>
> *To prevent the disgrace of repetition, we want to keep alive in our memory that the dark epoch in German history is never forgotten. We want to keep alive in our memory, in our historical consciousness, to learn from yesterday for today and for tomorrow. We want to keep alive the memory to help us handle the dark periods of our history here. Jews had lived in Nentershausen nearly 300 years.*
>
> *And what about today? Responsibility remains. We cannot escape our history. We have to acknowledge it. What to do? There must be a lively dialogue with the Jewish people. We must accept our responsibility for the Jewish people, for the people of Israel.*
>
> *We also need solidarity with all working to remove persecution. We must not retreat into a comfortable private and silent life when injustice occurs. We have a special responsibility. We must defend against any injustice, against any cruelty. More so after the Holocaust no one is allowed to stand on the sidelines when humanity is at stake. We must always be alert*

for the bad things that can happen again. The evil spirit is still stirring again in many corners.

If we stand up, then this day of remembrance of the horror, grief and shame can better be a day of promise.

The construction of this humble, beautiful synagogue in Hessenpark is a modest but important contribution to memory, to exhortation, to knowledge and to hope.

Formerly a university professor, Stephen Denker has been researching family histories since 2000. He has published five history and genealogy books. His book, The Nentershausen Synagogue, published in 2016, is for sale in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum bookshop.