

## SOME JEWISH IDEAS THAT HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD

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One of the traditional scriptural readings for the Holy Day of Rosh Hashana (The New Year) is the so-called story of the "Akayda". This story which is found in the Book of Genesis tells us that God commanded Abraham, the founder of Judaism, to take his beloved son, Isaac, and sacrifice him at the top of a certain mountain. You are all familiar with this story. Abraham makes the long journey to the mountain, he climbs it with his son, and after binding the boy on the altar, he raises his knife prepared to perform God's puzzling command. At the critical moment, the "Angel (or Messenger) of God" appears, and he informs Abraham that since he has demonstrated such profound faith in God, God will permit him to substitute a ram as the sacrificial offering. Indeed, the "Angel" provides the ram on the spot, as if this were a part of the original intention.

As a rule, most Rabbis interpret this biblical story with emphasis on the extreme faith of Abraham, who, the Rabbis say, was convinced that God would not take his son and the great sacrifice of his direct heir would not have to be made. The story, however, permits other interpretations, and this Rabbi favors a much different view of it.

Some scholars have suggested that the story must properly be understood as a transition story, that is, as a way of teaching that God does not desire the sacrifice of the "ben yahid, the only son", but will instead accept the offering of an animal. This story, these scholars tell us, is the way the Hebrews negotiated a revolutionary change from human sacrifice, which was the norm at the time, to animal sacrifice.

In his famous work, "The Golden Bough", Sir James George Frazer, writes, "Among the Semites of Western Asia the king, in a time of national danger sometimes gave his own son called Jeoud ("only begotten") dressed him in royal robes and sacrificed him upon upon an altar in a time of war, when the country was in great danger from the enemy". Frazer goes on to say, "When the King of Moab was besieged by the Israelites and hard beset, he took his eldest son, who should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall". The Bible tells us that the Israelites and their allies, witnessing this ultimate sacrifice, ended their siege of the Moabite city.

Thus we see that the "Akayda" story is tied in with an ancient semitic practice where the sacrifice of the "eldest son" (the first born) or the "only son" was deemed to have a special value in propitiating the deity. The Abrahamic story teaches us, "not this (human sacrifice), but this (animal sacrifice)". This was indeed a radical departure from an ancient and deep rooted practice amongst the peoples of that part of the world (and, as Fraser tells us, elsewhere as well). This new teaching is one of the ways in which Jews have changed the world.

Later on in Jewish history, the Hebrew Prophets taught that God did not desire the sacrifice of animals either. In a time when the Canaanites regularly sacrificed their sons to the god Moloch, Micah taught (ch 6:6 ff), "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, With calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, With ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?..." Then comes the radical answer. "It has been told of thee, O man what is good, And what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God". It has been said that

\* emphasis by this writer

this is the greatest definition of true religion ever made. It is the more remarkable that it was made 2700 years ago in a place and time when superstitious rituals and elaborate magic were the staples of religious practice.

#### ETHICAL MONOTHEISM-Not Simply Monotheism

One of the problems of polytheism for humans seeking a rational explanation of the world is that it is impossible to determine what the gods want from humankind (see Micah above). A pathetic prayer has been discovered by archaeologists in ancient Mesopotamia (Babylonia) which describes the profound sense of guilt of the worshipper who prays to many gods asking forgiveness for ritualistic omissions and commissions. Then the tablet concludes, "And may all the many gods of which I am unaware forgive me for all the sins I have committed of which I am unaware". How could life have a reasonable certainty in such a polytheistic environment?

Inevitably, then, the people turned to those who by magical means presumably could control the gods and ward off divinely sent punishment. Humans could not hope to escape the curse of magic unless they could otherwise escape the curses of many gods.

One of the values of monotheism, the belief in one God, is that it teaches that there are not conflicting divine wills in the world, but only one divine will. Therefore, if it is possible to perform what He demands of us, then life can be reasonably certain and meaningful. It is the Jews who first taught the world that there is only one God.

A religion which teaches that there is only one God, however, is not necessarily a "M'tziah", a bargain. Suppose this God were capricious and dictatorial, as the Greeks and Romans frequently spoke of their gods. Suppose our God was like Zeus, the chief of the Roman gods, who, according to Roman myth, raped his own daughter?! The pagans, including the Greeks, taught that the gods were like humans, only more so. The gods had the power to do what humans wanted to do but couldn't. They had petty and lustful appetites, and they were capable of theft, murder, and rape.

The greater contribution of Judaism, then, was not merely that it taught that God was one. Judaism asserted that God was ethical in His deepest nature. He was not only the Author of the moral law (as Micah teaches) but He was the essence of morality Himself. If this were true of the Creator of the universe, then life could be reasonably certain and humans could hope to establish an ordered society based on justice and compassion. God was not only ethical, He was also not capricious. We don't have to worry about what God wants from us, our tradition teaches. What God wants from us is recorded in His Torah (the ethical laws of the Bible); therefore scripture teaches, "Don't ask who will go up to heaven to find God's will for us....for it is near unto you, even in your ears and minds". We can know what God wants, and we can do reasonably well in performing what He wishes.

#### THE IMITATION OF GOD

Judaism goes beyond teaching that God is the moral standard of the universe. It further attests that God wants humans to imitate Him in His holiness. The nineteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus reads...., "Ye shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy". The chapter then goes on to list the many moral deeds required of the people which is asked to be holy. It is this chapter which teaches us not to take vengeance and which bids us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Much less quoted is the additional teaching in this chapter, "Ye shall love the stranger as yourself....". If someone were to ask me to give him or her a brief definition of Judaism, I would answer, "Judaism is that religion which asks us to imitate God in His

moral nature." Even if one were not inclined to be religious at all, he would have to admit that this is the most compelling of religious doctrines.

### GOD IS NOT IN NATURE

I have not met many people who understand the importance of the Jewish teaching that God is not in nature but is instead the Creator of nature.

The two great nations during the early days of ancient Israel were the Egyptians (who were not Arabs, by the way) and the Babylonians (who were not Iraqis). The Egyptians not only believed the Sun was a god, they believed that their king was the earthly representation of the Sun as god. The Egyptians, who were capable of building such glories as the Pyramids, believed that many aspects of nature were in themselves divine. The Nile, for example, was worshipped for its beneficence in recreating fertile land for farming every year..

It was the ancient Babylonians who first calculated the movements of the planets and who developed a religiously oriented astrology. Each of the planets was considered to be one of the recognized gods in the Babylonian mythology. Even the great Greeks like Aristotle thought the planets were divine beings. Nomadic semites worshipped the Moon as a goddess, and the storm god, Baal, was known throughout the ancient Near East. All of these peoples, including the Greeks and Romans, had an earth goddess and a god of nature.

The Canaanite religion was primarily a fertility religion. Its emphasis was on rituals designed to propitiate the gods of earth and the rain god. For all of these peoples the problem was how to seduce the gods into being fruitful. For this reason Canaanite worship, as Michener wrote in his book, "The Source", employed sexual rituals designed to excite the gods into reproductive activities.

It was the Hebrews who first taught, the aspects of nature are not divine, but God is the Creator of all nature. God is not in nature, He is above it.

Let us think for a moment, of the implications of this revolutionary teaching. If nature is divine, science, the study of nature, is taboo. Modern science would never have been possible had humans continued to believe that nature is divine. In this sense, we can say that modern science is built on the foundation of Judaism. In our day, Americans spend billions of dollars a year on projects to search the skies, to study the planets and the atmosphere. If the planets were still thought of as gods, they would be unapproachable, and humans would fear to study them.

The same might be said for attempts to control rivers for hydroelectric power and or even to explode atoms to obtain their tremendous energy. The latest scientific studies of the human genes might never have been possible unless humans were freed from the taboos against natural objects.

Some of you, like myself, have been to a lovely place in Israel known as Banias Springs. There one can experience a mighty flow of water such as is rare to find in that part of the world. Banias Springs is a site where the followers of Greek and Roman religions used to worship the god Pan, a god of nature. In recent years, archaeologists have even discovered caves in which the god was worshipped and images of the god have been uncovered. So widespread was the worship of the nature god Pan, that the very word for bread in French and Spanish today is a derivative of the god's name. You see, the ancients felt that each stalk of a cereal growth was part of the god's body, and bread

made from the god's body, that is the cereal, was given the very name of the god.

There is a vestige of this ancient belief in Christianity. The New Testament tells us that Jesus, at the last supper, took the bread and said, "This is my body...eat this in remembrance of Me". But there are also vestiges of this ancient belief in Judaism. Amongst Jews, the Hebrew word for bread is LECHEM. The name of an ancient Sumerian god was LACHMU. This is not to say, that we Jews think we are eating the god today. The point is that remnants of ancient beliefs exist in even the most advanced religions.

Today there is a disproportionate number of Jews involved in scientific research and study. No doubt this is due to the inquisitive spirit set forth in our people, when our early founders taught us that God is the Creator of nature but is not in nature. How much the world owes us for this revolutionary teaching!

#### IN THE DIVINE IMAGE

We have time for only one more example of Jewish ideas that have changed the world. At another time we can speak of still others.

Babylonian texts teach us, "the king is the reflection of the god; the citizen is the reflection of the king". The king has something of the divine essence. The people have no relation to the divine. Their worth is determined solely in their relationship with the king. It was this kind of teaching that enabled Babylonian kings practically to enslave their citizenry, for, after all, the gods wished it so.

In ancient Egypt, the teaching was that the King IS the god, and the citizenry were merely the king's attendants who had to perform his divine wishes.

Only in ancient Israel was it taught that the king was merely a human being whose deeds must conform to a specific set of norms which protected the people. In Israel there was a Torah which kings had to follow along with the citizens. Indeed, a special group of religious leaders arose whose main task was to be a control on the kings as they believed God wishes the king to act.\* The political and economic structure in Israel was different from that of their countries precisely because of the belief that the king was not divine.

On the other hand, the Book of Genesis makes it clear that God created all human beings in His image. It was not just the king who had divine qualities; it was everyone. What does it mean to say that man and woman were created in the image of the divine, "Bidmut Elohim"? I believe it means that we humans were created with the potential to be godlike, to take into ourselves those qualities which we associate with God. It is because humans were created in the image of the divine that they must be treated with respect, yes, and with love and compassion. It is because humans were created in the divine image that the poor are beloved of God and for this reason He has a special concern, as our Bible teaches, for the oppressed and outcast.

When I officiate at a marriage ceremony, I make a special point of singling out one of the so called shivah or seven blessings which praises God because He created us in His image.\*\* Surely that blessing is in the marriage ceremony to remind the married couple that to abuse his or her partner is to diminish that which is created in the divine image.

\* The N'vi'im or Prophets

\*\* We use the masculine pronoun for God although God is not necessarily male

Many of you know that in modern times there has been a major movement in psychology known as the Human Potential Movement, in which many Jewish psychologists happen to be involved. The Human Potential Movement is based on the belief that each human being is precious and has fundamental value. It is based on the belief that each of us can grow and change. So what's new? This is the implication of Biblical teaching thousands of years ago, as it has been a central teaching of 18th century Hasidism.

We must conclude that some of the grandest notions underlying modern thought and institutions emanate from Judaism. To be a Jew is to recognize the revolutionary aspects of these ideas, to make them our own, and to work for their acceptance in the world.