

Divine Authority and Personal Conscience  
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Faiths in Conversation  
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Text of Oral Presentation

“Take your son, your only son, the one that you love, Isaac ... and offer him as a sacrifice upon the mountain that I will show you”. So God commands Abraham in the Book of Genesis, very near the beginning of Hebrew Scripture. This is Abraham’s only son from his beloved wife Sara, whom she bore at the age of 90, when Abraham himself was 100 years old. They had hoped and prayed for this child for decades. Furthermore, God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation, whose seed would be as numerous as the stars in heaven. And God had vowed that it would all begin with this child Isaac.

And now Abraham is commanded to sacrifice the boy. This flies in the face of his overwhelmingly love for human life in general and for his only son in particular. This contradicts everything he has lived for, and everything God has told him up till now. It makes no sense!

Yet Abraham obediently sets off on the mission to do what God has told him to do. He arrives at the appointed place, builds an altar, binds his son, places him atop the altar, and draws the knife to slaughter his son. At the very last minute an angel of God cries forth out of heaven and says – Now I see that you are truly a God fearing man. Withdraw the knife, you have passed the test!

In his willingness to follow God’s command at all costs, Abraham passed God’s test.

This biblical text is listed as source number 1) in your handout.  
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A second passage from the Torah:

At the end of the Book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Scripture, God refers to the Israelites who he has redeemed from Egyptian slavery as “עבדי”, meaning my slaves or my servants. First the Jews were servants of the Egyptian Pharaoh and now they are servants of God.

Servants of God – a defining statement of what it means to be a Jew!

This biblical text is listed as source number 2) in your handout.  
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A third passage from the Torah:

The Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of the Torah, tells us that when one has a question of Jewish law, whether civil or ritual or criminal, if the lower

courts cannot give an answer, he shall go up to the high court in Jerusalem and ask there for a ruling. "And you shall do according to what they shall tell you ... and be careful to do everything that they will instruct you. According to the teaching that they hand down and according to the verdict that they tell you, you shall do, do not veer from what they teach you to the right or to the left".

God has handed over the authority to apply his law in every generation to the rabbinic authorities of that generation! Their authority must be accepted just like God's own authority!

This biblical text is listed as source number 3) in your handout.

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The three sources we have seen are consistent with our conviction that God is the wise and all knowing Master of the Universe. Our role is to accept the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and to do His will. He knows best, whereas our human understanding is by its very nature faulty and subjective.

And it may even be that we must not only act in accordance with God's commandments, even when they appears irrational, inconsistent, cruel or immoral, but we must also nullify our own autonomous judgments and learn to identity completely with God's will. We must accept Him as the arbiter of what is really moral and just and bend our will - and not just our actions - to His will.

Such is the meaning of being a religious, God fearing person. According to this paradigm, a Jew must not only accept without question the dictates of God as they appear in Scripture, but also as they are interpreted by the ongoing rabbinic tradition. Every significant moral or religious issue in life, every dilemma, he will bring before his rabbi for a ruling, and will act accordingly.

This is a mainstream Jewish religious approach that has tremendous internal logic and expresses a deep truth about the God man relationship. Many observant Jews live in this fashion. They are generally called Haradim, or in English Ultra Orthodox. This nullification of individual autonomy sometimes goes so far as asking for a rabbinic ruling on questions on which doctors to see and which medical advice to follow, or on questions of who to marry, or on questions of who to vote for or where to live.

In your handouts I called this concept A).

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I however, have been taught to view the matter in a much more nuanced fashion. Although I must admit that the approach described above has its foundation and its supporters within traditional Judaism, I believe that it does not do full justice to the traditional sources and is one-sided, misguided and distorted. Obedience and acceptance of authority is absolutely part of the truth, but it is not the whole truth.

To come closer to the whole truth, we return to the Book of Genesis and again turn to the life of Abraham the Patriarch:

The Torah allows us to be privy to a divine monologue, in which God muses to himself, 'Can I hide from Abraham that I am considering the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Amora, for behold, all the nations of the world are to be blessed through him, and I have selected him to keep the way of the Lord to do mercy and justice?' God seems to be saying that Abraham ought to be involved in the decision as to what to do to these cities that have become dens of wickedness and evil. So God informs Abraham of his intention to completely annihilate the cities, and immediately Abraham steps up and proclaims that it is unfair to kill the innocent with the guilty with the famous words that have echoed forth for three millennia, "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?"

For a full 10 verses, Abraham argues with God, speaking truth to power, as it were. Abraham presses forward and the two go back and forth, until God agrees to completely spare the cities if there will be found in them at least ten righteous persons.

This biblical text is listed as source number 4) in the handouts.

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The Torah tells us that it was not only Abraham who argues with God: Moses did so twice, once in the Book of Exodus and once in the Book of Numbers. In both cases - after the sin of the Golden Calf and after the sin of the spies - God reacted to terrible sin on the part of the Israelites with a decision to destroy the whole people and to leave only Moses, and to reconstitute a new nation from his descendants.

In both instances Moses springs into action and passionately argues against God's intention, trying to show logically why it is unfair and counterproductive. In both cases God hears out the claims made by Moses, and in the end accepts them and relents.

These biblical texts are listed as sources 5) and 6) respectively in the handouts.

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The matter does not end with Avraham and Moshe. Aharon the High Priest had been commanded by God to eat the sacrificial meat on the day of the Consecration of the Tabernacle, but when - in the third book of the Torah, the Book of Leviticus - tragedy struck and his two sons met an untimely death at the height of the proceedings, he decided that God would not have wanted him to consume the sacrifices. When Moshe sees the uneaten meat, he takes Aharon to task but the latter stands his ground.

This biblical text is listed as source 7) in the handouts.

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Only those who are ritually pure are eligible to partake of the Paschal Lamb on Passover. But near the beginning of the Book of Numbers that law is depicted as unfair according to a group of temporarily ritually impure men, and they lodge a protest with Moshe. Near the end of the same biblical book the daughters of

Tzelophchad are appalled when they realize that the divinely promulgated law will deny them an inheritance in the Land of Israel such that their father – who bore only daughters and no sons – would not have his name associated with a portion of the land. They too come before Moshe and protest the injustice. In both cases God is pleased by the initiative of his people, and amends the law accordingly!

These two biblical texts are listed as sources 8) and 9) respectively in the handouts.

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What are we to make of these amazing sources at the heart of the Jewish tradition? Clearly, we are being taught that God does not need mere yes men who abdicate personal moral responsibility. He desires ethically engaged human beings who question and grapple and think for themselves, and are willing to challenge even the Almighty himself.

In the handout I called this concept B)

Our Jewish tradition makes this point repeatedly in a number of rabbinic homilies. In one of the most powerful of them, our rabbis highlight the moral superiority of Avraham who protested against perceived divine injustice as compared to Noah who did not. When God told the latter to build an ark to save himself and his family from the flood that God was about to bring to wipe humanity off the face of the earth, Noah meekly complied. In Midrash Breishit Raba (30:10) our sages compare Noah to a little child who knows no better than to take his father's hand and follow his lead, whereas Avraham is compared to a grown son who has learned to walk in front of his father and to lead the way.

In the handout this text is brought as source 10)

God the father is rightly proud of His children when they grow up and learn to thoughtfully and creatively implement the values they absorbed from their parent.

Here we have come to a powerful metaphor that beautifully describes the human divine relationship at its best – the relationship of grown, mature children to their wise parent. We love our parent, we honor our parent, but also – within the parameters of the raw materials that are parents have passed on to us – we think for ourselves.

In the handout I call this concept C)

Another, parallel metaphor is that of partnership. Our sages tell us that just as the opening chapter of Genesis places upon us the imperative to join with God and become co-creators of the natural world, so are we to be co-creators in the moral and religious realm. God brought the physical world into being and told us to fill it and conquer it, creatively constructing a better reality from its natural resources. The same is true of the values according to which we live our lives. God's Torah sets the parameters and provides the raw materials, but it is up to us to take those values and apply them according to the exigencies of the time, the place and the person

In the handout I called this concept D)

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But now we must be more specific. How does this all really work? And most importantly, how do these ideas of autonomy and of partnership jive with the ideas of heteronomy, of accepting God's commandments and bending your will to His will that we mentioned at the outset.

We have here within Judaism a beautiful and pregnant tension, whose partial resolution may be understood as follows:

Jews are to be faithfully obedient to the law as promulgated by the Torah and interpreted by the tradition, but at the same time the application of that divine law is always developing and improving as it interacts with the creative insights of the Jewish People in each generation.

We view the divine law as an ever-growing tree. Its genetic material is given at the outset but a myriad of fluid factors determine how its branches, leaves, flowers and fruit will develop. Jewish law begins with God, but we believe it to have infinite potential to develop new insights and applications.

Of all the 613 commandments of the Torah, it has been accepted from time immemorial that the most important is that of Torah study. If one thing defines Judaism, it is study. More than prayer, more than anything else, what Jews do is study. Not just study to be a rabbi, and not just study to know what to do, but study for its own sake! And although at the basic and intermediate levels, study is about knowledge of what the Torah says and what past generations of scholars and interpreters have said, at the highest level study is about creativity. We could fill pages and pages with all of the many homilies of our rabbis that exhort us to interpret creatively, to search for new understandings, to uncover meanings unbeknownst to previous generations. The deepest sense of Torah study is to find the messages that have been waiting for you to be unlocked and only your personality can find them. Innovation is the desideratum of Jewish intellectual engagement. Here we are interacting with God, here we are discovering new meanings in his ancient text.

It is here that human autonomy is to be located. Here there is full intellectual freedom for the individual. Here we express our human maturity, our relationship to God as grown children. Here the matter of co-creating with God comes to its fullest expression.

But it is not only in the study hall that the glory of human creative thought expresses itself. Some of the discussions of the study hall eventually become the foundations for the future development of the practical law. We say that there are 70 different interpretations of any given matter of law, and as they are discovered, they vie for consideration in the processes that determine the continual development of the practical legal ruling. New insights continually feed the growth and application of the law as the intuitions and the sensibilities of the generation change, and the scholars of the generation debate how to reinterpret the law.

But there is another way in which the Jews of every generation contribute to the identity of the law that they themselves are bound to follow. Not only do Jews in the

study hall provide the input for the laws continued fluidity, but so do Jews outside of the study hall.

The simple Jew who is not a scholar is asked by Judaism to not only accept the traditional ruling but to engage it as well. He ought to study and to think and expand his understanding of the issues confronting him. In many cases, he will simply open up the codes and do what it says, or he will send an SMS to his rabbi and receive back a concise answer. But it is also his right and his responsibility to grapple with weighty issues. If he feels he has a perspective that is not given its due weight by the codes or by the straightforward answer of the rabbis, then he must engage the tradition. He will come to his rabbis and present his position and what he views as his unique circumstances, and he and his rabbi will discuss the issue and search – perhaps bringing additional rabbis into the discussion - if there is perhaps room within rabbinic literature for a new nuance.

So yes, in practical day-to-day life much of Judaism is about obedience to a holy regimen. But this is not about submission to a fossilized and unresponsive tradition, but to a tradition that is constantly being renewed by a dialogue between its ancient sources and its modern discoveries, a tradition that the individual Jew himself, through his studies and through the issues he brings before his rabbis, has a role in developing.

This is summarized as concept E) in your handouts.

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The creative input of the Jew is found not only in the study hall, and not only in the development of legal rulings, but in other areas as well. The authority of the law does not always fix a cut and dried ruling. In so many areas the legal rulings leave multiple possibilities, and the Jew is encouraged to seek out the way that most speaks to his soul. We call it finding your own particular letter in the Torah.

Furthermore, there are so many commandments – you can't give equal emphasis to all of them. We encourage each Jew to pick a particular commandment that seems to be getting short shrift in his generation and that he or she feels a special affinity to, and to devote particular energy in that direction.

In both of these ways does the individual gain an outlet for the free expression of his spirit.

These two thoughts are summarized as concept F) in your handouts.

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Lastly comes the dilemma of what is termed in America law, civil disobedience. Does Judaism leave any room at all for the principled transgression of a fixed unequivocal ruling? Most authorities will answer in the negative. There is no room for such a thing. But there are those who state otherwise, and they introduce us to the concept of holy sin in various permutations.

One of these thinkers is Rabbi Mordechai Leiner, a leader of a small group of Polish Hassidim in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. He intimated that there might be times at which the established Torah ruling as interpreted in a given generation may not

completely reflect the divine will for every individual. There may be extremely refined and holy Jews who may intuit that at certain rare times they may need to transgress against the law in order to do what God really wants of them.

Another one of these thinkers is Rabbi Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of what was British Mandatory Palestine in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote that the established system of legal development through precedent may be inadequate at certain unique junctions in human history, and at those times the divine spirit will express itself through sin and through sinners and in that way bring about the change that it wants to accomplish.

These last two thinkers are found in the handouts as sources 11) and 12) respectively.