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חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHERE ZIONISM DIFFER(ED)[S]

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

In *Where Judaism Differed* (as it was originally titled), Abba Hillel Silver contrasted Judaism to the Sermon on the Mount's doctrine of "turning the other cheek" and what he contended were its Stoic antecedents:

Judaism rejected all doctrines of nonresistance and all forms of pacifism. It demanded action from its devotees. It taught that there is evil in society and it is man's duty to overcome it – if need be, by force, though force is by no means the only way by which evil can be overcome."

Silver contended that

In Jesus' mystical outlook, the world was fast coming to an end, and there was no point in resisting evil. It would automatically cease with the Millennium and the imminent establishment of G-d's kingdom.

I won't speak to the history of Christian doctrine. But I am fascinated by Silver's depiction of imminent Messianism as leading to pacifism and quietism. It seems to me that Jewish messianism often has exactly the opposite impact. People are davka driven to the use of force by the sense that the Messiah's arrival could be imminent but is being delayed by others.

It's also necessary to point out that the immediate linguistic antecedents of "turning the other cheek" are

Yeshayah 50:6

גוי נתתי למכים

ולחיי למרשים פני

לא הסתרתי מקלמות נרק

I presented my back to those who struck (me)
and my cheek to those who pluck (the hairs from) my face
I did not hide from humiliations and spitting.

and Eikhah 3:30:

יתן למכהו לחי

ישבע בקרפה:

Let him give the one who strikes him a cheek
He will be sated with shame.

However, linguistic antecedence may not indicate ideological kinship. Yeshayah 50:6 may be addressed exclusively to aspiring kiruv workers, and Eikhah 3:30 can be read as descriptive and/or condemnatory rather than as imperative and/or hortatory. So one can still say that Judaism differed from those who recommended turning the other cheek.

However, Mishlei 25:21 seems to encourage going well beyond turning the other cheek, to the point of actively sustaining the enemy.

אם-רעב שָׁנָאךָ הָאֲכִלְהוּ לָחֶם

ואם-צָמָא הִשְׁקֵהוּ מַיִם:

If one who hates you is hungry give him bread to eat;
and if thirsty give him water to drink.

Yet the next verse reads:

כִּי גִחְלִים אֶתָּה חֲתָה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ וַיִּקְנֹךְ יְשַׁלֵּם-לָךְ:

Because you will be heaping embers on his head and Hashem will repay you.

Heaping embers on heads doesn't fit anyone's idea of principled nonaggression.

Rabbi Daniel Feldman posted last week about a dispute between the 19th century R. Meir Leibush Malbim and the 14th century R. Yehoshua Ibn Shuaib regarding these verses.

Malbim presents generosity to an enemy "as a double victory: it will remind your adversary of his own shortcomings, while preserving your own righteousness and earning reward".

By contrast, Ibn Shuaib in a derashah on Parshat Ki Tetze (ADK: possibly channeling Rav Saadia Gaon) contends that feeding the enemy "must be done only for noble reasons, and not as a form of vengeance, as it is inconceivable that Solomon would advise tainting the act of kindness with vengeful intentions".

Ibn Shuaib retranslates 25:22 to speak of removing rather than heaping embers.

Rabbi Feldman concludes that "It seems that, ultimately, the best revenge is (sincerely) not taking revenge."

However, what happens if you try this approach, and the enemy to all appearances is not embarrassed by your returning good for evil? Malbim does not say.

Netziv (Harchev Davar to Vayikra 19:18) offers a different pragmatic rationale. (My translation is loose but I think conveys the ideas accurately.)

וכתיב משיב רעה תחת טובה לא תמוש רעה מביתו (משלי י"ז י"ג),

ופירשו חז"ל בב"ר ס"פ נח: לא רק משיב רעה תחת טובה, אלא אפי' משיב רעה תחת רעה.

והיינו משום שדייקו חז"ל לשון "משיב", דלא שייך לשון השבה אלא מה שחייב, והאיך שייך לשון השבת רעה על טובה?! מש"ה פירשו משיב רעה, והדבר מובן שהוא משום שעשה לו רעה מש"ה משיב לו רעה, אבל הוא תחת טובה שה' לו לעשות, שאם ה' עושה טובה - ה' נשבת מדנים, וכדכתיב במשלי אם רעב שנאך האכילהו לחם כי גחלים אתה חותה על ראשו וה' ישלם לך, כי בע"כ עליו להיות בטוב

ושלום עמו, ועתה שלא עשה כן אלא השיב רעה - לא תמוש רעה מביתו, שהרי למחר יעשה לך רעה כשימצא, ואח"כ תשוב להרע לו כשתמצא ידך, וכן יחזור חלילה:

(Mishlei 17:13) writes: he who returns evil in place of good – evil will not cease from his house, and Chazal (Bereishit Rabbah, toward the end of Parshat Noach) explain that this refers not only to one who returns evil to someone who had done them good, but even to one who returns evil to someone who had done them evil,

because Chazal derived via a precise definition of the word “return”, that one can only “return” something that one is obligated to give to someone else, so how can one “return” evil in response to someone else’s good?! Therefore they explained “returns good” (in this way), because it is obvious that one can only “return” evil for evil, but the “returned” evil is actually in place of the good one should have done, because had he done good – the quarrel would have abated, as Mishlei writes: If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread . . . because you are heaping embers on his head and Hashem will repay you, because against his will he will be on good and peaceful terms with you, but now that you have instead returned evil – evil will not cease from your house, as tomorrow he will do you evil when he is able, and then you will again do evil to him, and this cycle will repeat endlessly.

Netziv encourages returning good for evil in the expectation that the other side will change. But he recognizes that this is not psychologically sustainable though multiple iterations. I don’t think he sees this as right, but he’s also not judgmental about it.

Malbim’s position may derive from the commentary of the 14th century philosopher R. Levi ben Gershon=RLBG. But RLBG’s formulation is much less pragmatic:

אם רעב שונאך – לא תמנע מלחון עליו להאכילו לחם, ואם הוא צמא - השקרו מים,

כי זאת מדה משובחת מאד, להיטיב לכל האנשי' לאוהב ולשונא, ואם ירע לך, איך ייטיב לו תחת אשר עשה לך רעה?

תדע באמת כי אתה עם גמלך בזה הראוי לנפשך משוב המדור - הנה לוקח נקמתך ממנו, כי גחלים וגו',

כי זה הענין קשה לו כאילו אתה חותה גחלי' על ראשו לשרפו מרוב בשתו על הטוב שיקבל ממך תחת הרעה אשר גמלך, וי"י ישלם לך טוב' תחת הטובה אשר גמלת אותו.

If one who hates you is hungry - do not refrain from acting graciously toward him by feeding him bread, and if he is thirsty - give him water to drink,

because this is a very praiseworthy trait, to do good to all people, those who love you and those who hate you.

But if your heart is dissatisfied and wonders: How can you do good for him in place of the evil he did to you?

Know in truth that you, having done what is fitting for your soul of the best traits – you will be taking your revenge from him, *because coals etc*, because this matter is as difficult for him as if you were heaping coals on his head to burn him, because of the great shame he feels about the good he has received from you in place of the evil he caused to you, and G-d will repay you for the good that you have caused him.

RLBG treats the attainment of revenge as a positive but unnecessary outcome, although unlike Ibn Shuaib he does not see it as a disqualifying motivation. The primary reason to feed hungry people who hate you is that doing so keeps your soul healthy, and that leaving one’s enemy to starve is unhealthy for your soul. This remains so regardless of how the enemy reacts to your humanity.

RLBG’s approach has no relationship at all to turning the other cheek. He does not suggest in any way allowing the enemy to strike you, or imply that one should refrain from attacking the enemy in retaliation or even preemptively. It’s entirely possible that tomorrow you’ll have a moral imperative to inflict violence on the person you’re feeding today, and that it would be more efficient to let them starve. The overriding question is what will happen to your soul if you respond to genuine human need with indifference or worse.

Silver’s book was eventually retitled “Where Judaism Differs”, apparently for trivial reasons. But to me, the substantive difference is immense. The original title made no claims about current religion, and recognized that cultures can over the long term abandon their founding virtues and vices. “Differed” is a historical claim; “Differs” is a theological imperative. Everyone reading Silver understands which side of the difference he prefers.

Silver’s book countered the assumption that because Christianity emerged from Judaism, they were basically the same on ethical issues, differing only about ritual.

Zionism is often presented as emerging from nationalism. There is certainly a relationship. Some Zionist thinkers certainly saw all nationalism as fundamentally the same, with different cultural trappings. It’s a useful thought experiment to consider what a book titled “Where Zionism Differed” would focus on.

I think that Religious Zionism required a belief that Jewish nationalism must be different, and specifically different than the nationalism of its immediate neighbors. The elementary school I attended stressed pride in both Israel’s military achievements and its military ethics = *tobhar hanesbek* = “purity of arms”. Even though terrorism and credible threats of genocide were constant, and I never heard anyone imagine that “the Arab street” was secretly opposed to these tactics, we were committed to a nationalism that differed. At the core of that difference, I think, was something like RLBG.

I don’t know whether there is currently famine in Gaza – I suspect not yet - or whether the planned new mode of distributing aid is in time and sufficient – I pray that it is. I recognize that the major agency that previously distributed aid responded to the Israeli plan with statements that clearly prioritized politics over Palestinian lives, and therefore has no constructive role to play.

But – and this is an utterly crucial but – Religious Zionists who express indifference or worse to actual or potential mass starvation in Gaza – and I believe them when they say it - are clear and present dangers to the health of the collective Jewish soul. Zionism must continue to differ.

Shabbat shalom!

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