**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur #26: Natural Morality (2)**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

What is one to do in the face of a seeming clash between the demands of natural morality and the prescriptions of the Halakha?

Perhaps the most famous example of such a clash is in the case of *akeidat Yitzchak*, in which God's commandment to Avraham contradicted the prohibition of murder, the most basic of all moral imperatives. While the primary test in this episode was the personal sacrifice of Avraham giving up his beloved son, the Sages were also sensitive to the moral conflict involved in this commandment, noting that an element of this test was Avraham's willingness to subordinate the moral norm to the divine command. The *midrash* tells us that Satan appeared to Avraham and attempted to dissuade him from fulfilling God's commandment. He first argued that it was unreasonable of Avraham to give up his beloved son whom he had waited for until the age of one hundred. When that tactic failed, he appealed to Avraham's moral conscience, warning him that tomorrow he would be accused of murder for killing his son:

“And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said: My father” (*Bereishit* 22:7) – Samael went to our father Avraham and said: “Old man, old man! Have you lost your mind [lit. have you lost your heart]? You are going to slay a son given to you at the age of a hundred!” “Even this I do,” replied he… [Samael said:]”‘Tomorrow He will say to you, ‘You are guilty of murder; you murdered your son!’” He replied: “Still I go.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:4)

Avraham passed the test through his willingness to engage in both personal and moral sacrifice for the sake of God.

**The *Akeida* as a Rejection of Natural Morality: *Eish Kodesh* and Yeshayahu Leibowitz**

As we noted in the previous *shiur*,according to the *Eish Kodesh*, the message of this story is clear. If God could command Avraham to kill his son, this proves that there is no independent moral prohibition of murder. If so, there cannot be any natural moral order, as the prohibition of murder is the most basic of all moral obligations.

Similarly, another twentieth century Jewish philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, understands the lesson of the *akeida* as the conquest of our natural instincts in order to serve God. He includes in our natural instincts not only our psychological and physical desires, but our moral instincts, which are binding only from a secular perspective and have no significance in the worldview of the Torah. According to Leibowitz, the passage in the *siddur* introducing the story of the *akeida*, in which we pray to God to help us subdue our inclination in order to serve Him, includes the subduing not only of our inclination towards evil and selfishness, but the subduing of our moral inclination as well.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We argued in the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-25-natural-morality-1), however, that the mainstream tradition of Jewish thought disagrees with the *Eish Kodesh* and holds that there exists a natural moral order that is binding even in the absence of divine revelation. If so, how are we to understand the commandment of *akeidat Yitzchak*?

We could perhaps argue for a position very close to that of the *Eish Kodesh*: There exists a natural moral order, but God is not bound by that order, and His commandments do not necessarily conform to natural morality. When faced with a clash between natural morality and divine command, we are bidden to follow the example of our forefather Avraham and transgress the obligations of morality in order to fulfill the divine will. This position was made famous by the Danish protestant philosopher Soren Kierkegaard in his book about the *akeida*.[[2]](#footnote-2) He argues that there is no possible moral evaluation of Avraham's behavior other than as a transgression of morality. The greatness of Avraham, according to this understanding, is that he placed his loyalty to God above his commitment to morality and suspended the ethical obligation in order to follow the more authoritative obligation of serving God.

According to the approaches we have mentioned, whether we grant the existence of natural morality or not, the message of the *akeida* is clear. Divine commandments are not meant to be in consonance with any system of morality; the task of a Jew is to overcome his moral feelings and submit instead to the divine command.

**The *Akeida* as an Affirmation of Natural Morality: R. Kook and R. Lichtenstein**

A strikingly different approach is taken by R. Kook in his commentary to the story of the *akeida*. While the *Eish Kodesh* focused on God's initial commandment as paradigmatic and viewed God's later command not to harm Yitzchak as an expression of divine grace that could just as easily not have occurred, R. Kook focuses instead on God's final command as definitional. He explains that when God commanded Avraham not to harm Yitzchak, His intention was to reveal the uncontested ethical truth that Avraham could never have been permitted to kill his son. R. Kook explains that neither the natural instinct of a father protecting his beloved son from harm, nor the natural moral prohibition against murder, lost any of their binding authority due to the commandment of the *akeida*. God prohibited Avraham from harming his son not as a divine fiat, but specifically because of the moral reprehensibility of such an act.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As we discussed in the previous *shiur*, R. Kook believes that natural morality and Halakha form one continuum, in which morality serves as the basis for spiritual growth, and Halakha expands, deepens, and sharpens the moral order. R. Kook understands that this is precisely the moral message of the *akeida*, which is meant to teach us that God's will is always in consonance with morality and that He would never command or desire that we act in an immoral fashion.

This raises the question, of course, of how R. Kook understands God's initial commandment to Avraham to slaughter his son. If God's commandments are always in consonance with natural morality, how could He have commanded Avraham to commit murder, even if He later revoked that commandment?

Perhaps we can explain this based on the *midrash* that describes a conversation between God and Avraham in the wake of the *akeida*:

R. Acha said: Avraham began to wonder: “These words are only words of wonder. Yesterday, you told me: ‘Because in Yitzchak will your seed be called’ (*Bereishit* 21:12). And [then] you went back and said, ‘Please take your son.’ And now You say to me, ‘Do not send your hand to the youth.’ It is a wonder!” The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “Avraham, ‘I will not profane My covenant and the utterances of My lips, I will not change’ (*Tehillim* 89:35). When I said, ‘Please take your son,’ I did not say, ‘slaughter him,’ but rather, ‘and bring him up.’ For the sake of love did I say [it] to you: I said to you, ‘Bring him up,’ and you have fulfilled My words. And now, bring him down.” This is [the meaning of] what is written, “it did not come up on My heart” (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5) – that is Yitzchak. (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:8)

According to this *midrash*, God's commandment never contradicted the dictates of natural morality, but only seemed to do so. In accordance with all the information available to Avraham when he set out to the *akeida*, there was a clash between the divine command and natural morality, but in truth there was never a clash.

Perhaps this can serve as a paradigm for all clashes between Halakha and natural morality. A Jew who is faced with such a clash is certainly being tested. According to R. Kook, however, one does not pass the test by discarding morality and committing oneself to worshiping a God who does not care about the moral order. Rather, God desires that in face of an apparent contradiction between morality and the divine will, we remain steadfast in our faith that He is ultimately just, and that there is some information of which we are not aware which can resolve the contradiction. We pass the test by continuing to believe in the morality of Halakha, although we do not yet have an explanation for how that morality is expressed in this particular instance.

R. Lichtenstein, in his discussion of the *akeida*, explains the matter similarly. On the one hand, we must always give precedence to the divine command over our moral conclusions. On the other hand, however, we must remain steadfast in our belief that loyalty to the dictates of natural morality is an expression of, rather than a contradiction to, *yirat* *Shamayim* (fear of Heaven). The integration of moral goodness and obedience to Halakha, according to R. Lichtenstein, is a principle that can never be compromised, even if that requires that we admit, as did Avraham on his way to the *akeida*, that there are apparent contradictions whose resolutions we have not yet succeeded in finding.

R. Lichtenstein draws a number of practical conclusions from this understanding. First, R. Lichtenstein concludes that it is not only legitimate, but necessary, that when faced with such a clash between morality and Halakha, we feel the weight of the contradiction and are troubled by our lack of understanding. R. Lichtenstein assumes that during the three-day journey to the *akeida*, Avraham wrestled and grappled, attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to find an answer to the burning question of "Can the Judge of the whole world do injustice?" This grappling, explains R. Lichtenstein, is not a religious flaw, but rather a religious accomplishment, so long as it is undertaken in the context of ultimate submission to the wisdom of the divine command.

Second, R. Lichtenstein suggests that our moral intuition has a role in an interpretive capacity. When the halakhic directive is unclear, we must seek out an interpretation that accords with natural morality. Just as we would interpret one passage in the *Shulchan Arukh* in such a way that it would not contradict another halakhically authoritative passage, we must likewise interpret the halakhic texts in a way that they do not contradict the authoritative divine will expressed via natural morality. Nonetheless, ultimately, a Jew must be prepared to act like Avraham and submit to the divine will even when he cannot find any resolution to the conflict, neither by re-examining his moral conclusions nor by re-examining his interpretation of the divine command.[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to the *midrash*, the answer to his question was revealed to Avraham shortly after the *akeida* concluded. Not every Jew merits such revelation, however, and sometimes we may have to live with the conflict for years or decades. R. Lichtenstein admits that from an educational perspective, such an approach is much more difficult to sustain than the competing approach of the *Eish Kodesh*, who understands *yirat Shamayim* as a rejection of natural morality. It is always simpler to remain committed to one set of values and reject all others, rather than believing in the integration of values that do not always integrate effortlessly. It may be more challenging for our students to remain committed to Halakha if we challenge them to live with conflict rather than dismiss it. The easy path, though, is not necessarily the correct path. R. Lichtenstein concludes that if we want to imbue our students with loyalty to Halakha in the face of these challenging conflicts, we must teach them to love piety more rather than morality less. The solution is to deepen *yirat Shamayim* rather than to jettison morality.

**Summary**

We have seen two general approaches to understanding the story of the *akeida*, and more generally to understand clashes between Halakha and morality. The approach of the *Eish Kodesh* and Yeshayahu Leibowitz attributes philosophical significance only to God's initial commandment to sacrifice Yitzchak, learning from the *akeida* that we are bidden to deny the significance of natural morally and heed only the divine command. Even if one were to admit the binding obligation of natural morality, one could conclude from the *akeida* that although morality is authoritative in the absence of revelation, divine commandments are independent of and more authoritative than natural morality. We must sometimes transgress morality in order to fulfill the divine command.

 The second approach, exemplified by R. Kook, understands God's initial commandment as merely a test and attributes philosophical significance to God's second commandment forbidding Avraham from harming Yitzchak. According to this approach, we learn from the *akeida* that natural morality and Halakha are integrated and that ultimately there can be no contradiction between the natural and the prophetic revelations of divine will. Any apparent conflict between Halakha and morality is merely a test, as in the *akeida*.

R. Lichtenstein explained that we pass the test by heeding the divine command, but while our loyalty to Halakha takes precedence over our understanding of reality, we are not meant to reject either our commitment to morality or our belief in the integration of morality and Halakha. We are meant to struggle, to wonder, to ask questions, to seek alternative explanations, and ultimately to have faith that someday we will find a resolution that vindicates our belief that loving piety more does not entail loving morality less.

1. Yeshayahu Liebowitz, “Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah,” reprinted in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Harvard University Press, 1992). Some students of Liebowitz, however, understand that he acknowledges the binding obligation of natural morality but disassociates it from Halakha. In this case, his view would be similar to that of Kierkegaard, as opposed to the *Eish Kodesh.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rav Kook, *Siddur Olat Re’iyah,* pp. 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God,* chapter 6, part 4, pp. 122-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)