FIRST THINGS

THE VIRTUE OF HATE

by
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In his classic Holocaust text, *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal recounts the following experience. As a concentration camp prisoner, the monotony of his work detail is suddenly broken when he is brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi. The German delineates the gruesome details of his career, describing how he participated in the murder and torture of hundreds of Jews. Exhibiting, or perhaps feigning, regret and remorse, he explains that he sought a Jew—any Jew—to whom to confess, and from whom to beseech forgiveness. Wiesenthal silently contemplates the wretched creature lying before him, and then, unable to comply but unable to condemn, walks out of the room. Tortured by his experience, wondering whether he did the right thing, Wiesenthal submitted this story as the subject of a symposium, including respondents of every religious stripe. An examination of the respective replies of Christians and Jews reveals a remarkable contrast. "When the first edition of *The Sunflower* was published," writes Dennis Prager, "I was intrigued by the fact that all the Jewish respondents thought Simon Wiesenthal was right in not forgiving the repentant Nazi mass murderer, and that the Christians thought he was wrong."

Indeed, the Christian symposiasts did sound a more sympathetic note. "I can well understand Simon's refusal [to forgive]," reflects Fr. Edward Flannery, "but I find it impossible to defend it." Archbishop Desmond Tutu cites the crucifixion as his source. Arguing that the newly empowered South African blacks readily forgave their white tormentors, Tutu explains that they followed "the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*." If we look only to retributive justice, argues Tutu, "then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future."

And yet, many Jews would respond to Tutu's scriptural source by citing another verse, one that also describes a Jew strung up by his enemies, yet who responds to his enemies in a very different, perhaps less Christian, way:

> So the Philistines seized [Samson] and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. . . . They made him stand between the pillars. . . . Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."
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> And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, . . . [and] then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life.

The symposiasts' varying theological responses, Prager suggests, reflect "the nature of the Jewish and Christian responses to evil, which are related to their differing understandings of forgiveness." Indeed, the contrast between the two Testaments indicates that this is the case: Jesus' words could not be more different than Samson's.

Some might respond that the raging, vengeful Samson is the Bible's sinful exception, rather than its rule; or, perhaps, that Samson acted in self-defense. Yet a further perusal indicates that the Hebrew prophets not only hated their enemies, but rather reveled in their suffering, finding in it a fitting justice. The great Samuel, having come upon the Amalekite king Agag, after Agag was already captured and the Amalekites exterminated, responds in righteous anger:

> Then Samuel said, "Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me." And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women." And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

And lest one dismiss Samuel's and Samson's anger as exhibitions of male machismo, it bears mentioning that the prophetess Deborah appears to relish the gruesome death of her enemy, the Philistine Sisera, who had, fittingly, been executed by another woman. Every bloody detail is recounted in Deborah's ebullient song:

> Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the KeniteOf tent-dwelling women most blessed.She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet.She struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet; At her feet he sank, he fell; there he sank, there he fell dead. . . . So perish all your enemies, O Lord!

In his *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden* , journalist Yossi Klein Halevi speaks with Johanna, a Catholic nun who is struck by the hatred Israelis bear for their enemies. Johanna tells of an Israeli Hebrew teacher "who was very close to us. She told us how her young son hates Saddam. . . . She said it with such enthusiasm. She was so proud of her son." "I realized," Johanna concluded, "that hatred is in the Jewish religion." She was right. The Hebrew prophets spoke in the name of a God who, in Exodus' articulation, may "forgive iniquity and transgression and sin," but Who also "by no means exonerates [the guilty]." Likewise, in refusing to forgive their enemies, Jewish leaders sought not merely their defeat, but their disgrace. When Queen Esther had already visited defeat upon Haman—the Hitler of his time, attempted exterminator of the Jewish people—and had killed Haman's supporters and sons, King Ahasuerus asks what more she could possible want:

> The king said to Queen Esther, "In the capital of Susa the Jews have killed also the ten sons of Haman. . . . Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." Esther said, "If it pleases the king . . . let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows."

Interestingly, the most vivid response in Wiesenthal's symposium was also written by a woman. The Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick, reflecting on how Wiesenthal, in a moment of mercy, brushed a fly away from the

Nazi's broken body, concludes her essay in Deborah's blunt but poetic manner:

> Let the SS man die unshriven. Let him go to hell. Sooner the fly to God than he.

During my regular weekly coffees with my friend Fr. Jim White, an Episcopal priest, there was one issue to which our conversation would incessantly turn, and one on which we could never agree: Is an utterly evil man—Hitler, Stalin, Osama bin Laden—deserving of a theist's love? I could never stomach such a notion, while Fr. Jim would argue passionately in favor of the proposition. Judaism, I would argue, does demand love for our fellow human beings, but only to an extent. "Hate" is not always synonymous with the terribly sinful. While Moses commanded us "not to hate our brother in our hearts," a man's immoral actions can serve to sever the bonds of brotherhood between himself and humanity. Regarding a *rasha*, a Hebrew term for the hopelessly wicked, the Talmud clearly states: *mitzvah lisnoso*—one is obligated to hate him.

Some would seek to minimize this difference between our faiths. Eva Fleischner, a Catholic interfaith specialist and another *Sunflower* symposiast, argues that "Christians—and non-Christians in their wake—have misread, and continue to misread, [Christian texts] interpreting Jesus' teaching to mean that we are to forgive anyone and everyone. . . . The element that is lost sight of is that Jesus challenges *me* to forgive evil done to *me*. . . . Nowhere does he tell us to forgive the wrong done to another." Perhaps. But even so, a theological chasm remains between the Jewish and Christian viewpoints on the matter. As we can see from Samson's rage, Judaism believes that while forgiveness is often a virtue, hate can be virtuous when one is dealing with the frightfully wicked. Rather than forgive, we can wish ill; rather than hope for repentance, we can instead hope that our enemies experience the wrath of God.

There is, in fact, no minimizing the difference between Judaism and Christianity on whether hate can be virtuous. Indeed, Christianity's founder acknowledged his break with Jewish tradition on this matter from the very outset: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." God, Jesus argues,

loves the wicked, and so must we. In disagreeing, Judaism does not deny the importance of imitating God; Jews hate the wicked because they believe that God despises the wicked as well.

Among Orthodox Jews, there is an oft-used Hebrew phrase whose equivalent I have not found among Christians. The phrase is *yemach shemo*, which means, *may his name be erased*. It is used whenever a great enemy of the Jewish nation, of the past or present, is mentioned. For instance, one might very well say casually, in the course of conversation, "Thank God, my grandparents left Germany before Hitler, *yemach shemo*, came to power." Or: "My parents were murdered by the Nazis, *yemach shemam*." Can one imagine a Christian version of such a statement? Would anyone speak of the massacres wrought by "Pol Pot, may his name be erased"? Do any Christians speak in such a way? Has any seminary student ever attached a Latin equivalent of *yemach shemo* to the names "Pontius Pilate" or "Judas"? Surely not. Christians, I sense, would find the very notion repugnant, just as many Jews would gag upon reading the Catholic rosary: "O my Jesus . . . lead all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of thy mercy."

Why, then, this remarkable disagreement between faiths? Why do Jews and Christians respond so differently to wickedness? Why do Jews refuse at times to forgive? And if the Hebrew prophets and judges believed ardently in the "virtue of hate," what about Christianity caused it to break with its Old Testament roots?

"More than a decade of weekly dialogue with Christians and intimate conversation with Christian friends," writes Prager, "has convinced me that, aside from the divinity of Jesus, the greatest—and even more important—difference between Judaism and Christianity, or perhaps only between most Christians and Jews, is their different understanding of forgiveness and, ultimately, how to react to evil." Here Prager takes one theological step too many and commits, in this single statement, two errors. The first is to deem the issue of forgiveness more important than that of Jesus's identity. Such a statement, to my mind, sullies the memory of thousands of Jews who died rather than proclaim Jesus Lord. Yet Prager also misses the fact that these two issues, that of approaching Jesus and that of approaching our enemies, are essentially one and the same: that the very question of how to approach our enemies depends on whether one believes that Jesus was merely a misguided mortal, or the Son of God. Let us examine how each faith's outlook on Jesus provides the theological underpinnings for its respective approach to hate.

The essence of a religion can be discovered by asking its adherents one question: What, to your mind, was the seminal moment in the history of the world? For Christians, the answer is easy: the passion of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the sins of the world. Or: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son" so that through his death the world would find salvation. Jews, on the other hand, see history's focal moment as the Sinai revelation, the day the Decalogue was delivered. On this day, we believe, God formed an eternal covenant with the Jewish people and began to communicate to them His Torah, the Almighty's moral and religious commandments. The most fascinating element of this event is that before forming this Covenant with the Hebrews, God *first asked their permission to do so*. England's Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, describes the episode:

> Before stating the terms of the covenant, God told Moses to speak to the people and determine whether or not they agreed to become a nation under the sovereignty of God. Only when "all the people responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said'" did the revelation proceed. . . . The first-ever democratic mandate takes place, the idea that there can be no valid rule without the agreement of all those who are affected by it.

There is a wonderful bit of Jewish lore concerning the giving of God's Torah, in which God is depicted as a merchant, proffering His Law to every nation on the planet. Each one considers God's wares, and each then finds a flaw. One refuses to refrain from theft; another, from murder. Finally, God chances upon the Jewish people, who gravely agree to shoulder the responsibility of a moral life. The message of this *midrash* is that God's covenant is one that anyone can join; God leaves it up to us.

Consider for a moment the extraordinary contrast. For Christians, God acted on humanity's behalf, without its knowledge and without its consent. The crucifixion is a story of a loving God seeking humanity's salvation, though it never requested it, though it scarcely deserved it. Jews, on the other hand, believe that God's covenant was formed by the free consent of His people. The giving of the Torah is a story of God seeking to provide humanity with the opportunity to make moral decisions. To my knowledge, not a single Jewish source asserts that God deeply desires to save all humanity, nor that He loves every member of the human race. Rather, many a Jewish source maintains that God affords every human being the opportunity to choose his or her moral fate, and will then judge him or her, and choose

whether to love him or her, on the basis of that decision. Christianity's focus is on love and salvation; Judaism's on decision and action.

The difference runs deeper. Both the Talmud and the New Testament have a great deal to say about the afterlife. Both ardently assert that it exists, and both assure the righteous that they will receive eternal reward and warn the wicked of the reality of damnation. Yet one striking distinction exists between these two affirmations of eternal life: only the Christian Testament deliberately and constantly links the promise of heaven with ethical exhortation, appealing to the hope of eternity as the incentive for righteous action. For Christians, every believer's ultimate desire and goal must be to experience eternal salvation. Leading a righteous earthly existence is understood as a means towards attaining this goal. Jews, on the other hand, insist that performing sacred acts while alive on earth is our ultimate objective; heaven is merely where we receive our reward after our goal has been attained. The Talmud, in this regard, makes a statement that any Christian would find mind-boggling: "One hour obeying God's commandments in this world is more glorious than an eternity in the World to Come."

This difference in emphasis can be seen most clearly by contrasting the central New Testament statement on ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, with Rabbinic writings. Here are some of Jesus's ethical exhortations:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

A traditional Jew studying Jesus's style in delivering the Sermon on the Mount is instantly reminded of the Mishnaic tractate *Ethics of the Fathers*, a collection of rabbinical sayings that Jesus's words appear to echo. Consider these parallel passages from the tractate:

> Fortunate is man, for he was created in the image of God.
> Fortunate are the Israelites, for they are called the children of God.

> Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion in pursuit of the will of your Father in heaven.

While the common phrases used by Jesus—"fortunate are," "Father in heaven"—are standard rabbinic utterances, Jesus's repeated support for his statements—"for they will inherit the kingdom of heaven"—is his own. Such a phrase appears nowhere in the rabbinic ethical writings. Their focus is more on action than on salvation.

The contrast extends to differing ways of celebrating holidays. In speaking to Fr. Jim about our respective faiths, I told him about the phenomenon of "Yom Kippur Jews." Many of my nonobservant coreligionists, I said, show up in synagogue only on the Day of Atonement and so experience a Judaism that focuses only on judgment and repentance. They never experience Judaism at its most joyous moments: Passover, Hanukkah, Purim. "I have the opposite problem," said Jim. "Some people show up in church for Easter only—Christianity at its most joyous. And so they never think about judgment and repentance."

Both rabbis and priests would appreciate regularly packed houses of worship; but the contrast between the central days of the Jewish and Christian calendars is instructive. Christians celebrate a day when, they believe, Jesus was given his place in heaven and so, at least potentially, was every member of humanity. Yom Kippur, in contrast, is not a day for celebration but for solemnity, a day for focusing not on salvation but on action. Jews recite, again and again, a long litany of sins that they might have committed; they pray for forgiveness, and conclude, time and again, with the sentence: "May it be Thy will, Lord our God, that I not sin again." While the entire day is devoted to prayer, and to evaluation of past deeds, the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife is *not mentioned once*. The only question of concern is whether, at the end of the day, God will consider us sufficiently repentant. Yom Kippur's climax comes at sunset, during the *neilah*, or "closing" prayer. After begging once again for forgiveness, Jews the world over end the day with the recitation of "Our Father, Our King," named thusly because of the first phrase in every sentence:

> Our Father, our King, we have sinned before You.
> Our Father, our King, we have no king but You.
> Our Father, our King, return us in wholehearted repentance before You.

We ask God for mercy and for forgiveness, attributes of God that Judaism holds dear. But then our thoughts turn to the utterly evil and unrepentant. Towards the end of this prayer, one anguished, pain-filled sentence stands out: "Our Father, our King, avenge, before our eyes, the spilled blood of your servants." After a day devoted to prayer, synagogues everywhere are filled with the cry of fasting, weary, exhausted Jews. They have spent the past twenty-five hours meditating upon their sins and asking for forgiveness. Now, they suddenly turn their attention to those who gave no thought to forgiveness, no thought to God, no thought to the dignity of the Jewish people. After focusing on their own actions, Jews turn to those of others, and their parched throats mouth this message: "Father, do not forgive them, for they know well what they do."

The essence of each religion is reflected in its attitude toward the sinner. The existence of hell should be a painful proposition for Christians, who profess to believe that Christ died to redeem the world. C. S. Lewis, in his *The Problem of Pain*, mournfully admits as much. Yet the doctrines of free will and divine justice compel him to admit that some will not be redeemed.

> There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specifically, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.

The notion that someone may be eternally damned, Lewis writes, is one that he "detests" with all his heart; yet anyone who refuses to submit to salvation cannot ultimately be saved. Despite this, Lewis adds that even these wretches must be in our prayers. "Christian charity," he stresses, "counsels us to make every effort for the conversion of such a man: to prefer his conversion, at the peril of our own lives, perhaps of our own souls, to his punishment; to prefer it infinitely."

Here Judaism strongly disagrees. For Jews deny that there ever was a "divine labor" to redeem the world; rather, God gave humanity the means for its own redemption, and its members will be judged by the choices they make. Christians may maintain that no human being is unloved by the God who died on his or her behalf, but Jews insist that while no human being is denied the chance to *become* worthy of God's love, not every human being engages in actions so as to be worthy of that love, and those unworthy of divine love do not deserve our love either.

This distinction between salvation and decision is evident in the fact that some Christians hold out hope for something that traditional Jews never even consider: that every human being will ultimately be saved. As Fr. Richard John Neuhaus notes, some verses in the New Testament have been said to assert this explicitly ("Will All Be Saved?" FT, Public Square, August/September 2001). Take, for example, 1 Corinthians: "For as all die in Adam, so will all be made alive in Jesus Christ." Romans states it even more strongly: "For just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." Pope John Paul II has suggested that we cannot say with certainty that even Judas is in hell.

Forget Judas, a Jew might respond. What about Hitler? Even here, Fr. Neuhaus refuses to relent: "Hitler may have repented, turning to the mercy of God, even as his finger pressed the trigger." Maybe, Neuhaus suggests, Hitler and Mao spend thousands of years in purgatory. Or perhaps, he whimsically says, "Hitler in heaven will be forever a little dog to whom we will benignly condescend. But he will be grateful for being there, and for not having received what he deserved," just as "we will all be grateful for being there and for not having received what we deserve."

The Mishnah's view, set down approximately at the time Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, could not be more different, explicitly singling out specific wicked men in biblical history who will never by saved. And unlike Lewis, the rabbis seem utterly unperturbed that some are eternally damned; for, unlike Neuhaus, the rabbis quite strongly believed that we go to heaven precisely because we *deserve* to be there. One of the most fascinating differences between Judaism and Christianity is that while both faiths believe in heaven, only Judaism speaks of one's eternal reward as a *chelek*, a portion. For instance: "Jeroboam has no portion in the World to Come." The rabbis saw the afterlife as a function of one's spiritual savings account, in which the extent of one's experience of the divine presence is determined by the value of the good deeds that he or she has accumulated in life.

This does not mean that the rabbis believed that those with few virtues were eternally damned. The sages believed in a form of purgatory, where those with more sins than good deeds were sent. Damnation was reserved for the frightfully wicked.

ewish intolerance for the wicked is made most manifest in Maimonides' interpretation of damnation. In his view souls are never eternally punished in hell: the presence of the truly wicked is so intolerable to the

Almighty that they never even experience an afterlife. Rather, they are, in the words of the Bible, "cut off": after death, they just . . . disappear.

The Protestant theologian Harvey Cox, who is married to a Jew, wrote a book on his impressions of Jewish ritual. Cox describes the Jewish holiday of Purim, on which the defeat of Haman is celebrated by the reading of the book of Esther. Enamored with the biblical story, Cox enjoys the tale until the end, where, as noted above, Esther wreaks vengeance upon her enemies. Like Sr. Johanna, he is disturbed by Jewish hatred. It cannot be a coincidence, he argues, that precisely on Purim a Jew by the name of Baruch Goldstein murdered twenty innocent Muslims engaged in prayer in Hebron.

There is something to Cox's remarks. The danger inherent in hatred is that it must be very limited, directed only at the most evil and unrepentant. According to the Talmud, the angels began singing a song of triumph upon the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt until God interrupted them: "My creatures are drowning, and you wish to sing a song?" Yet the rabbis also state that God wreaked further vengeance upon Pharoah himself, ordering the sea to spit him out, so that he could return to Egypt alone, without his army. Apparently one must cross some terrible moral boundary in order to be a justified target of God's hatred—and of ours. An Israeli mother is right to raise her child to hate Saddam Hussein, but she would fail as a parent if she taught him to despise every Arab. We who hate must be wary lest we, like Goldstein, become like those we are taught to despise.

Another danger inherent in hate is that we may misdirect our odium at institutions in the present because of their past misdeeds. For instance, some of my coreligionists reserve special abhorrence for anything German, even though Germany is currently one of the most pro-Israel countries in Europe. Similarly, after centuries of suffering, many Jews have, in my own experience, continued to despise religious Christians, even though it is secularists and Islamists who threaten them today, and Christians should really be seen as their natural allies. Many Jewish intellectuals and others of influence still take every assertion of the truth of Christianity as an anti-Semitic attack. After the Catholic Church beatified Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Christianity, some prominent Jews asserted that the Church was attempting to cover up its role in causing the Holocaust. And then there is the historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who essentially has asserted that any attempt by the Catholic Church to maintain that Christianity is the one true faith marks a continuation of the crimes of the Church in the past.

Burning hatred, once kindled, is difficult to extinguish; but that is precisely what Jews must do when reassessing our relationship with contemporary Christianity. The crimes of popes of the past do not negate the fact that John Paul II is one of the righteous men of our generation. If Christians no longer hold us accountable for the crime of deicide, we cannot remain indifferent to such changes. Christians have every right to assert the truth of their beliefs. Modern anti-Christianity is no more excusable than ancient anti-Semitism.

Yet neither does this mean that hate is always wrong, nor that Esther's actions were unnecessary. The rabbis of the Talmud were bothered by a contradiction: the book of Kings describes Saul as killing every Amalekite, and yet Haman, according to his pedigree in the book of Esther, was an Agagite, a descendant of the Amalekite king. The Talmud offers an instructive solution: after Saul had killed every Amalekite, he experienced a moment of mercy, and wrongly refrained from killing King Agag. This allowed Agag a window of opportunity; he had several minutes before he was killed by the angry Samuel. In those precious moments, Agag engaged in relations with a random woman, and his progeny lived on to threaten the Jews in the future. The message is that hate allows us to keep our guard up, to protect us. When we are facing those who seek nothing but our destruction, our hate reminds us who we are dealing with. When hate is appropriate, then it is not only virtuous, but essential for Jewish well-being.

Archbishop Tutu, who, as indicated above, preaches the importance of forgiveness towards Nazis, has, of late, become one of Israel's most vocal critics, demanding that other countries enact sanctions against the Jewish state. Perhaps he would have Israelis adopt an attitude of forgiveness towards those who have sworn to destroy the only democracy in the Middle East. Yet forgiveness is precisely what the Israeli government attempted ten years ago, when it argued that the time had come to forget the unspeakable actions of a particular individual, and to recognize him as the future leader of a Palestinian state. Many Jews, however, seething with hatred for this man, felt that it was the Israeli leaders who "knew not what they were doing."

At the time, my grandfather, a rabbi, joined those on the Israeli right in condemning the Oslo process, arguing that it would produce a terrorist state responsible for hundreds of Israeli deaths. As a rabbinical student, I could not understand my grandfather's unremitting opposition. He was, I thought, so blinded by his hate that he was unable to comprehend the powerful potential of the peace process. Now, many hundreds of Jewish victims of suicide bombings later, and fifty years after the Holocaust, the importance

and the necessity of Jewish hate has once again been demonstrated. Perhaps there will soon be peace in the Middle East, perhaps not. But one thing is certain: we will not soon forgive the actions of a man who, as he sent children to kill children, knew—all too well—just what he was doing. We will not—we cannot—ask God to have mercy upon him. Those Israeli parents whose boys and girls did not come home will pray for the destiny of his soul at the conclusion of their holiest day, but their prayer will be rather different from the rosary:

> *Let the terrorist die unshriven.*
>
> *Let him go to hell.*
>
> *Sooner a fly to God than he.*

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