

Einstein and Us: The Origins of Judah-ism

Parashat Vayigash, Genesis, Chapters 42-45 | December 9, 2021

In the 1930s, Albert Einstein was once asked about his views on Judaism, and he replied by highlighting one aspect of the faith of his fathers with which he disagreed:

I am a determinist...I do not believe in free will. Jews believe in free will. They believe that man shapes his own life. I reject that doctrine.

So he said, but the irony is that Einstein's friend, the physicist Abraham Pais, once called Einstein "the freest man I know," describing Einstein's own astonishing overturning of the assumptions of centuries. Einstein, for him, embodied the very possibility of human freedom, and Judaism insists that what is true of Einstein is true of us all—for Einstein was correct that Jews believe in free will, and moreover, it is the man who gave us the word for Jew who will truly teach us about the very possibility of human freedom.

Pharaoh is so impressed by Joseph's interpretation of his dreams that he appoints the Hebrew prisoner as vizier. Because of the famine plaguing civilization, Joseph's brothers end up in Egypt, standing before a powerful personage who, unbeknownst to them, is the half-brother that they betrayed. They are there to seek sustenance on behalf of themselves and their elderly father. Joseph accuses them of being spies, and then, responding to their claim of being a family, demands that they prove their story by returning to the Holy Land and bringing back with them Benjamin, who is the other son of Jacob's beloved Rachel and Joseph's full brother. Until they return, one of them—Jacob's second son Simeon—is to be held hostage by this mysterious vizier. The brothers, bewildered, take their leave of Joseph, and ponder why God has brought about such a bizarre and terrible turn of events:

On the third day Joseph said to them, Do this and you will live, for I fear God:

If you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined in your prison, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households;

And bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die. And they did so.

Then they said to one another, But in truth, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us. (Genesis 42:18-21)

"But in truth, we are guilty." In Hebrew: "Aval asbeimim anachnu." The words are framed as if they are responding to someone who sought to excuse their actions, yet no such excuse had been made. But the reality is that day after day following the sale of Joseph, the brothers, talking amongst each other, or to themselves, had likely sought some reason to mitigate their misdeed: "He brought it on himself," they might have said. "It was not our fault; he was too arrogant for his own good; we had no choice." It is to these thoughts—unexpressed at the time, but perhaps murmured to each other throughout the years following Joseph's kidnapping—that the brothers now respond. But in truth, we *are* guilty. Despite all our excuses, we were free to choose, and we chose wrongly. In our freedom lies our culpability.

The brothers' statement presents us with an approach to human nature that is irreconcilable with modern materialist determinism. They give us a picture of the mind that is more than a mere sequence of synapses which we cannot control. They depict moral choices as truly *choices*, not predetermined, emerging inevitably out of an environment that demanded it. For the latter determinist perspective, man is not free and therefore is

never guilty. Albert Einstein himself supposedly expressed such an approach in his purported remark that:

I know that philosophically a murderer is not responsible for his crime, but I prefer not to take tea with him anyway.

Such a moral anthropology is not only a product of modernity. In the biblical age as well, countless cultures proclaimed that one's actions were controlled by the planets, or one's fate by the stars. As the religious physicist Stephen M. Barr has put it, the modern materialist is akin to the pagan of old in that he

...ends up subjecting man to the subhuman. The pagan supernaturalist did so by raising the merely material to the level of spirit or the divine. The materialist does so by lowering what is truly spiritual or in the divine image to the level of matter. The results are much the same. The pagan said that his actions were controlled by the orbits of the planets and stars, the materialist says they are controlled by the orbits of the electrons in his brain. The pagan bowed down to animals or the likenesses of animals in worship, the materialist avers that he himself is no more than an animal. The pagan spoke of fate, the materialist speaks of physical determinism.

To such an approach—both the pagan and the modern—the brothers' confession offers a ringing reply: *But we are guilty. We are* responsible for our crimes. Einstein himself recognized that Judaism, from its very beginning, proclaimed the exact opposite of his understanding of man's moral capacity, and he succinctly summarized what may be Judaism's first principle. "Jews believe in free will. They believe that man shapes his own life." For some, such as the medieval Jewish exegete Obadiah Seforno, it is to this freedom that the Bible refers when it tells us that man is made in the image of God. An animal follows only urges and instincts, an angel only the orders of the Almighty. But man, and man alone, chooses the course that his life will take.

The phrase uttered by the brothers, "*But in truth we are guilty*," "*Aval asbeimim anachnu*," becomes that uttered by Jews around the world on the Day of Atonement year after year, "*aval anachnu va-avaoteninu chatanu*," "but in truth we and our ancestors have sinned," and then we add "*ashamnu*," "we are indeed guilty." Making the brother's mantra our own is strikingly countercultural. For we live today, as many have noted, in an age and culture of victimhood, where nothing is our fault, where bad things happen to us not through our own seeming irresponsibility or immorality, but because of external factors. As George Will once wryly noted, after someone sued because of being burned by spilling hot coffee, today in America

you can buy a five-inch fishing lure with a warning label on it that says 'harmful if swallowed.' You can buy a letter opener that says 'safety goggles recommended.' You can buy a clothes iron that says on it 'warning: do not iron clothes on body.' You can buy a child's stroller that says 'remove child before folding.'

Ours, in other words, is a generation that communicates constantly to citizens of society that they are fundamentally not responsible for their own lives.

But for Judaism, we are responsible, because we are free, and it is this freedom that we reference when we echo Joseph's brothers and proclaim our own guilt on the Day of Atonement. It is this freedom that Jacob's children acknowledge as they admit their guilt. But freedom has another corollary as well. If we are free, then we are responsible, but we are also able to change, to progress, to repent, to correct our flaws, and to right wrongs. The acknowledgment of guilt is only the beginning. Here, Judaism parts paths not only with materialism but also with some approaches to repentance in which atonement is described as an acknowledgment of inherent wretchedness. But for Jewish religious literature, repentance is something very different; rather than a recognition of wretchedness, repentance is a triumph of the human spirit, a confrontation with, and victory over, a temptation to which one had once succumbed. Yes, only a bad person need repent, but a bad person remains *capable* of repentance. Indeed,

his previous failure allows him to make manifest an extraordinary strength of spirit of which one may not have been aware before. Maimonides puts it this way:

What is complete repentance? That is a case of one who is presented with a sin that he had once transgressed, and he is able to perform it again, and he refrains, and does not sin, motivated by repentance, and not from fear or lack of will.

God demands repentance of humankind, but God also has faith that humankind is capable of achieving it. It is this capacity that Judah, above and beyond all the other brothers, will make manifest. All of Joseph's brethren proclaimed their guilt, but one and only one will come to embody the form of repentance described by Maimonides. Originally, upon the brothers' return to Jacob, the elderly patriarch refuses to send Benjamin to Egypt, because Benjamin is the only remaining son of Rachel. At this point, all of the hatred and jealousy directed against Joseph could so easily have found a new target in Benjamin. But Judah—who had suggested selling Joseph—pledges his life for his other half-brother:

And Judah said to Israel his father, Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones.

I will be surety for him; of my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame for ever. (Genesis 43:8-9)

Thus does the very same Judah who had betrayed one half-brother pledge himself for another. Judah is then called to make good on his pledge, for in Egypt, Joseph frames Benjamin for theft, and insists that the latter remain in Egypt as his slave.

Here, Judah rises to the occasion, fulfills his promise to the patriarch, and pleads: take me instead.

Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, then, as

his life is bound up in the lad's life;

When he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol.

For your servant became collateral for the lad to my father, saying, If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.

Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers. (Genesis 44:30-33)

It is Judah's transformation that suddenly stuns Joseph, and convinces him to cease his charade:

And Joseph said unto his brethren: I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were affrighted at his presence. (Genesis 45:3)

Joseph assures his brothers of their safety and asks that they bring Jacob to Egypt, and then, astonishingly, the man they betrayed embraces them all:

And he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them; and after that his brethren talked with him. (Genesis 45:15)

The story is often referred to as that of "Joseph and his Brothers," and Joseph's forgiveness is indeed astonishing and inspiring; but Joseph is not the person in this story who undergoes the most interesting character development. This saga could just as easily have been called "Judah and his Brothers," for as much as Joseph, it is the story of Judah, sinner and then penitent, betrayer and then savior, coward and then hero. Faced with a chance to commit the very crime that he had chosen in the past, Judah does not flinch. To abandon a favorite half-brother yet again was so tempting, so easy. The children of Israel could have returned with both children of Rachel gone, leaving them the sole heirs to Jacob's legacy. Judah faces the very same choice decades after

his first failure, and again free to choose, he chooses very differently. Judah repents, but his repentance is not, ultimately, one of mere humbling and surrender, but of heroic greatness.

As we approach the end of Genesis, we realize that the question of freedom has recurred throughout. Building on Thomas Cahill, we described how Abram defied the cyclical approach of Mesopotamian time. We further saw how Joseph brought the Hebraic belief in the possibility of change to the Groundhog Day that is Egypt. And now, in Judah's evolution, the true potential for change within ourselves reveals itself.

In a lovely bit of homiletics, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, building on Thomas Cahill, once interpreted the Almighty's instruction to Abram, "*Go from your land, and from your birthplace, and your father's house*" as a response to three men of Jewish descent who impacted the modern world: Spinoza, Marx, and Freud. As Rabbi Sacks put it:

Marx said that human beings are determined by the play of economic forces, by class differences, by who owns land. Therefore God said to Abraham: *Lech lecha me'artzecha*—Leave the land. Spinoza said that human beings are determined by the circumstances of their birth, by what today we would call genetic instincts and therefore God said to Abraham: Leave *moledetecha*—the place of your birth. Freud said that human beings are determined by our early childhood experiences and therefore God said to Abraham: Leave your father's house...every attempt to reduce human behaviour to science or to pseudo-science is a failure to understand the nature of human freedom, of human agency, of human responsibility. A failure to understand that what makes us human is that we have will, we have choice, we have creativity. Every single attempt—socio-biological, genetic etc., and they are published by the hundred every single year—represents the failure

to distinguish between a cause and an intention. Between phenomena whose causes lie in the past: those are scientific phenomena—and human behaviour, which is oriented towards the future. A future which only exists because I can imagine it and because I can imagine it I can choose to bring it about. That is in principle not subject to scientific causal analysis. And that is the root of human freedom. Because human beings are free—therefore we are not condemned to eternal recurrence. We can act differently today from the way we did yesterday—in small ways individually, in very big ways collectively. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world.

The story of Judah is the story of change. And that, I would suggest, allows us to understand, as I argues in the journal *Sapir*, another reason why it is apt that the word "Judaism" is linked to Judah. For Judaism is a faith that not only informs us about God, but also informs us about the moral capacity of man. To those who insist that human beings are not truly free, but are a bundle of uncontrollable, irrepressible urges, Judaism submits the overwhelming realization of guilt experienced by Judah. To those who submit that man is inherently evil, unable to repent on his own, Judaism submits the stunning repentance of Judah. Thus, Judaism is genuinely "Judaism." It proclaims, idealistically but also realistically, that most men may not be Moses, but we can be Judah. It asserts, critically but optimistically, that mankind is not inherently good, but that it is capable of goodness. Judaism is a faith whose namesake is not perfect, but therefore is also an inspiration to us all. Judah was not Abraham, the knight of faith; he was not Moses, who spoke face to face with God; he was a man who struggled, who faltered, who failed; but who also repented, improved, and overcame. This then is our aspiration—not perfection, but the moral life well-lived. This is our ideal: to be like Judah, to be a *Yehudi*, to be a Jew.

Discussion Questions:

1. In addition to Judah, who are some other biblical figures who engage in acts of repentance? How are they similar to, and different from, Judah? Why do you think Judah becomes, in many ways, the paradigmatic Jewish penitent?
 2. As Rabbi Soloveichik explains, Judaism puts forward a conception of humanity in which human beings are not inherently good, but are also endowed with freedom and profound moral capacity. What do you think this nuanced view of human nature has to offer contemporary society? Can it help heal some of what ails modern man?
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