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A Jewish Response to Dysfunctional and Destructive Passion

by Daniel Maoz¹

This morning we listened to Rabbi Telushkin address the topic of “Martin Luther and Antisemitism” by framing his keynote address in the context of how passion can blind one from ethical propriety. In so doing, he looked at five historical figures to reveal how passion blinded their reason and judgement: 1) Martin Luther’s passion for faith over ethics; 2) Immanuel Kant’s passion for truth over ethics; 3) Elijah of Vilna (the Vilna Gaon)’s passion for Torah study over ethics; 4) General Robert E. Lee’s passion for loyalty to one’s state over ethics; and 5) Mahatma Gandhi’s passion for non-violence over ethics. By historically detailing the manner in which each of these five seminal figures subverted ethical propriety, Rabbi Telushkin demonstrated the inherent danger of passion and its tragic effects throughout history. In returning to Luther, he traced the early years when Luther appeared to be Philo-Semitic to later Luther when he, in hostility, turned anti-Judaic and antisemitic upon realization that Jews who heard his Gospel message would not wholesale convert to Christianity, pointing to undeniable documentation such as his venomous tractate, “Against the Jews and Their Lies.”

This afternoon, I have been given the opportunity to express my reflections on how passion has played a seminal role in my own community tradition and, in so doing, to further the conversation about ethical propriety. It occurs to me that there are a number of methodological approaches available, each with their own merit and each with their own potential pitfalls. For example, I could trace throughout Jewish history examples of passion gone wild, in instances of individuals as well as collectively. To begin this path of investigation, individual passion is recorded in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures with one brother killing another in passionate pursuit of divine acceptance (Rosenberg and Rosenberg 2001-2002). Collective passion created a golden calf in similar search for the Divine (Kahan 2013). After tracing specific documented episodes of passion gone wrong individually and collectively throughout Jewish history, I might have concluded with recent examples that elicited names such as Bernie Madoff, widely known for financial crimes of passion (Scott and Ajmera 2019), and Lev Tahor, a Haredic Jewish cult of contemporary notoriety charged with communal crimes of passion including kidnapping, sexual abuse, and child abuse (Swenson 2019). But in order to properly address this approach, I feel that I would have to spend much of my time balancing the approach with a conversation about moral equivalency and false moral equivalency, given the propensity of our generation (and past generations) to consider singular transgressions within Jewish history as equal to or greater than atrocities committed against Jews, not to mention the need to address pejorative Jewish stereotypes and damning tropes about the Jewish community. Another method that occurred to me would look at passion-driven transgressions against Jews throughout history around the world – a kind of who’s who and what’s what of antisemitism. But, again, I feel that I would have to spend far too much time framing the enormous catalogue of data and be particularly careful to remain positive and constructive, all the while

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rehearsing societal bias against Jews and Judaism in various forms and permutations of anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and Judeophobia. Those who know me know well that I tend away from negatively framed narratives on any topic. As well, I am not an effective apologist able to dispassionately counter irrational forms of bias and bigotry. I will leave this to those who are both called and gifted in this field.

There is, however, an approach with which I am familiar and comfortable, an approach I have both learned and had reinforced through the teachings of Rabbi Moshe Goldman of the Rohr Chabad Centre for Jewish Life in Waterloo. Rabbi Goldman is a regular guest lecturer in classes I teach that form part of a newly minted Minor in Judaism at Martin Luther University College here at Wilfrid Laurier University. Too often when Rabbi Moshe was scheduled to speak in my class there has been a national or international incident representing an attack on a Jewish congregation somewhere in Canada, the United States, or Western Europe, whether by stabbing during a Hanukkah celebration north of New York City (Tarinelli et al 2019); or as a Jewish yarmulke/kippah wearing pedestrian attacked by a taxi driver while coming out of his apartment in Montreal (Oster 2019); or being spit at while walking in a Parisian street for wearing Star of David jewelry (Nossiter 2018). No academic term seemed immune to headlines that warranted a common question from my Jewish students: ‘How should Jews react to such public expression of hatred?’ Rabbi Goldman’s response was calm, consistent, and comforting. He would begin by saying that there is no standard response that Jews throughout the world and in the span of history abide by. But, he would add, his sectarian community of Chabad follows the teachings of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson Z”L (of beloved memory), who taught that only light overcomes darkness. Only love suppresses anger and hatred. Reason alone fills irrationality’s cognitive void. And, so, in following this line of thinking relevant to our context, I looked for an appropriate anecdote for misappropriated and destructive passion. So, I first turned to the Talmud, Judaism’s foremost interpretive lens for the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Talmud records the familiar adage of our great first century CE sage, Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” In breaking down Hillel’s maxim, we understand that we must be for ourselves in order to realize fully our identity: thus, “If I am not for myself, who am I?” We also know that a self-serving life is a hollow life, one that disregards the needs of those in our midst. We become less than what our potential can be if we remain indifferent to others: thus, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” But Hillel also knew that what he was pointing out demanded more than intellectual assent. It called for putting our positive potential into action; thus, “If not now, when?” Self-preservation and self-service are essential for ontological balance. Over-emphasis of being for oneself, however, crosses a line and transforms into an expression of passion – an “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction” (Merriam-Webster). Once that line is crossed, consideration of others tends to fall aside as I become only for myself. What have I become as passion has taken control of my sense of self and propriety?

But passion as an energizing and motivating force can also be positively construed. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel identified a religious person as one who holds God and humanity “in one thought at one time,” a person who internalizes harm done to others, whose strength is realized in love and defiance of despair, and “whose greatest passion is compassion” (Kasimow 2015, xxi-xxii). Heschel’s last clause underscores a valid and effective response to excessive passion, compassion as one’s greatest passion.

By linking compassion with voluntarily bearing the weight of the burdens of others, Heschel apophatically mimics a Talmudic teaching that “anyone who does not have compassion for God’s creatures, it is known that he is not of the descendants of Abraham, our forefather” (*Bavli*, Beitzah 32a, in Sepharia 2020). And, “although in theory they are distinguishable,” “there is no bright line between ... the traits of kindness and compassion” and the attributes of generosity and charity (Pies 2011, 10). In Jewish tradition, a *tzadik* (righteous person) is known by their kindness, compassion, generosity, and charitable giving. The biblical proverb instructs, “If your enemy is hungry, provide food; and if your enemy thirsts, give water to drink” (Proverb 25.21). But beyond material provision, charity and compassion both may seek to address the root cause of that which endangers, hampers, or otherwise causes harm or diminishes the well-being of a fellow human being. While one may literally fulfill the mitzvah to not put a stumbling block in front of a person who cannot see it for them self (Leviticus 19.14), Jewish tradition expands the obligation to remove that which will cause a person to stumble rather than, in being aware of what they are not, permitting them to stumble by not removing it. Practically and literally speaking, remove anything on a sidewalk that a sight-challenged person might stumble over, and even extinguish discarded cigarettes lest a child come along, pick it up, and get burned (Telushkin 2000, 297).

Charity and acts of kindness are distinguished in that charity is given to the poor whereas acts of kindness are given to both poor and rich. The Talmud points out that while charity is for the living, acts of kindness serve both the living and the dead. For this reason, the Talmud considers acts of kindness greater than the giving of charity (*Bavli*, Sukkah 49b).

In a prior study (Maoz 2016), I identified compassion as essential fabric of Judaism. If compassion is, as Heschel says, the greatest compassion one can express, and if addressing crimes of passion is best done by exercising a positive alternative to dysfunctional excesses of passion, as our Chabad community friends advance, then the method I choose to consider as a response to passion that usurps ethical propriety centres on compassion in Jewish tradition.²

In order to do justice to the topic of compassion as understood and expressed in Judaism, I have first considered the actual words that the Hebrew Scriptures use to express the notion of compassion. Next, I looked at a few key contexts within Judaism in which the concept of compassion has been applied traditionally. Finally, I have considered the contemporary usage of the term in the light of its linguistic beginnings and historical employment.

Linguistic and Scriptural Origins of the Term

The first instance of the Hebrew word for compassion sees Moses standing on Mount Sinai early one morning awaiting God’s arrival in a cloud with promise that God would inscribe instructions on the two tablets that Moses had carved out of stone in obedience to a command God had given him just the day before. The scene was becoming somewhat familiar to Moses.

Moses had earlier, in ascending the same mountain, received ten “words” of instruction on stone tablets. He had descended to deliver these commandments to the Israelites who were encamped at its base. Enraged, he “hurled the tablets from his hands and

²Hereafter, the former study is presented with minor modifications to accommodate present applications.

shattered them at the foot of the mountain” in response to witnessing the golden calf that they had made in his absence. And now Moses was once again on the mountain awaiting God’s bidding. It was at this point that God self-revealed:

The Lord! the Lord! a God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.... Exodus 34.6b-7a (all English translations follow the translation of JPS TANAKH unless otherwise noted)

The Hebrew word *rachum* (compassion) is used sparingly in Hebrew Scriptures, appearing only a dozen more times. (i.e. Deuteronomy 4.31; Psalms 78.38, 86.15, 103.8, 111.4, 145.8; Joel 2.13; Jonah 4.2; 2 Chronicles 30.9) The word itself, however, tells an intriguing linguistic tale, seeing the concept of compassion generously distributed throughout Scripture by means of its root word and cognates. The plural form, *rachamin*, variously translates as “mercy” (e.g. Genesis 43.14; Isaiah 47.6; Jeremiah 42.12; Daniel 9.9) and “compassion.” (E.g. Deuteronomy 13.18; Jeremiah 16.5; Zechariah 7.9; Nehemiah 9.17, 19, 31) That both English ideas of mercy and compassion can serve to express a singular Hebrew word is telling. The divine act of holding back a judgement that one deserves (mercy) is an action borne from a profound sympathetic sentiment toward the person’s well-being (compassion). And so, the terms compassion and mercy can be interchangeable when translating *rachamin*. However, in contexts that focusing solely on mercy, the term *chesed* is used. Even so, *chesed* emanates compassion. (See Maoz, 2005)

Contemporary feminist hermeneuts such as Phyllis Trible (1978) have further advanced our understanding of the Hebrew concept of compassion by noting that the Hebrew tri-consonantal root (*r-ch-m*) for compassion / mercy, when vocalized with different vowels, conveys the physical organ specific to woman. There are ten occurrences of *rechem* in the Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis 20.18; Exodus 13.2, 12, 15; 34.19; Numbers 3.12; 8.16; 18.15; Hosea 9.14; Job 24.20. In acknowledgment of the linguistic association between compassion / mercy and the female womb may represent a minor observation. But, when this link is treated as an interpretive lens, one readily sees the deep impact it has on pivotal texts of Scripture.

According to the Psalmist, it was God who delivered him from the womb, acting as a midwife and thereafter assumed the role of mother, “I became your charge at birth; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.” (Psalm 22.10, 11) Torah has already informed the Psalmist that as a father, God created a designated people and as a mother, God gave birth to them. (Deuteronomy 32.6, 18) On this point, Trible (2015) comments:

Though the RSV translates accurately “the God who gave you birth,” the rendering is tame. We need to accent the striking portrayal of God as a woman in labor pains, for the Hebrew verb has exclusively this meaning.

Trible rightly opines,

How scandalous, then, is the totally incorrect translation in the Jerusalem Bible, “You forgot the God who fathered you” in reframing heretofore patriarchal readings of

texts, “male idolatry that has long infested faith,” that signal the motherhood of God. (Trible, 2015)

Judaism historically has interchanged the words mercy and compassion based on Scriptural interdependence of the meaning of the two terms in English, as demonstrated in

Friedlander’s acrostic translation of Psalm 145:
Holding us in your grace and compassion (*rachamin*),
You are patient and enduring in love.
In your goodness, Eternal God,
You have mercy (*rachamin*) on all your creatures.

Compassion in Jewish Context(s)

Within Judaism, the concept of compassion has been traditionally understood and applied in a wide range of contexts. To illustrate this, I will look at three such contexts: the home, when ushering in the Sabbath; ethical texts that attempt to explain difficult passages of the Hebrew Scriptures for subsequent generations; and Jewish mystical thought.

The Jewish Home: Jewish service to God begins in the home. Among the many rituals that uniquely express themselves in the family context is the welcoming of the Sabbath on Friday evening. Traditionally, while the husband attends Kabbalat Shabbat service in the synagogue, the wife prepares the Sabbath table, the table spread, lights the Sabbath candles, and recites Sabbath prayers. Compassion plays a central role at this defining moment in the Jewish week.

An example of this is The Kaf HaChaim which is a 10-volume masterpiece on *halakhah*, the *Kaf Hachaim* (the palm of life). This was composed by Yaakov Chaim Sofer, a late nineteenth early twentieth century Orthodox rabbi of Hungarian origin. This work has become a standard reference work of *halakha* (the path one walks) for both eastern (Sephardic) and western (Ashkenazi) Jewish communities. The Kaf HaChaim offers the following prayer text to be recited by women at the time of Friday evening candle lighting:

May it be your will ... that you have compassion and mercy, and may your kindness to me be increased to grant me children, who will follow Your will, and learn Torah for its sake, and may they shine forth the light of the Torah, in the merit of these Shabbos candles, as it says “for a mitzvah is a candle, and the Torah is light.” The prayer ends: Also, have mercy and compassion on my husband, [Blank] son of [Blank], and grant him long life and full years, filled with blessings and success and help him fulfill Your will fully, may it be your will. Amen. (Kaf HaChaim, 263.34, as cited in Simcha Fishbane, 2016)

Ethical Literature (Aggadic Midrash): Judaism has an entire corpus of writings, ranging from the second century BCE to the thirteenth century CE, that addresses the path one walks (*halakha*) from an ethical vantage. Earliest aggadic compositions are Targums (interpretive translations / paraphrases of Hebrew Scripture) although some scholars point out that one can see aggadic passages earlier than this, in the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. By the end of the thirteenth century CE, no single collection of ethical stories (pl., *aggadot*) contained original narratives but instead compiled a patchwork of previously written stories with, in some instances, original aggadic content added. Fantastic in nature and imaginative in spirit,

aggadic texts engage animals in conversation, embellish biblical narrative, and otherwise create discussion of important matters of life in order to imbed spirituality into the body of legislation that obligates an observant Jewish life.

Genesis Rabbah is a verse-by-verse exposition of the first book of the Bible. Genesis Rabbah (Heb., *Bereshit Rabbah*) introduces Midrash Rabbah (the great midrash), a 10-volume collection of aggadic texts. It is considered one of the earlier aggadic collections, thus offering a window into early rabbinic thought on matters of Jewish ethics. As one can imagine, a patriarch's action of sacrificing his son would have been a topic of much discussion and debate, including the role God had to have played in demanding such behaviour. Was Abraham heartless in doing so? Would Abraham's relationship with God change as a result? If so, how? Mercy from which compassion emanates plays a central role in these expositions. Not only is Abraham's compassion validated, but also it is used as a bargaining chip in negotiating reciprocity of divine compassion for future generations. Many biblical texts encourage Israel to reach an understanding with God (Isaiah 1.18), prove God's faithfulness (Malachi 3.10), and otherwise struggle with God (the very meaning of the word Israel).

Isaac said to him, 'Father, I am young and I suspect that my body might move from fear of the knife and I will cause you sorrow, or the slaughter will be invalid and the sacrifice will not rise for you, you should tie me very tight.' He sent out his hand to take the knife and tears were flowing from his eyes and his tears were falling into the eyes of Isaac because of the compassion of a father.

R. Bibi Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name, He (Abraham) said to him (God), Ruler of the universe, when you ordered me, "Take your son, your only son" (Gen. 22.2), I could have answered, Yesterday you promised me, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gen. 21.12), and now you are saying, "Offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22.2). But I did not respond in that manner, but suppressed my feelings of compassion in order to do your will. Therefore, may it be your will, O Lord our God, that when Isaac's children are in trouble, you will remember the binding (of Isaac) in their favor and be filled with compassion for them. (Genesis Rabbah 56.8, 10)

At times, aggadic texts subvert tradition, such as in *Yalkut Shimoni*, a comprehensive thirteenth century CE aggadic collection.

When the daughters of Tslafchad heard that the land was being divided to the tribes but not to the women they convened to discuss the matter. They said, "God's mercy [hesed] and compassion [*rachamin*] is not like the compassion [*rachamin*] of humankind. Humankind favors men over women. God is not that way. God's compassion [*rachamin*] is on men and women alike." (Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas 27)

Jewish Mystical Thought: Kabbalists engaged the known world with the Other World, having eyes to see beyond the physical to the transcendental world of God. Kabbalists were also aggadists, meaning that they often expressed their understanding of the path one is to walk (i.e. *halakha*) in ethical and narrative terms. In the Zohar, biblical themes are taken up such as we saw earlier in aggadic midrash. The *Zohar* (a commentary on the Torah and the Megillot) is a primary text of Jewish mysticism, or kabbalah, traditionally said to have been

composed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (a fourth generation Tanna who taught many of the great rabbis of Early Judaism including Rabbi Akiva), although Moses de Leon more probably should be credited (a thirteenth century Spanish kabbalist) either with its authorship or final redaction.

In the Zohar, compassion plays a central role in mystical thought and expression as Abraham's heart is revealed through compassionate action of intercession.

Noah and Abraham, not in relative perfection, but in relative compassion, caring for others and being willing to defend them against one's superior. ... Breshit Rabbah saw Abraham as the older more independent son, here in the Zohar he is depicted as a better father, for his task will be not only to grow up and become an independent adult but to extend his love to others – first towards his fellow human beings and then towards his children. (Zion & Israel, 2005) Rabbi Yehuda said: Who has seen a father as compassionate as Abraham? Come and see: Regarding Noah it is stated (6.13) "And God said to Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; ... and behold I will destroy them from the earth. Make you an ark of gopher wood ...;" And Noah held his peace and said nothing, nor did he intervene. But Abraham, as soon as the Holy One said to him: "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now and see ...;" Immediately, as it is stated, "and Abraham drew near and said: Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?"

The style of some passages of the Zohar employs words that echo each other. This structure is often lost in translation. Lewis divides the Aramaic text into poetic lines to reflect the original. In doing so, this portion of the Zohar exemplifies the all-inclusive nature of the theme of compassion embedded within the very fabric of Jewish thought and life.

Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white,
so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion.
Just as a rose has thirteen petals,
so Assembly of Israel has thirteen qualities of compassion.
(Barrett & Lewis, Fox, Maoz, and Meacham 2019, 368)

Contemporary Usage of the Term Compassion

In the light of its linguistic beginnings in the Jewish Bible and its historical employment in Judaic literature, the term compassion is an indistinguishable and inseparable part of the fabric of Jewish thought and life, of moral and ethical code. By embedding Rabbinic thought with Aristotelian rationalism, twelfth century medieval philosopher Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides forever altered Jewish tradition. The Rambam's influence cannot be overstated as his *Mishneh Torah* offers an accessible systematic codification of Jewish oral law (the Babylonian Talmud) that represents the highest legal authority in Orthodox Judaism today. Maimonides explains that the purpose of Torah and its contained laws is to "promote compassion, loving-kindness, and peace in the world." (*Yad Hazachah*, Hilchot Sabbath 2.3)

Compassion occupies a central role in how Jews engage in self-betterment (Jewish ethics) and responsibly act within society (morality). Unlike secular ethical codes, whether philosophical, public, deontological, or whatever, the primary emphasis of self-improvement remains core to Jewish ethics. (See Telushkin, 2006) Former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and

the British Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, addressed the topic of human morality in terms of compassion lost, compassion sought, and compassion gained. In his challenge, one recognizes the dangers that insensitivity, even passionate insensitivity can produce through lack of compassion.

Morality ... binds and blinds. It binds us to others in a bond of reciprocal altruism. But it also blinds us to the humanity of those who stand outside that bond. It unites and divides. It divides because it unites. Morality turns the "I" of self-interest into the "We" of the common good. But the very act of creating an "Us" simultaneously creates a "Them," the people not like us. Even the most universalistic of religions, founded on principles of love and compassion, have often seen those outside the faith as Satan, the infidel, the antichrist, the child of darkness, the unredeemed. They have committed unspeakable acts of brutality in the name of God.

Rabbi Sacks highlighted a wide range of positive and negative outcomes when humans passionately focus on morality. Compassion opens our eyes to that which passion can blind us. Heschel, who reminded us that "compassion is one's greatest passion," once said: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people."

At the onset of this study, I set out to address Jewish tradition's response to passion that displaces ethical propriety. In the spirit of Chabad, I conclude that words and deeds of kindness offer a valid and effective path ultimately to address corrupted passion. As Jews, in becoming a (more) compassionate people, in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, "Ours is not to finish the task (for it is a dynamic, ever-challenging, life-long process); ours also is not to abandon it."

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