

Matters of Conscience III: The obligation to obey, the obligation to disobey
and how to tell the difference?
(Genesis 22:1-19; Exodus 33:11-23)

The two young teachers face a dilemma. Nasira, a devout Muslim, is revolted by the man her parents have selected for her to marry. Rochel, an orthodox Jew, has gone on multiple dates set up by a matchmaker, each worse than the one before. At the public school where they teach, the feminist Principal is offended by their archaic ways—she wants to buy them fashionable clothes to replace the modest ones they wear, not realizing that she has insulted them. Nasira and Rochel are at home neither in the religiously structured confines of their families and communities nor in the sexually and emotionally liberated culture of their peers. Should they obey their religious traditions and deny their hearts or disobey their parents and look for love?

In the film, “Arranged”, the two women bond over this predicament. Misjudged in modernity, misunderstood in their communities, but fortified by friendship, they confide in and encourage one another. Nasira figures out how to ask her father to entertain other suitors while honoring his traditions, wisdom and concern for her. When Rochel sees a handsome, young orthodox man studying in the library, Nasira thinks outside the boxes of both traditions. She poses as a researcher to interview and photograph him, and then, pretending to be a Sephardic Jew, she brings his bio and picture to the matchmaker. Through struggle, self-knowledge, and a bit of subterfuge, these two women each find ways to balance disobedience and obedience, rebellion and compliance, love and tradition. And, of course, true to Hollywood’s happy endings, each end up with loving, handsome, religious husbands!

This balance is not easy to achieve. When is the right time to obey? What is the right way to disobey? These are interdependent obligations. The devout Nasira would no more trade in her head-scarf for the revealing clothes of the nightclub than she would repudiate her parents. And when Rochel is so alienated from the constraints of orthodoxy that she attends a party with her previously observant cousin, she nonetheless runs from it, rejecting the drinking and dirty dancing as foreign to her values. Yet as much as they would

not disobey their consciences and the religious ideals that formed them, neither would they obey the narrow religious strictures of who is appropriate to befriend and who is acceptable to love. They find a way to balance both duties.

Conscience may be found in the intersection of tradition and lived experience. There are, in our sacred traditions, values, texts and rituals that call forth obedience and there are others that describe disobedience. Yet, even when our religious texts are direct and comprehensible, they do not necessarily provide a roadmap to balance obedience and disobedience, forbidden or permitted, right from wrong.

The Genesis text Kathy just read—known in Hebrew as *akedat Yitzchak*, the “binding of Isaac” has straightforward language. “Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. God said to him, “Abraham” and he answered, “Here I am” And God said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” This request for obedience seems excruciatingly clear—and at least to me, appallingly wrong. A sovereign command is given from on high and Abraham’s fidelity is tested. He saddles his animal, takes firewood and a knife. He answers his son who asks the whereabouts of the sacrifice with a cryptic, perhaps hopeful, certainly faithful answer, “God will see to the sheep for God’s burnt offering.” As readers, we are nearly breathless with anxiety as Abraham builds an altar, as he binds his son, as he picks up the knife. Only then, do we—and Abraham—hear that angelic voice issue a reprieve, to obey the only command we want for him to obey. “Abraham, Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy!” He puts down the knife.

As we read this story, religion is not simple. Questions abound. How can a loving God ask this of a father? What happened to the Abraham who, just a few chapters ago, challenges God to change the decree of Sodom and Gomorrah? What if Abraham wasn’t hearing the true voice of God? What if the second command had never arrived?

Conscience is not straightforward. Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard calls Abraham a “knight of faith” and affirms his willingness to trust in and to obey God against all odds. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel remembers how he experienced the story as a young child. Upon hearing the angel cry out, “Abraham – Abraham - Do not raise your hand against the boy!” Heschel remembers beginning to weep. Despite his teacher's reassurance that Abraham did not sacrifice Isaac, the young Heschel could not be consoled.

He asked, "But rabbi, what if the angel had come a second too late?" Heschel's rabbi patiently explained that an angel can never come too late. But Heschel concluded, "An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be." Heschel took from this story an obligation to act.

Does this story affirm a faithful duty to obey? Or evoke an equally faithful duty to disobey? Many interpreters herald Abraham's fidelity and faith, his confidence that even though it seems impossible at the start, he knows that God would not allow him to complete such a sacrifice. Other interpreters condemn Abraham—engaging in what we clergy call "preaching against the text." Books have been written about Abraham failing the test—by choosing to obey rather than to disobey.

Perhaps what this complex and painful story teaches us is, that neither an independent duty to obey nor an independent duty to disobey is a truly ethical and useful religious stance. Rabbi Harold Schulweis suggests a metaphor. A window that is stuck open is as useless as one that is stuck closed. A window that is stuck open offers no protection from gusty winds and thunderstorms. A window that is stuck closed isolates and suffocates. We need flexibility to move between the two. When the window of the duty to disobey is stuck open, it leaves us unprotected from relentless storms that can lift us into the unknown and fill us with fear. When the window of the duty to obey is stuck closed, it keeps out the air that can invigorate religious life, infuse relevance, and animate responsiveness.¹ Just as the most desirable windows are those that can both open and close, let in light and air and protect us from weather, so a discerning conscience is necessary for healthy ethical living and breathing.

Malinke was a small, curious child, who went to bed with hunger her constant companion. Her mother, unable to sell her last chicken in the marketplace, decided that if the scrawny fowl couldn't bring her family money, it could at least bring them pleasure. She announced a rare treat—she would make chicken soup for *Shabbas* dinner. Her mouth watering, Malinke imagined chicken fat floating on the surface and morsels of tender meat in the broth. But upon preparing the chicken, they discovered to their horror, a wire in the gizzard. Fearing that the chicken may be *treif*—that is, unable to be cooked or eaten in a kosher home—Malinke took the chicken and raced to the rabbi. He looked at the bird and he looked at his books. He looked at both again. It was a close call. "*Treif*" he declared. There would be no special *Shabbas* feast with this bird.

As Malinke ran home, a terrible thought came to her. Nobody knew of the rabbi's decision but her. She uttered a quick prayer, "Good God, if the chicken is *treif*, punish me, and nobody else. Amen." "Kosher," she declared breathlessly to her mother. At sundown, dressed in her best clothes, Malinke started to eat her soup. And then she began to choke. A neighbor dashed over, held the girl upside down and dislodged a bone. "God has punished me." Malinke moaned. Her lie tumbled out. Oy! Her penniless mother's whole kitchen in which she'd cooked the chicken was defiled. In the middle of the night, Malinke, tormented, took her only *Shabbas* dress and her most prized possession—beautiful, nearly new boots she inherited from a cousin who died of cholera, and sacrificed them in the river. She prayed, "Good God, I have nothing to sacrifice except this... Forgive me for everything. Amen."

When the rabbi heard of what Malinke had done, he summoned her back to his study. Rather than punishing her, he sought her for forgiveness. He had looked too long and hard at his books and at the bird. He had not noticed the pinched face and hungry eyes of the girl who brought them. He had paid attention to the wrong question. While obeying the illustrations in his books, he disobeyed the imperatives of suffering staring him in the face.

This story, "Malinke's Atonement,"ⁱⁱ by Mary Antin, highlights how interdependent obedience and disobedience can be, how critical it is to find the balance between following laws, policies and conventions and attending to the circumstances and needs in which they are embedded.

To obey without empathy is to fulfill the letter of the law while missing its spirit. We develop our conscience, not in utero or in our genes, but through the example and the wisdom of our parents and teachers, religion and culture and community. Our moral sensibilities are honed through their stories. And sometimes our conscience is developed not by accepting them at face value, but by taking exception to how they come out, by challenging them, by arguing about the norms and assumptions embedded within those stories.

Remember that bumper sticker, "Question Authority?" We can learn about conscience by protesting Abraham's obedience as much as by admiring it. We may root for Malinke as tradition's innovator, seeing in her disobedience a deeper faith and we may root for the rabbi as tradition's conservator, affirming faith by acknowledging the limits of human interpretation.

But if there is one yardstick to use in measuring our own conscience, it is empathy and compassion for others. Does obeying this rule bring more compassion into the world? Does challenging this convention increase empathy for others? To be able to know right from wrong, obedience from disobedience, to be able to discern when and how to exercise our conscience is the gift—and the responsibility—of being human. As Psalmist reminds us, “What are human beings that you have been mindful of them? Mortals that you have taken note of them? You have made humans little less than divine, and adorned them with glory and majesty. You have made humans master over Your handiwork.” (Ps. 8:5-7)

In our Exodus text for today, Moses has just argued passionately with God seeking compassion for people who seriously disobeyed—by worshipping the Golden Calf. In doing so, Moses has gained God’s favor and so he ventures two requests of God, “Let me know Your ways,” he asks. “Let me behold Your presence.” God’s response is both illuminating and inscrutable. “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name “Eternal”...but you cannot see My face, for humans may not see my face and live...Station yourself in the rock, and as my Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back, but My face must not be seen.”

So what can, what does Moses see? The most common translation is the one I’ve used here—“you will see My back”, but curiously the Hebrew word for the body part for “back” is not the word that appears in the bible. Rather, the word used here is “*achurai*”, a temporal word, meaning, “after.” You will see what there is after I have passed by. You will see my afterglow. So what is God’s afterglow?

We find a hint in the beginning of the text. “I will make all my goodness pass before you,”—what Moses can see, what we human beings can know and experience is God’s goodness. We may not be able to be biblical literalists in understanding what God asks of us, but we can recognize God’s goodness. Rabbi Schulweis calls this afterglow God’s moral predicates—the Divine qualities that we can imitate—compassion, slowness to anger, graciousness, kindness. To know the back of God, to know God’s *achurai* is to know God’s godliness. Helping, caring, healing, making peace.ⁱⁱⁱ These are the elements of conscience. If we embody these qualities of God, whether we are obeying or disobeying the laws, policies or conventions of a given time, we will

be able to live timelessly. If we do so, may we, like Moses, be able to bask in God's afterglow. *Ken yehi ratzon*. So may this be the Divine will.

ⁱ Rabbi Harold Schulweis, Conscience, p. 4

ⁱⁱ <http://www.unz.org/Pub/AtlanticMonthly-1911sep-00300>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Harold Schulweis, Conscience, p. 116