

On Halakhah

#10: God in Halakhah

David Zvi Kalman - dzkalman@gmail.com

1. תלמות בבלי שבת לא.

שוב מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי אמר לו גירני ע"מ שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו בא לפני הלל גיריה אמר לו דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור:

1. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.'

2a. תלמוד בבלי ברכות ח:

דאמר ר' חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד.

2a. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 8b

R' Hiyya b. Ami said in the name of Ulla, "From the day that the Temple was destroyed, God has nothing in His world but the four cubits of halakhah alone."

2b. תלמוד בבלי ברכות ח:

ואמר אביי מריש הוה גריסנא בגו ביתא ומצלינא בבי כנישתא כיון דשמענא להא דאמר רבי חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד לא הוה מצלינא אלא היכא דגריסנא.

2b. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 8b

Abaye said, "I used to study at home and pray in the sanctuary. Since I heard the state of R' Hiyya b. Ami in the name of Ulla...I only pray in the place where I study."

3. Zvi Kolitz, Yosl Rakover Talks to God, New York: Vintage, 1999.

p.15-6:

I believe in the God of Israel, even when He has done everything to make me cease to believe in Him. I believe in His laws even when I cannot justify His deeds. My relationship to Him is no longer that of a servant to his master, but of a student to his rabbi. I bow my head before His greatness, but I will not kiss the rod with which He chastises me. I love Him. But I love His Torah more. Even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still cherish His Torah. God commands religion, but His Torah commands

a way of life—and the more we die for the way of life, the more immortal it is!

p.24:

"God of Israel," he said, "I have fled to this place so that I may serve You in peace, to follow your commandments and glorify Your name. You, however, I doing everything to make me cease believing in You. But if You think that You will succeed with these trials in deflecting me from the true path, then I cry to You, my God and the God of my parents, that none of it will help You. You may insult me, You may chastise m, You may take from me the dearest and the best that I have in the world, You may torture me to death—I will always believe in You. I will love You always and forever—even despite You."

4. Exodus 33:17-34:7

17 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken, for thou hast found grace in My sight, and I know thee by name.' 18 And he said: 'Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory.' 19 And He said: 'I will make all My goodness pass before thee, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' 20 And He said: 'Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.' 21 And the LORD said: 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock. 22 And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand until I have passed by. 23 And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back; but My face shall not be seen.' {P}

1 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first tables, which thou didst break. 2 And be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to Me on the top of the mount. 3 And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount.' 4 And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tables of stone. 5 And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed: 'The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; 7 keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation.'

5. תלמוד בבלי בבא מציעא נט:

אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו א"ל מאי עביד קוב"ה בההיא שעתא א"ל קא חיך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

5. Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 59b

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'

6. Midrash Tehillim (Buber), Psalm 137

Rabbi Aḥa bar Abba said, “At that moment, God wished to return the entire world to null void. God said, ‘Everything that I have created was only ever for these [Israelites]...I shall destroy it.’” Rabbi Alpha bar Qeruya said, “At that moment, all the ministering angels came before God and said, ‘Master of the Universe, the whole world and everything within it is yours. Are you not satisfied with destroying your lower house that you would destroy your upper house?’ He said to them, ‘Do I need consolation?! I know the Beginning and the End, as it says “Even to old age I am the same” (Isaiah 46:4), “Therefore I said, “Look away from me, I will weep bitterly” (Isaiah 22:4). He said to them, “This consolations with which you attempt to console me are revolt to me. Leave me and lift the burden from upon them.’ Immediately the ministering angels descended and took the burden from upon them — and not just the ministering angels, but God himself travelled, as well...Why did it say, “we also wept?” Because they cried and God cried with them.

7. תלמות בבלי סוטה יד.

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב (דברים יג) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה והלא כבר נאמר (דברים ד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה מה הוא מלביש ערומים דכתיב (בראשית ג) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב (בראשית יח) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים הקב"ה ניחם אבלים דכתיב (בראשית כה) ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו אף אתה ניחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים דכתיב (דברים לד) ויקבר אותו בגיא אף אתה קבור מתים:

7. Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: “You shall walk after the Lord your God?” (Deut. 13:5) Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said: “For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire?” (Deut. 4:24) But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them,” (Gen. 3:21) so do you also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: “And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre,” (Gen. 18:1) so do you also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,” (Gen. 25:11) so do thou also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: “And He buried him in the valley,” (34:6) so do thou also bury the dead.

8. Tomer Devorah (Moshe Cordevero, d. 1570, Tzfat):

It is proper for man to imitate his Creator, resembling Him in both likeness and image according to the secret of the Supernal Form. Because the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds, a human resemblance merely in bodily appearance and not in deeds debases that Form...Consequently, it is proper for man to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown, which are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy[4] hinted at in the verses:

Part One: Who is a God like unto Thee? (Micah 7:18)

This refers to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as a patient King Who bears insult in a manner that is above human understanding. For behold, without doubt, there is nothing hidden from His providence. Furthermore, there is no moment when man is not nourished and does not exist by virtue of the divine power which flows down upon him. It follows that no man ever sins against God without the divine affluence pouring into him at that very moment, enabling him to exist and to move his limbs...And this is the meaning of the prophet's words: "Who is a God unto Thee?" He means: 'Thou, the good and merciful, art God, with the power to avenge and claim Thy debt, yet Thou art patient and bearest insult until man repents.' Behold this is a virtue man should make his own, namely, to be patient and allow himself to be insulted even to this extent and yet not refuse to bestow of his goodness to the recipients.

9. David Hartman (1931-2013), *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition*, p. 59-60

In a halakhic way of life infused by this spirit, a perspective focused on God-consciousness can act as a guiding framework for the evolution of halakha, functioning as an important corrective to the types of halakhic decision making (and decision avoidance) that tend to trigger moral conflict among many modern Jews. To continually ask the question, *Whichi God are we worshipping?* is to introduce a critical catalyst for self-correction. It is to offer a way for individuals and communities to negotiate aspects of the tradition they find problematic, allowing personal subjectivity as a way of both deepening and critically evaluating one's religious practice. Rather than searching for moral guidance within the legal precedents and exegetical maneuvering of the halakhic library, as has sadly become the common default for a wide variety of halakhic Jews, we must search for it in the image of God our moral conscience desires to learn from and compels us to choose. When God told Abraham about his plot to destroy the people of Sodom, Abraham's response was not to run to the library and crack open a book. There is a natural impulse about what is decent and just. We should allow that impulse to surface within our religious system, rather than burying or dismissing it. In this way, a God-intoxicated halakha fully emancipates the natural religious yearning that may feel nurtured by the halakhic system, yet suppressed and constricted by the moral conflicts that arise within it.

Thus, God-consciousness is not only a theological principle of halakha, but a hermeneutic one.

10. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), Totality and Infinity, p. 199

The Other who can sovereignly say no to me is exposed to the point of the sword or the revolver's bullet, and the whole unshakeable firmness of his "for itself" with that intransigent no he opposes is obliterated because the sword or the bullet has touched the ventricles or auricles of his heart. In the contexture of the world he is a quasi-nothing. But he can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very unforeseeableness of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force...not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder." The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance — the ethical resistance... If the resistance to murder were not ethical but real, we would have a perception of it, with all that refers to the subjective in perception. We would remain with the idealism of a consciousness of a struggle, and not in relationship with the Other, a relationship that can turn into a struggle, but already overflows the consciousness of struggle. The epiphany of the face is ethical.

11. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), Totality and Infinity, p. 267-9 (excerpts)

My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he is me. He is me a stranger to myself...The son coveted in voluptuousness is not given to action, remains unequal to powers. No anticipation represents him nor, as is said today, projects him...Both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved, my future does not enter into the logical essence of the possible. The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity.

...

The relation with the child...establishes relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time...In fecundity the tedium of this repetition ceases; the I is other and young, yet the ipseity that ascribed to it its meaning and its orientation in being is not lost in this renouncement of self. Fecundity continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring an eternal life to an aging subject; it is *better* across the discontinuity of generations, punctuated by the inexhaustible youths of the child.

...

Fecundity engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness: above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of the child. Here the Desire which in the first pages of this work we contrasted with need, the Desire that is not a lack, the Desire that is the independence of the separated being and its transcendence, is accomplished—not in being satisfied and in thus acknowledging that it was a need, but in transcending itself, in engendering Desire.

12. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), *God in Search of Man*, p. 159-60:

The sense for the realness of God will not be found in insipid concepts; in opinions that are astute, arid, timid; in love that is scant, erratic. Sensitivity fo God is given to a broken heart, to a mind that rises above its own wisdom. It is a sensitivity that bursts all abstractions. It is not a mere playing with a notion. There is no conviction without contrition; no affirmation without self-engagement. Consciousness of God is a response, and God is a challenge rather than a notion. We do not think Him, we are stirred by Him. We can never describe Him, we cannot comprehend Him. We can sense His presence; we cannot grasp His essence.

His is the call, ours the paraphrase; His is the creation, ours a reflection. He is not an object to be comprehended, a thesis to be endorsed; neither the sum of all that is (facts) nor a digest of all that ought to be (ideals). He is the ultimate subject.

The trembling sense for the hereness of God is the assumption of our being accountable to Him. God-awareness is not an act of God being known to man; it is the awareness of man's being known by God. In thinking about Him we are thought by him.