

Is There an Inherent Value to Mitzvos?

Biblical Perfectionism in the 14th and 20th Centuries

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Paradigm	Example
The Avos seemed to violate prohibitions	Yaakov married two sisters
The Avos needed to not fulfill certain mitzvos	The Avos needed to violate Shabbos
The Avos chose not to fulfill certain mitzvos	Avraham waited to circumcise himself until commanded to do so

V - Mystical Approach

1. ש"ת הרשב"א חלק א סימן צד – Responsa of Rashba 1:94

ועל אשר נשא יעקב שתי אחיות דע שהתורה נכונה על שלושה עמודים האחד זמן והשני מקום והשלישי כלים. הזמן לא כל הימים אסורים במלאכה כשבת וכיום טוב. ולא אסורים בחמץ כפסח. ולא חייבין בסוכה ובלולב כחג. והמקום שלא בכל מקום חייבין בתרומות ובמעשרות ואסורין בטבל כארץ ישראל ולא חייבין בקרבנות כבית הבחירה. והכלים לא בכל דבר יוצאין תמורת הלולב והאתרוג. ולא כל דבר מקריבין כבקר וצאן תורים ובני יונה ולא ראוי להקריב ככהן. ואיני יכול לפרש יותר

Regarding that Yaakov married two sisters, know that the Torah is set upon three pillars: time, place, and object. Not all times are forbidden with work like Shabbos and Yom Tov or forbidden to eat Chametz like Pesach or Succah and Lulav like on Succos. Not all places are equal like Trumah and Ma'aser are only applicable in Israel, nor obligated to offer sacrifices like in the Temple. And not all objects are equal to replace a Lulav and Esrog. Nor can anything be used

instead of cattle, sheep, or doves for sacrifices or offered by anyone other than a Priest. I am not able to explain further

2. שו"ת רדב"ז חלק ב סימן תרצו – Responsa of Radvaz 2:696

הנה אתה אווז בעורפי להוציא מה שאין לי חפץ [זאת ואעפ"כ] כדי שלא להוציאך חלק ארמוז לך רמזות עד שתבין דברי הרב... לא הכל ראויים לישא שתי אחיות כיעקב לפי שצורתו חקוקה בכסא הכבוד...

You are grabbing me by the neck to divulge something which I have no desire to. But so that you are not left empty handed, I will give you some hints so that you are able to understand the words of the Rashba... Not everyone was fit like Yaakov to marry two sisters because his face is etched on the Throne of Glory...



3. Nefesh Hachaim 1:21 – נפש החיים שער א פרק כא

שקיימו את התורה קודם נתינתה... לא שהיו מצווים ועושים כך מצד הדין. דא"כ לא היו מעמידים ח"ו על דעתם והשגתם אף שהשיגו שלפי ענין שרש נשמתם ההכרח להם לעבור ולשנות אף מקצת מאחת מכל מצות ה'. ולא היה יעקב אע"ה נושא ב' אחיות ולא היה עמרם נושא דודתו ח"ו. רק מצד השגתם בטהר שכלם



התקונים הנוראים הנעשים בכל מצוה בהעולמות וכחות העליונים ותחתונים. והפגמים הגדולים והחורבן והריסה ח"ו שיגרמו בהם אם לא יקיימום.

The Forefathers kept the Torah before it was given... It doesn't mean that they were obligated to keep it, because I that was the case, they would never have (Heaven Forbid)

used their understanding [of the spiritual workings of the world] to rationalize transgressing even a part of a single mitzvah. Yaakov would never have married two sisters, and Amram would never have married his aunt. Rather, [their decisions to keep or not keep mitzvos] were based on their pure understanding of the awesome cosmic impact in the upper and lower realms of a single mitzvah, and the spiritual calamity and destruction that would happen if they did not.

Der Judishe Togblatt April 16, 1935 Warsaw, Poland

מינ בעה וועגען מרחמה אוי שרום
אוי וועגען קרוים אוי די אינטערנאציאנאלע בעציהונגען

אין נעכטיגען י. ט. פ. צ"א איז אבי' סעניטרייך פון פילאס, רעדען אבער אלע טעטליכעייטען, פאכט אויף מיר דעם לען לעבען, פונקט אזוי, לאנג איז נישט

From the Archives

A protest by Rabbi Aaron Kotler against the trivialization and profanation of the Avos in "Chumash Motifs," an ongoing newspaper series. This essay appeared in Warsaw's Der Judische Togblatt, Poland's only religious daily newspaper, 13 Nissan, 5695/April 16, 1935.

I was recently shown the last few issues of the newspaper *Heint*. How shocked I was to see the terrible blasphemies and the violation of the sanctity of our Holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs that they contained!

The laws of our Holy Torah obligate me to react to this unheard-of profanation of truth, *Chillul Sheim Shomayim* and violation of the dignity of the Jewish Nation. I thus feel compelled to depart from my usual practice and to issue the following public statement:

The holy forefathers— who were the most luminous, loftiest, and purest personalities, the holiest creatures— represent the foundation of eternal spiritual vitality, the wellsprings of *chesed* and the full range of positive attributes, for the entire world, for all of mankind. The Avos are, in fact, held in the highest esteem by every nation on earth. The worst enemies of the Jews did not dare tamper with their luminous and holy image.

How deep the shame and how profound the anguish, then, that this despicable blasphemy should appear in a Yiddish, so-called nationalistic paper! Worse yet is the shame that this very newspaper, which compromises every principle for financial gain, did not realize that its violation of the dignity of the Avos would arouse protest from its broadest circle of readers! This protest, besides curtailing this outrage, also serves as a source of encouragement to the religious community. Did the publishers really expect people to ignore such

Free translation by Rabbi Moshe Kolodny, director of the Orthodox Jewish Archives of Agudath Israel of America.

defamation of the Creator, His Torah, and the holy Patriarchs, who form the very basis for the continued existence of *Klal Yisroel*?

The worst victims of this betrayal are our youth, for whom these stories are an insidious venom which can poison their entire way of thinking... especially in this era of widespread ignorance, when so many young people are not even vaguely familiar with what the *Chumash* writes

If we continue to tolerate such falsehoods in our homes, how can we continue to beseech G-d to answer our prayers in the merit of the very same Patriarchs and Matriarchs that these columns malign?

about the holy forefathers, and certainly do not know what *Chazal* say about them. They will instead learn about the Patriarchs from a *Heint*-perspective, culled from the "Chumash Motifs," which are permeated with cynical ridicule and the spirit of the *Yevsektzia* (the Jewish Communist division).

Every Jew possessing a spark of

faith, to whom the honor of *Klal Yisroel* is dear, is thus forbidden to allow such heretical writings (which the *Rambam* deems worse than idolatry) to enter his home, so as not to transgress: "You shall not bring anything despicable into your home."

It must be emphasized that Torah law considers whoever reads this newspaper culpable as "an accessory to a transgression," for this travesty is written and published with the reader in mind.

Every Jew must spare his household from the destructive influence of such literature. Moreover, if we continue to tolerate such falsehoods in our homes, how can we continue to beseech G-d to answer our prayers in the merit of the very same Patriarchs and Matriarchs that these columns malign?

Understandably, it is impossible to fully convey even one of the myriad facets of this subject in the confines of a letter. This inadequacy on our part, however, does not give us license to remain completely silent, either.

I appeal to *Rabbanim*, *Gaonim*, *Talmidei Chachamin*, as well as to ordinary G-d-fearing Jews to protest this sacrilege as strongly as possible!

Who knows but what our previous silence on other matters of outrage caused this present outrage to take place!

May *Hashem* heal the breaches within His People, and rebuild its spiritual ruins.

(signed) Aaron Kotler, *Rosh Mesivta* of Kletzk, who writes these words and signs them...grieving over the shame inflicted on the Torah and the People of Israel.

4. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's Commentary on the Torah

The Torah is no collection of examples of saints. It relates what occurred, not because it was exemplary but because it did occur. (Genesis 12:10)

We follow the opinion of our sage and do not consider it our task to be apologists for our great men and women, just as the Word of God, **the Torah itself never refrains from informing us of their errors and weaknesses.** (Genesis 27:1)

5. The Approach to Teaching Tanach (Mishnas Rebbe Aharon 3 173) 1981

כשנגשים לענין ישמעאל ויצחק בהשגות והשקפות של אנשים רגילים ובפרט בדור הזה אפשר לטעות שהיתה כאן תגרה בין שתי נשים על זכויות בניהן אסור להעלות זאת על הדעת ומחשבה זו היא כפירה ממש זה גם לא מתקבל על השכל כי הרי הקב"ה ציוה לאברהם לשמוע בקול שרה ובסתם תגרה בין שתי נשים לא היה הקב"ה מצוה זאת

ובכלל מעשי האבות שכפי שאמרנו היו יסודות לבנין עם ישראל והעולם כולו לא יכלו להיות מושפעים השפעה כל שהיא מנטיות ורצונות עצמיים להבין ענין זה לפי כמות ואיכות השגתנו צריך לדעת שאין אבות אלא שלשה ואילו היה פגם כל שהוא באבות ויהיה זה פגם דק מן הדק היתה כל מציאות עם ישראל אחרת מתן תורה הגאולה ויום הדין העתידיים לבוא היו בכח ובהשפעת האבות על צאצאיהם

When we approach the topic of Yishmael and Yitzchak with the ideas and perspectives of ordinary people, particularly in this generation, it is possible to err that there was a dispute between two women over the rights of their children. It is forbidden to entertain such notions, and such thoughts constitute actual heresy. Such a perspective is also illogical, because Hashem commanded Avraham to listen Sarah, and Hashem would not involve Himself and give commandants in a mere fight between two individuals.

And in general, with regard to the actions of the Forefathers which we have already mentioned are the building blocks of the nation of Israel and the entire world [as we know it], it is impossible that they were influenced by a modicum of self-interest. To understand this with our limited capabilities, one must know that the three Forefathers were unique individuals [in the course of human history]; **had there been even the slightest blemish within them, the entire existence of the Jewish nation would be radically different. The Giving of the Torah, the**

eventual Redemption and Day of Judgment are due to the actions and influence of the Avos on their descendants.

6. On the Morality of the Patriarchs: Must Biblical Heroes be Perfect? (Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schachter, Proceedings of the First International Conference on Jewish Education 2006)

Teaching Rabbi Kotler's position poses one final challenge that is not a criticism of him but rather of contemporary culture which has been deeply embedded in parts of the Modern Orthodox community as well. Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville already noted the "general equality of condition" he discovered in the United States which, he suggested, kept its citizens from acknowledging the greatness or superiority of any single idea or even any particular individual. America is a democracy and, as such, all of its citizens are considered to have been created equal, none greater or on a higher level than anyone else. George Orwell began his review of Gandhi's autobiography by asserting that "saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent." The status of sainthood is never simply bestowed; on the contrary, the operative assumption is that it is inappropriate and undeserved. In contemporary America where the personal behavior of a president of the United States is utterly inappropriate and embarrassing, our students quickly develop a huge degree of cynicism about the greatness of any authority figure. And so, in a culture where we shrink everyone to Lilliputian dimensions, how hard it is to expose our students to the fact that there were people who lived who had no imperfections whatsoever, even "the slightest of the slight."

But, while Rabbi Hirsch's position is closer to and resonates more fully with the assumptions of our culture, it too poses a significant challenge for it opens up the proverbial Pandora's box. Is it now appropriate to ascribe whatever "faults, errors and weaknesses" we want to the patriarchs? Is there a line to be drawn beyond which such ascriptions are inappropriate? Where do we draw the line? Can they, in fact, be considered just like you or me? Do we not refer to God as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?" Do we not conclude the first blessing of the Amidah by referring to Him as "the shield of Abraham?" In the words of Gary Kamiya, "To feel the pedestal is to call the very idea of the pedestal into question." It is

incumbent upon Tanakh educators squarely to face this issue and construct an approach that will fall somewhere on the continuum between these two positions, first for themselves and then for their students, whatever age they may be.

7. רמב"ן בראשית פרק יב, י – Ramban Genesis 12:10

ודע כי אברהם אבינו חטא חטא גדול בשגגה שהביא אשתו הצדקת במכשול עון מפני פחדו פן יהרגוהו, והיה לו לבטוח בשם שיציל אותו ואת אשתו ואת כל אשר לו, כי יש באלהים כח לעזור ולהציל. גם יציאתו מן הארץ, שנצטווה עליה בתחילה, מפני הרעב, עון אשר חטא, כי האלהים ברעב יפדנו ממות. ועל המעשה הזה נגזר על זרעו הגלות בארץ מצרים ביד פרעה:

And know that Avraham our father sinned greatly by bringing his righteous wife [to Pharaoh who could sin] merely because he was afraid [the Egyptians] would kill him. Rather, he should have had trust in Hashem that He would save him, his wife, and all that was with him, for Hashem has the power to help and save. Also his leaving Israel, where was initially commanded to go, because of the famine was a sin because Hashem could save someone from death by famine. And for these actions, it was decreed that his descendants would be exiled to Egypt under the control of Pharaoh.

8. Genesis Rabbah 47 – בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת לך לך פרשה מז

אר"ל האבות הן הן המרכבה שנא' ויעל אלהים מעל אברהם

Reish Lakish said: The Avos are God's chariot. As it says, God ascended from [atop] Avraham.

9. Tanya Likkutei Amarim 23 – תניא ליקוטי אמרים פרק כג

כמו שאברי גוף האדם הם לבוש לנפשו ובטלים לגמרי אליה מכל וכל כי מיד שעולה ברצונו של אדם לפשוט ידו או רגלו הן נשמעות לרצונו תכף ומיד בלי שום צווי ואמירה להן ובלי שום שהייה כלל אלא כרגע ממש כשעלה ברצונו... ועל כן גם אברי גוף האדם המקיימים המצוה ... נעשו מרכבה ממש לרצון העליון כגון היד המחלקת צדקה לעניים או עושה מצוה אחרת. ורגלים המהלכות לדבר מצוה וכן הפה ולשון שמדברי' דברי תורה והמוח שמהרהר בד"ת וי"ש ובגדולת ה' ב"ה. **וזהו שארז"ל האבות הן הן המרכבה שכל אבריהם כולם היו קדושים ומובדלים מענייני עוה"ז ולא נעשו מרכבה רק לרצון העליון לבדו כל ימיהם**

Just as the limbs of the body are "garments" for the soul and completely subservient to it, and the moment when a person wills to stretch out their arm or leg they immediately listen without any explicit command without any delay, but rather at the exact moment it is willed...so too,

the limbs of a person that fulfill a mitzvah...become a veritable chariot to God's will. For example, a hand that gives charity to a poor person or does another mitzvah. Similarly, legs that walk to a mitzvah, or a mouth that speaks words of Torah, or the brain that thinks of Torah, fear of Heaven, or the greatness of God. **And this is what the Sages meant when they said "The Avos are God's chariot" – for all of their limbs were sanctified and divorced from worldly matters and only served as a chariot for the will of God their entire lives.**

10. "The Joy of the Obedient" A Treasury of Chassidic Tales: Holidays (Rabbi Shalom Yosef Zevin)

So dangerously ill was Reb Menachem Mendel of Vizhnitz that when Yom Kippur approached, his doctors forbade him to fast. Fearful that he might ignore this instruction which the Torah of course would oblige him to heed – his chassidim turned to Reb Yehoshua of Belz: perhaps he could persuade their rebbe to eat. Reb Yehoshua thereupon wrote the ailing tzaddik a letter which ran as follows: "When my late father, Reb Sar Shalom of Belz, was dangerously ill one Yom Kippur, I recall how anxious we were lest he refuse to eat. Being the saintly man he was, though, he tackled this task with the same alacrity that he brought to the performance of any regular mitzvah. Immediately after the evening prayers he asked that food be brought to him, for he was under doctor's orders to eat at that hour. He then said, as he was accustomed to say before he performed many other mitzvos: "am herewith ready and willing to fulfill the commandment of my Creator as laid down by the Sages." He then ate with a joy that could be equaled only by the joy he experienced on Seder night in the performance of the mitzvah of eating matzah, or on Sukkos when he pronounced the blessing over the lulav."

11. Mah Hashem Elokecha Sho'el Me'imach (Rav Meir Twersky Torah Web 2020)

זאת אומרת אין לך דבר בעולם - ואפי' תפלה, ת"ת או אהבת ד' - שהוא בעל ערך רוחני עצמאי מוחלט. בזאת תבחן כל פעולה: האם הקב"ה רוצה בה באותה צורה באותה השעה?

מספרים בשם הגר"ח מבריסק שראה יהודי שנתעצב אל לבו על שנאלץ לאכל ביוה"כ. אמר לו: האם הוא גם עצוב כאשר צריך למול ביום השבת? ומי שאמר למול בשבת אמר לאכל ביוה"כ (הערת הגר"א נבנצל שליט"א למשנ"ב ס' תרי"ח). מי שאמר לצום ביוה"כ לפעמים אומר לאכל. מי שאמר לשבות בשבת לפעמים אומר

לעשות מלאכה. הצום ביוה"כ וגם שמירת שבת אינן בעצם מהותן נהוגי קדושה ורוחניות החלטיים. ישנו רק דבר אחד בעולם העבודה: רצון ד'.

The quintessence of Torah, then, is acting in accordance with retzon Hashem, God's will. No facet of Torah - be it Torah study, tefilah, or even love of God - possesses independent spiritual value and legitimacy per se. The metric we use to evaluate the propriety of every action has to be whether it ultimately reflects the retzon Hashem as delineated by the Halacha at a given time.

A similar story is told about Rav Chaim Soloveitchik zt"l. Rav Chaim encountered someone who was compelled to eat on Yom Kippur for reasons of health and was saddened by that fact. Rav Chaim asked him if he would be similarly saddened were he to make a bris on Shabbos. Rav Chaim paused and then concluded: He who legislates the performance of melacha on Shabbos on the occasion of a bris bizmano, at times commands, for reasons of health, to eat on Yom Kippur! HKB"H who commands us to fast on Yom Kippur sometimes mandates that we eat on Yom Kippur; HKB"H who commands us to desist from melacha on Shabbos sometimes stipulates that we actually engage in melacha. Even fasting on Yom Kippur and desisting from melacha on Shabbos are not, in an absolute sense, intrinsically sanctified, spiritual modes. In the service of God, there is only one factor: retzon Hashem.

https://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2020/rtwe_whatHashemWants.html

12. תניא ליקוטי אמרים פרק יח - Tanya 18

צריך לידע נאמנה כי אף מי שדעתו קצרה בידעת ה' ואין לו לב להבין בגדולת א"ס ב"ה להוליד ממנה דחילו ורחימו אפי' במוחו ותבונתו לבד אעפ"כ קרוב אליו הדבר מאד לשמור ולעשות כל מצות התורה ות"ת כנגד כולן בפיו ובלבבו ממש מעומקא דלבא באמת לאמיתו בדחילו ורחימו שהיא אהבה מסותרת שבלב כללות ישראל שהיא ירושה לנו מאבותינו רק שצריך להקדי' ולבאר תחלה באר היטב שרש אהבה זו ועניינה ואיך היא ירושה לנו.

והענין כי האבות הן הן המרכבה ועל כן זכו להמשיך נר"נ לבניהם אחריהם ... ולכן אפי' קל שבקלים ופושעי ישראל מוסרים נפשם על קדושת ה' על הרוב וסובלים עינוים קשים שלא לכפור בה' אחד ... וגם במעט שיודעים אין מתבונני' כלל ואין מוסרי' נפשם מחמת דעת והתבוננות בה' כלל. אלא בלי שום דעת והתבוננות רק כאלו הוא דבר שאי אפשר כלל לכפור בה' אחד בלי שום טעם וטענה ומענה כלל

One must know that even one who is not knowledgeable about God and does not have the ability to grasp the greatness of Hashem to generate love and fear [of Heaven] even on a

superficial level, **nevertheless it is very possible to keep all of the mitzvos in the Torah**, and all the more so, learning Torah itself which is the greatest mitzvah of all. This is done genuinely from the depths of one heart with love and fear which stems from the “hidden love” that rests in the collective heart of the Jewish people. **This is an inheritance from our Forefathers**. But we first must understand the source for this love and how we received it as an inheritance.

The explanation is that the Avos were God’s chariot. And therefore they merited to pass on these qualities to the souls of their descendants... Therefore, even the simplest Jew or the most sinful Jew are still generally willing to give up their lives to sanctify God’s name. And they choose to undergo severe pain and torture rather than deny the One God...And even the select few that know [God’s greatness], they don’t think about it that when they give up their lives. Rather it is without any calculation; **it is as if they are simply unable to deny the existence of the One God.**