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The Tranquility of the Righteous

What does it mean to be a Conservative Jew? Specifically, what is the narrative, the story that we tell ourselves in order to justify our choosing to affiliate as Conservative Jews, let alone choosing to live as Conservative Jews? despite the fact that choosing to affiliate and choosing to live-as are two different dimensions of being Conservative Jews, never-the-less, they are related. Those who choose to live as Conservative Jews and those who choose to affiliate with but not live as Conservative Jews are theoretically motivated by the same narrative. For the affiliating only Jew, Conservative Judaism is the Judaism I would live if I lived Judaism for the same reasons that it is the Judaism that some people actually live. I have been speaking over the past few weeks, in the shadow as it were, of the latest Jewish population study and its implications for our movement. I have tried to suggest that the anticipated decline in Conservative Jewish affiliation is a result, in part, of a breakdown in narrative. That the Conservative Movement no longer has an *aggadah* to justify its *halachic* orientation: Without a “why” we cannot justify a “how.” I have further suggested that a contemporary *Musar* could serve as the connection between the “why” and the “how.” I have defined such a *Musar* as follows:

1. That human personality is shaped by the tension between the *Yetzer Ha-ra* and the *Yetzer ha-tov*, that is the necessity at every moment to choose between our Good and Evil inclination.
2. That this choice is made possible by a commitment to *halacha*. That is, that our *faith* is that we have a law which reflects the Divinity implicit in making this choice.
3. That the Divinity of this choice is measured by the impact of our choice on the good of another, our neighbor, the other human being; those closest first, those furthest away in the course of time until time itself is transformed into Messianic time. This measuring standard, in turn, helps us to refine number 2 (our faith in the law) by number 1 (our choosing the good over the evil) and this is the ongoing project of Jewish life.

Finally, I have suggested that such an orientation must be brought to bear over and over as we engage in commentary and teaching, especially including our commentary and teaching each week in respect of the *parshiyot* of the Torah if we are going to establish a narrative continuity or a functioning *aggadah*. It is this project which I continue this morning.

If you were to attempt to make use of traditional *Musar* texts in constructing a contemporary Conservative *aggadah* among the many challenges you would face is the related questions of reward and punishment and the meaning of the idea of a world to come. The latter especially appears on the one hand in need of contemporary re-interpretation along the historical lines that initially characterized the Conservative Movement in its early *aggadaic* understanding of itself as the “historical school.” If, as I’ve claimed these earlier *aggadot* are no longer compelling, what are we to do with ideas such as *Olam Ha-ba* or “world to come?” To simply assign it to an earlier, more primitive system of religious thought eliminates the idea from our spiritual arsenal. We may feel vindicated as modernists, but bereft as Jews. So, perhaps we waiver: We neither really believe nor outright disbelieve. It depends on the situation. Yet it is precisely this wavering which results in our being accused of either believing in nothing or not being honest about what we believe, on the one hand, and of having no traditional religious foundation on the other. After all, we have jettisoned a central notion of religious faith. So those who desire such faith turn to our right and those who agree with our seemingly historical solution realize that they really don’t need us to reach that conclusion anymore.

How then can we approach an idea as central and as problematic as *olam ha-ba*, within what sort of *aggadah*, in order to put forward a compelling Conservative position? Can we find a *Musar* approach different from the traditional *musar* approach which we have already rejected? Allow me to attempt to do so from a verse in this morning’s *parsha* and a comment that Rashi brings from the *midrash*. The verse is the opening verse of our *parsha*:

“Jacob dwelled (or settled) in the land of his father’s sojourning; in the land of Canaan.”

Rashi’s commentary on this verse is unusually long and detailed. After a detailed commentary on each of the elements of this verse and the next one, Rashi returns to the

words *וישב יעקב* and begins his commentary again saying that there is an additional *midrashic* commentary on these words as follows:

“He Dwelled” Jacob sought to dwell in tranquility. The terrors of Joseph jumped upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility. The Holy One of Blessing says: The righteous do not consider what is prepared for them in the world to come to be sufficient; they seek tranquility in this world.”

The traditional understanding of this *midrashic* statement is that Jacob was not satisfied with what he could expect as a righteous one in terms of peace and tranquility from the world to come; he tried to achieve such tranquility in this world also. When God saw this arrogance, he punished Jacob by bringing the terrors of Joseph upon him. Just when everything seemed great, Jacob was assaulted by what he thought was the death of his child and the further challenges that would confront him in the course of the story of Joseph. Thus, apparently, he would learn to be satisfied with what awaited him in the world to come and not try to enjoy the fruits of his righteousness in this world. Furthermore, this is how it must be for every righteous individual. The reward for righteousness awaits us in the world to come, and to make sure we understand this, every good deed is matched by *tsoris*, or suffering, in this world. It is precisely such Midrashim and such interpretations of Midrashim that place us in that wavering state that I described. Certainly, our experience confirms that the righteous do not often prosper in this world. At the same time the idea that this is the way it should be, that it is God’s will repels us. What can we say? I suggest a different reading of the Midrash that Rashi has brought and hence a different interpretation of the situation Jacob finds himself in and the consequences of the Joseph story in their turn.

Let me suggest that *עולמ הבה* and *עולמ הזה* are not temporally connected. That is, they describe dimensions or experience rather than either places or epochs. This world and the world to come are ways of referring to the reality we inhabit simultaneously. The very phrase *עולמ הבה* means the world that is coming or the future; It is our ability to imagine a future that constitutes the arena of moral choice. The notion of *עולמ הבה* means that our actions have consequences and those consequences are dependent on the quality of our choices: If *Musar* entails our knowledge “That human

personality is shaped by the tension between the *Yetzer Ha-ra* and the *Yetzer ha-tov*, that is the necessity at every moment to choose between our Good and Evil inclination.” then it is part and parcel of a *Musar* orientation to be concerned with the world to come. It is the world we shape every minute of the day. It is no wonder then that Jacob, a righteous man, desired to live in tranquility. He desired to create by his choices each day a world in which harmony, tranquility, the good, predominated. How difficult is it to be righteous? We need only to look at Jacob to answer that question. Despite his acts of righteousness the world, influenced obviously by others in addition to himself, his *עולמ הבה* was one of deep suffering. The righteous have no choice but to take that chance. This is what makes this an *aggadah* for a contemporary Conservative Jew. We well realize that the obligation to seek a world of tranquility is neither justified by nor a guarantee of realizing such a world. We are well aware of the fact that most of our acts of righteousness will go unrewarded and even when we can garner some personal reward, we do not expect the world to be transformed. But it is our only choice. *עולמ הבה* the future, demands that we act in search of goodness. But the trials of Jacob and the pain of Joseph will not easily disappear. It is our acting in this context that prompts the final statement of the Midrash, read this time not as a cruel admonition from God but a statement of supreme admiration for the grandeur of human righteousness.

”The righteous are not satisfied with what is prepared for them in the world to come, they seek to dwell in tranquility in this world.” God is amazed: Unwilling to accept fantasies of a world to come, the righteous attempt to wrestle their future into a present. Despite the fact that they are confronted at every turn with pain and suffering they persist in choosing tranquility, peace and goodness. This is the rationale for a Contemporary Conservative Jewish life. We recognize that the *halacha*, traditional Jewish law, is with us at every moment. We recognize that submission to *halacha* is intended to incline our every choice to the good, the tranquil. Like Jacob we are not sanguine about the possibility of success, but like Jacob and all the righteous we will no desist. At the same time we are not satisfied to submit to a law unless we in fact can feel confident that it does indeed incline us toward our *עולמ הבה*, toward the tranquil world se seek. Therefore, we engage in exhausting argument about the law and change it in order to

accomplish these purposes. Not apologetically, but proudly. For we, like Jacob, seek the approbation of the Holy One of Blessing upon our task.