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MARTYRDOM: SUICIDE FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

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We live in a period of time when religious martyrdom has become an important issue, and there is more discussion of martyrdom now than at any time since the Middle Ages. It is obvious why. When people are willing to commit suicide in order to kill others and claim it is an act that God wants, and even commands, we must discuss it. Where does Judaism stand on the question of suicide for the sake of heaven? It is not my intention to present a complete survey of martyrdom in the Jewish tradition or the halakhic parameters of sacrificing one's life for the sanctification of the Name. For example, I will not deal with the martyrs of Masada or the question of whether Samson was a suicide martyr. The common dictionary definition of the word *martyr* is one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles. It is not clear with both Masada and Samson that this was the motivation. Martyrdom comes in two forms: involuntary and voluntary. Involuntary martyrdom occurs when the person does not intend to die, but is killed for what the person is, or does, or believes. Voluntary martyrdom occurs when the person seeks death as a positive and praiseworthy act. I will deal only with voluntary martyrdom. In voluntary martyrdom, the martyr chooses death because his/her death is pleasing to God. It is the ultimate sacrifice and expresses the deepest love for the Deity; this expression of loyalty and fealty can be matched by no other. My concern will be a relationship with God in which one believes that God views the suffering of the individual or even the death of the individual as a positive and desirable expression of faithfulness. I will make some general observations, and then move to a consideration of two specific texts, the *Akeidah*, and the death of Rabbi Akivah.

In religious martyrdom the act of self-sacrifice is usually connected to a belief in an after-life which is a reward for the act, although it does not have to be so connected. However, it is clear that in Judaism, Christianity and Islam it is. It may entail a concept of soul and body in which the soul is valued much higher than the body and the body may be regarded as an entrapment or cage for the soul. It may be that the body has no intrinsic value whatever; the body is something to be endured until we can leave it and attain

blessed relief. The body, perhaps, created by a malevolent god or demi-urge is the seat of all evil. For example, in Gnosticism, escape from the body, which is the source of evil, corruption and suffering, is a goal of the system.

In the Jewish tradition praise is given to those *she masru et nafsham al kiddush hashem*, those who sacrifice their lives to sanctify God's name.

“Said Rav Papa to Abaye: How is it that for the former generations miracles were performed, and for us miracles are not performed? He replied to him: former generations were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of (God's) name. We do not sacrifice our lives for the sanctity of (God's) name.”¹

The rabbis of Rav Papa's day were being told that they were unworthy of God performing miracles for them because they did not have the strength to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Name. This also reflects the point of view that as time passes, spiritual resources decline; that spiritually, the earlier is always better. The authority of the past is that, in truth, their wisdom was higher, closer to the source, than ours. This contrasts with the modern *Weltanschauung* in which the later is always wiser and better. The ancient sages did not believe in spiritual progress.

There is a consideration of when martyrdom is mandated:

“By a majority vote, it was resolved...that in every (other) law of the Torah, if one is commanded: ‘Transgress and suffer not death,’ they may transgress and suffer not death, excepting idolatry, incest, (which includes adultery) and murder.” When the act is public “one must incur martyrdom rather than transgress even a minor precept.”²

The difference between a private and public act is the principle of *marit ayin* - the way it appears. If someone sees a great sage doing the forbidden, that person may lose faith and be led to sin. A sage, therefore, should choose death rather than violate even a minor *mitzvah*.

Four hundred boys and girls were kidnapped to be sold into brothels. They reasoned: If we drown in the sea, we shall attain the life of the world to come. All four hundred committed suicide.³ We see that martyrdom is praiseworthy in this context even though it involves neither incest nor adultery, but will involve sexual immorality. Also, we note the close connection between martyrdom and the life of the next world.

As Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion was being burnt at the stake by the Romans: "The executioner then said to him: "Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you cause me to enter into the life to come? Yes, he replied. ...He thereupon raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul departed speedily. The executioner then jumped and threw himself into the fire. And a *bat kol* exclaimed: Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and the executioner have been assigned to the world to come."⁴

This story has some resemblance to Luke 23: 39-43 in which Jesus assures one of the two criminals crucified with him that he would have a place with him in Paradise. Hanina ben Teradion is unwilling to do anything to hasten his death, that would be suicide. Suicide and martyrdom are not the same, even when being burnt at the stake. God would take him, when God determined. The executioner (I assume the executioner was not Jewish), however, can do things to hasten death, a kind of *shabbes goy* in extreme circumstances. While Hanina ben Teradion is an involuntary martyr, the executioner who has acquired the world to come is a voluntary martyr. It is, also, interesting that the text believes that a Talmudic sage can confer the world to come at will.

Let us now proceed to the first of the two texts to be considered the, *akeidah*. There are two traditions, one that Isaac was thirteen at the time of the *Akeidah*, another that he was thirty-seven. If Isaac were thirteen years old when Abraham brings him to his sacrifice, then we would consider him an involuntary martyr. But, if he were thirty-seven years old, and behaved the way he did in many midrashic stories, we would classify him a voluntary martyr. To give just one example from Midrash Rabbah:

"...I am now thirty-seven years old, yet if God desired of me that I be slaughtered, I would not refuse.' Said the Holy Blessed One, 'This is the moment!' Straight away, God did prove Abraham."⁵

The *Akeidah* becomes the model for martyrdom and it is no coincidence that Christianity sees Isaac as an adumbration of Jesus. In the Midrash, Isaac's martyrdom is seen as a voluntary and praiseworthy act in obedience to the will of God. In another midrash:

"...Rabbi Isaac said: When Abraham wished to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said to him: 'Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve you, whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice; therefore bind me very firmly...'"⁶

Obedience to the absolute will of God, no matter what is demanded, is the meaning of serving God. It may even contradict human feeling; so Abraham, with tears in his eyes is ready to obey God's will, which is a privilege granted to him.⁷ ..."R. Azaria said: It is unnatural. It is unnatural that he should slay his son with his own hand..."⁸ In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, of course, it is the very unnaturalness of the act that moves Abraham from the ethical to the religious stage of existence and makes Abraham the knight of faith. Kierkegaard raises the question of whether there can be a "teleological suspension of the ethical". Under ordinary conditions, slaughtering your son is murder; this is an ethical universal and applies to all people, in all circumstances, in all places, and all times. Is it possible that God might move Abraham beyond the universal and demand a personal act in which Abraham, as a single one, relates to God as one particular person to the Absolute? This would be incomprehensible since only a universal can be comprehended; a particular can never be comprehended. Abraham can explain this command, therefore, to no one since he cannot bring it under a universal. That is why he cannot tell Sarah what he is doing and lied to his servants when he said that both he and Isaac would return from the mountain. The Torah credits human beings with a natural sense of justice. Thus, when Abraham had the famous dispute with God

over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he challenged God by asking whether the judge of all the earth would act unjustly.⁹

Abraham did not need Divine revelation to ask this question. For God to command a person to violate his God given sense of justice, as in the *Akeidah*, presents us with a theological dilemma, and may bring us back to Kierkegaard. We might doubt, however, that the Torah thinks in these terms, and relates to a concept of ethical universals. The sacrifice of the universal may not be part of the Torah story. The Torah may believe that God *can* command human sacrifice, but chooses not to. In the Midrash, Isaac offers himself for slaughter with zeal because this is the ultimate service of God and the ultimate obedience. What I am most interested in here, is not the justice of Abraham making Isaac into an involuntary martyr through obedience to the will of God, but the midrashic Isaac who is a willing and even zealous voluntary martyr.

The Rabbis do find such voluntary martyrdom positive:

“ Rabbi Akiva was being judged before the wicked Tunius Rufus. The time for reciting the *shema* arrived. He began to recite it and smile. He said to him: ‘ Old man, old man, either you are deaf, or you make light of suffering. He said...’ neither am I deaf, nor do I make light of suffering, but all my life I have read the verse: “ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your property.” I have loved Him with all my heart and I have loved him with all my property, but until now I was not sure I could love Him with all my soul. But now that the opportunity to love Him with all my soul has come to me, and it is the time of the recital of the *shema*, and I was not deterred from it, therefore, I recite and, therefore, I smile.”¹⁰

Rabbi Akiba is not able to fulfil the mandate in the Torah that “ you shall love the Lord your God... with all your soul,” until given the opportunity to become a martyr. This is his understanding of the meaning of the verse. Martyrdom, then, is not only positive, it is a mitzvah; and without fulfilling it, a commandment of the Torah is not performed.

It is my contention that voluntary martyrdom is an act of sacred violence that is, in fact, a ritual sacrifice. In *Totem and Taboo* Sigmund Freud understands an act of violence, murder, as the founding act of religion and civilization. This act becomes the basis for sacrifice. For Freud, human existence is a perpetual war of the forces of life and the forces of death. So Freud tells us in *Civilization And Its Discontents*:

“The existence of this inclination to aggression, which we can detect in ourselves and justly assume to be present in others, is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure (of energy). In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration... Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations.”¹¹

Sacrifice displaces the guilt and aggression onto a victim and it is through the sacrificial mechanism that civilization is held together and is not destroyed by its centrifugal forces. Like the struggle between the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer tov*, this is not something that human beings will evolve out of. As the Jewish tradition tells us that the Torah was given to us to aid the good drive in its struggle with the evil drive, so Freud suggests that civilization needs a Torah of some kind. Perhaps, in the Days of the Messiah, God will take the *yetzer hara*, out of the world, but in this world the battle is permanent. Since this struggle is a defining characteristic of human existence, we will not be surprised to learn that every human institution, including religion, contains the contest. As a matter of fact, the evil drive can express itself in religious symbols and language. For Freud there is, even, a desire for death, a kind of entropy-wish. As Freud says in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*:

“If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons- becomes inorganic once again- then we shall be compelled to say that ‘the aim of all life is death.’ ”¹²

For Richard Rubenstein, the Holocaust was a gigantic act of sacred violence with the Jews as the sacrifice:

“The Nazi ‘final solution’ represented one vast explosion of all the repressed forces which in Paganism had been channeled into the controlled and regulated slaughter of one victim at a time.”¹³

He prefers Paganism and its controlled, sacred violence to our modern, rational post-Enlightenment civilization. The more rational, the more repressed until the explosion comes. Rubenstein believes that one death is better than six million, so even human sacrifice can be justified.

Mary Douglas sees a pattern in the Torah of warring doublets, in which one is blessed and the other is sent into the wilderness. In Leviticus we have the ritual of the two goats, one is sacrificed (chosen) the other is sent into the wilderness.¹⁴ The same pattern appears with the two birds in the cleansing of the leper.¹⁵ Douglas then sees a repetition of the pattern with Isaac and Ishmael, one chosen, the other sent into the wilderness, and with Jacob and Esau, also one chosen and the other sent into the wilderness. When one thinks about it, it also applies to Cain and Abel, one is chosen and the other wanders. Perhaps, the murder of Abel is a sacrifice. The pattern may, even, underlie the account of Adam and Eve where a state of chosenness in the Garden of Eden is followed by life in the wilderness. With the goats, one is clearly the *scapegoat* and bears away the sins of Israel. But in the other cases, it is not so clear which part of the doublet is the scapegoat and which is not. Being chosen does not necessarily mean the chosen one is not the sacrifice.

The name most associated with the scapegoat and sacred violence, as the foundation of religion is Rene Girard. Girard sees sacrifice and sacred violence as a way that a community heals its disorder:

“Real or symbolic, sacrifice is primarily a collective action of the entire community, which purifies itself of its own disorder through the unanimous immolation of a victim...”¹⁶

“By scapegoat effect I mean that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters.”¹⁷

For Girard, as for Rubenstein, scapegoating is at the heart of religion, and religion is at the heart of civilization. But as compared to Freud and Rubenstein, he does not believe that scapegoating need be perpetual. James G. Williams says the following about Girard and the Bible:

“... At certain times in human history there have been disclosures that unmask the victimization mechanism that results in sacrifice and scapegoating. Such disclosures are focused and sustained in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures...Girard finds in the Bible the revelation or disclosure of a God who does not want victims, a God who is disclosed in the actions of those who take the side of victims.”¹⁸

In the Bible, evil is performed when we transform that which has been given us for life into death, as when a kid is boiled in its mother's milk. Goodness is enacted when we transform that which means death into life, as is the transformation of a war bow (*keshet*) into a rainbow in the story of Noah, or we beat our “swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks”. The struggle of life against death is part of the depth meaning of Judaism. Although in our experience, death always wins, since every living creature dies, in Jewish faith, ultimately, in a way, perhaps, we cannot comprehend, life wins.

For Richard Rubenstein, a scapegoat is necessary to maintain the equilibrium of society. It could be a human victim, and human sacrifice has played this role in history. But an animal victim works and is, therefore, preferred to the sacrifice of a human being. Neither is terrible. What is terrible is the bursting out of the feelings kept down in the pressure cooker, the return of the repressed, which resulted in the ritual sacrifice of 6,000,000 Jews. For Girard, we can escape from the scape-goating mechanism; it is not inevitable. The Bible starts the process by identifying with victims. Rubenstein does

not believe this can happen, which, perhaps, is why he calls himself a pagan.

In our day, Martyrdom has become the ideal of extremist Islamism. The victims are the scapegoats in a religious ritual. Its cause is not poverty or nationalism or politics. Its cause is religious and goes back "to things hidden since the foundation of the world," to quote Girard. Martyrdom, as a positive religious act, which is desired by God for its own sake, is a sacrifice in which the perpetrator is also the victim, making himself/herself into a scapegoat. All religions have a dark side because of the *yetzer hara* and it is the obligation of religious people to struggle against the dark side of their own religion. Judaism is not immune to this, as the violence of Baruch Goldstein has shown. We can find the belief in Judaism that voluntary martyrdom is the highest form of service and that without it the mitzvot cannot be fulfilled and we have not succeeded in loving God. The Torah does not have a uniform message and interpretation establishes which message is preferred. This, certainly, was done by the Rabbis. It is our obligation to bring the scapegoat mechanism to an end in religious affirmation. It is time for us to declare that God does not want victims and does not desire the suffering and death of God's creatures as a demonstration of loyalty. There are times when a person who does not want to die must sacrifice a life in order not to violate moral principle, and this is noble. It is the evil of the world that might require such an act. But voluntary suicide as an act well pleasing to God, intrinsically, is not noble. The time has come for us to say that voluntary violence as a religious act, whether perpetrated against others or against ourselves, is not desired by God.

Notes

1. b. Berakhot. 20a.
2. b. Sanhedrin 74a-75a.
3. b. Gittin 57b.
4. b. Avodah Zarah 18ab.

5. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (ed.) *Midrash Rabbah*, London, 1961, Genesis (*vayera*), p. 485.
6. *Ibid.*, Genesis (*vayera*), p. 497.
7. *Ibid.*, Genesis (*vayera*), p. 498.
8. *Ibid.*, Genesis (*vayera*), p. 495.
9. Gen., 18:23-32.
10. P. Talmud Berakhot, 9:5.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, And Its Discontents*, London, 1963, p. 49.
12. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure*, 1963, p. 70.
13. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, Indianapolis, New York and Kansas City, 1966, p. 18.
14. Leviticus 16:8-10.
15. Leviticus 14:5-7.
16. Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, New York, 2000, p.11.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
18. James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence & The Sacred*, San Francisco, 1991, p. 12.

All Talmud translations are from *The Talmud*, The Soncino Press, I. Epstein, editor, London, 1948. Midrash translations are from *Midrash Rabbah*, The Soncino Press, H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, editors, London and New York, 1983. Some adjustments have been made in the translations to suit modern style.