

The Ashes of Isaac and the Nature of Jewish Philosophy

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To what extent should Jewish philosophy seek to avoid accommodationism? Yoram Hazony calls Jewish philosophy 'accommodationist' when it seeks to 'provide a mirror in which the Christian philosophical tradition can admire itself' (2015, 194). He means to pick out a style of Jewish philosophy that seeks to air-brush over differences between Christian and Jewish ways of thinking. According to Hazony, it is precisely this style of philosophising that Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the great leader of American Modern Orthodox Judaism, inveighed against as an affront to the 'martyrdom of millions' of Jews in the face of religious persecution (Ibid. 197). How dare Jews paper over the differences that their ancestors were willing to die for?

In this paper, I argue that, although accommodationism would indeed be a damaging, and intellectually dishonest methodology for Jewish philosophers to adopt, we also need to be wary of a methodology that adopts the opposite extreme. The opposite extreme would be to champion Jewish distinctiveness as a philosophical end in and of itself. We cannot allow ourselves to fall prey to the mythology of a culturally pure Jewish philosophy. There is no such thing, and there *can* be no such thing, and we're all, Jew and gentile, richer for that fact.

In what follows, I will return to the central Biblical story that Hazony and I have been discussing – in our recent to and fro (Lebens 2014; Hazony 2015) – the binding of Isaac; since it makes a particularly compelling case study. I will explain how I think a central strand of Rabbinic thought understands that story and then go on to argue that only a myopic fear of, and a crippling stigma against Christianity, is responsible for some Jews choosing to suppress this central Rabbinic reading.

Having explored the Rabbinic understanding of the binding of Isaac – a reading that only emerges once we rid ourselves of our anti-Christian attitudes – I will go on to explore how that Rabbinic reading of the binding of Isaac subtly undercuts and critiques the actual Christian reading of the same story. Far from being accommodationist, my reading of the story gives rise to its own critique of Christianity; a critique not borne of fear; but serious engagement. Moving beyond the story of Abraham and Isaac, I hope to show how Judaism has always been open to influences from outside, and at every juncture in its history, it appropriated insights from other cultures.

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The Binding of Isaac

Hazoni makes two claims about the Binding of Isaac. First, he claims that it functions as a complete repudiation of human sacrifice. Second, he claims that at no point did Abraham ever consider that he would really have to go through with the sacrifice of his son (Hazoni 2012, 115-118). This second claim is important to Hazoni because only if it's true can Abraham be set up as an exemplar of the concern for innocent life. According to Hazoni, it is Abraham's concern for innocent life that motivates his election. But, if he really did consider killing his innocent son, then he couldn't very well function as an exemplar of such a virtue. Hazoni contends that only a 'Christian' misreading of the story could lead one to deny either of his claims. Furthermore, in a footnote to his book, he argues that no Rabbinic traditions contradict his two claims. This is where I differ. I contend that the Rabbis rejected *both* of his claims in various Midrashim and in both Talmuds.

Again: Hazoni's first claim is that the binding of Isaac functions as a complete repudiation of human sacrifice. I think that the claim is almost right. The story certainly functions as a repudiation of human sacrifice. At no point, in anything that I've written, have I said, or intended to convey, that God desires the sacrifice of humans – an act that the tradition quite clearly rejects as horrific and abominable. But, what I *am* going to deny is that the story functions as a *complete* repudiation. Instead, I'm going to claim that the story rejects human sacrifice but salvages a kernel of truth from the midst of the horror of that pagan rite.

Hazoni's second claim is that Abraham was utterly convinced, right throughout the story, that he wouldn't really have to go through with the sacrifice of his son. He brings a number of textual cues to support his contention. I won't analyse them here, though I don't personally find them at all persuasive. I will mention only the following two considerations. Firstly, it makes the story seriously mysterious: mysterious that Abraham was being *tested* if he knew all along that it was just a test, and mysterious that the angel should report God's satisfaction that Abraham didn't withhold his only son, if all along Abraham knew that he would never actually have to sacrifice him! But I leave those issues aside. Perhaps Hazoni's reading of the Biblical text can stand up to scrutiny. All I claim is that the Rabbinic tradition thought of Abraham as *completely* willing to sacrifice his son – thinking all along that it *would* occur. Let me share two pieces of seemingly incontrovertible proof.

A quote from Genesis Raba 56:5

Where was Isaac [as Abraham was building the altar]? Rabi Levi said, [Abraham] had taken him and hidden him away, and said that the one who should be rebuked [i.e. Satan] shouldn't come and throw a stone at him, and invalidate him from being a sacrifice.

In other words, Abraham was so intent upon fulfilling God's command to sacrifice Isaac that he hid him away from potential harm, as he built the altar, so that he shouldn't get bruised or cut, and thereby invalidated; for a sacrifice has to be unblemished. In the Rabbinic imagination, it very much looks as if Abraham was

intent upon performing the unspeakable act. When Abraham is told to withhold from sacrificing his son, the Midrash paints him as almost *disappointed*, 'let me just spill a drop of his blood', he suggests, before the angel tells him that that won't be necessary (Genesis Raba 56:7).

The Jerusalem Talmud (Taanit 2:4) imagines Abraham submitting the following prayer to God:

Master of the Universe, it's revealed and known before you that when you asked me to bring up Isaac, my son, I had a response open to me, in order to say, 'yesterday you said to me that Isaac shall be called my seed, and now you're telling me to bring him up as an offering?!' [i.e., I could have made such a claim to avoid having to go through with what you commanded me to do]. God forbid! I didn't act in such a way, but instead conquered my desire, and did your will. So may it be your will, before you, Lord, my God, that when the children of Isaac, my son, enter into times of distress, and they don't have somebody to act as their defence [in the heavenly court], *you* shall act as their defence.

In the Rabbinic imagination, Abraham was able to find a loop-hole by which to get out of the obligation to sacrifice his son, but he didn't act in such a way. 'God forbid'. Instead, he conquered his desire in order to do God's will. This Talmudic motif – Abraham's conquering his desire in order to do God's will – becomes a central image in the High Holy Days liturgy.

I don't think that these texts can honestly be read in any other way. The Rabbis of Midrash Rabba and the Jerusalem Talmud are presenting Abraham as willing to do what he had been told to do; as truly believing that he would have to sacrifice his son, and willing to do so at God's command. Perhaps Hazony could dismiss these texts as somehow polluted by Christian modes of thinking – but if the Jerusalem Talmud and Genesis Raba are polluted by Christian modes of thinking then we should pretty much write off the entire Rabbinic cannon. So, whether or not Hazony's second claim – that Abraham was never willing to sacrifice his son – stands up in the Biblical text itself; it certainly cannot be said to be a Rabbinic consensus. On the contrary, the Rabbinic reading of the story seems to stand at odds with Hazony's second claim.

My dismissal of Hazony's first claim is going to be harder to motivate, but I think that once the evidence piles up, it becomes pretty compelling. The first thing to witness is how, even in the Biblical text, Abraham offers up a sheep *in place of his son*. This is a very strange thing to do upon finding out that God doesn't want the sacrifice of his son. Why offer *x* in place of *y* if *y* is something that is completely unwanted? There are a number of ways in which this question could be answered, but I think it important, at first, simply to note the question.

Shalom Spiegel, a scholar to whom Hazony and I have both appealed as a supporter of our own position, notes how the Torah doesn't *completely* repudiate the pagan culture that sanctified first born children as sacrifices to God. In Spiegel's words (1993, p. 53):

Scripture forbade the sacrifice of the human first born, and for the practice substituted that of the [monetary] redemption of sons – but the primitive demand of “You shall give Me the first born among your sons” was never actually abolished, for the whole Levitical institution was based on that ancient principle of the sanctity of all first born, “the first issue of every womb among the children of Israel” ...

Speigel’s point is that if the Torah had wanted to repudiate the pagan practice in its entirety it could also have done away with the very notion of the sanctity of the first born and the need to redeem first born human sons. Spiegel goes on to point out how dangerous the Torah’s accommodation with this pagan custom was. By asking for animals in the place of humans, and redemption money in place of the sacrifice of first born sons, the Torah might be misconstrued to imply that human sacrifice would be even better, and that the first born son would be the best offering one could proffer. At various points in Jewish history, horrific though it is, people fell into this confusion. Surely, it would have been safer to repudiate the entire institution. But the Torah didn’t. Why?

Nachamanides provides us with a central account of what the sacrifice of animals might symbolise. In his words:

Since the deeds of man are completed in thought, word, and action, God commanded that when they sin they should bring a sacrifice, place their hands upon it, in place of the action, verbally confess in place of the word, and burn in fire the intestines and the kidneys [of the animal], which are the seat of thought and desire, and its legs, in place of the hands and legs of a person, that performs all actions, and to sprinkle the blood over the altar, in place of the blood of the person’s soul, so that the person should think, in his doing all of this, that he has sinned to his God with his body and his soul, and it would be fitting to spill his [own] blood, and burn his [own] body, were it not for the lovingkindness of the creator, who takes our offerings from us, and the sacrifice atones such that its blood should be in place of the person’s blood, its soul in place of the person’s soul, and the extremities of the sacrifice in place of the extremities of the person...
(Commentary to Leviticus 1:9)

Nachmanides’s use of the phrase-structure ‘x in place of y’ conjures up Abraham’s sacrifice of an animal *in place of his son*. The idea seems to be this: Human sacrifice is surely horrific; God wants no part in that abominable practice; He wants that institution revoked for all time; but, there is a kernel of truth in the midst of that dark and evil practice. The kernel of truth is that, in some sense or other, it would be fitting, to echo Nachmanides’ words, to spill one’s own blood before God. What can we give to God that would suffice short of our very *lives*? There is some sense in which we should be willing to spill our very guts upon the altar of the Lord. Other virtues, such as the imperative to choose life, outweigh any such consideration, and thus God doesn’t really want us to volunteer our lives, and God forbid, the lives of others. But we sacrifice animals *in place of ourselves* out of recognition of that limited kernel of

truth; in recognition of the limited sense in which it's true to say that we *should* be sacrificing ourselves, and sacrificing everything that's dear to us.

The idea that animal sacrifice is intended as a replacement for self-sacrifice is perhaps what lies behind the ancient Rabbinic tradition that Abraham wasn't merely commanded, nor merely willing, to sacrifice his son, but was actually commanded, and was actually willing, to sacrifice *himself*. In the words of the Sifre to Deuteronomy §313:

Even had the Holy One, blessed be He, asked Abraham to gouge out his own eye, he would have given it to him, and he wouldn't merely have gouged out his eye, but even his soul, which was more dear to him than anything, as it says, (Genesis 22:2), 'take now your son, your only one; Isaac'. And don't we know who his only son is? Rather [the words 'your only one'] refers to his soul, which is called 'only one', as it says 'You saved my soul from the sword; from the dog, my only one.'

Despite drawing a reference, in my review of Hazony's book (Lebens, 2014), to the Midrashic tradition concerning the ashes of Isaac, I wasn't claiming that the Rabbis *really* thought that Abraham sacrificed Isaac, and burnt him into ashes, and that he *really* was resurrected. In the words of the Amorayic Rabbi, Elazar ben Pedat, even though Isaac didn't die, scripture treats him *as if* he died, and *as if* his ashes were piled onto the altar (Midrash HaGadol Genesis 22:19). Of course the Rabbis are trading in metaphors. But it's vitally important to recognise what these metaphors were metaphors for.

I mentioned how Leviticus Rabba, as quoted by Rashi's commentary to Leviticus, talks of Isaac's ashes, and how it presents Isaac as having died a metaphorical death, for our sins. Hazony claims that I'm over-reading things (Hazony 2015, 200, note 68). The sources I quoted only say that God sees Isaac's ashes piled up before him. The sources say nothing about sin. But here, context is everything. The relevant verses in the Bible say that God's curses for the Jewish people will eventually end. At some point in time, salvation will come. We will be redeemed from the curses, and a period of blessing will be ushered in – perhaps an intimation of a messianic eschaton. And then the verse says (Leviticus 26:42) that 'I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac, and I will remember my covenant with Abraham, and the land I will remember.' The Midrash picks up on the fact that the words 'I will remember' appear next to Abraham, Jacob, and the land, but not next to Isaac. The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, explains that God doesn't need to conjure up a memory of Isaac, since Isaac's ashes lay, constantly, in front of God.

Of course, Isaac's ashes aren't real. He wasn't really sacrificed. The Rabbis are trading in metaphors. But the idea is surely that, in some sense or other, it is considered *as if* Isaac was sacrificed. And, in some sense or other, it is in the merit of those metaphorical ashes that God eventually stops cursing us, and saves us. In other words, Isaac's metaphorical death is being presented as bearing some sort of soteriological significance.

What really stands behind the sacrifice of an animal is the symbolic sacrifice of the person who brings the animal. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. Isaac, who was surely strong enough to fight off his elderly father, but instead submitted to being tied down, was willing to be sacrificed. God doesn't want such acts, of course, but he does want a kernel from them; he wants the willingness; the willingness, and the desire to give everything to him. Not, surely, because he's actually hungry, or in need of such sacrifices, but because he wants us to be completely devoted to the one ideal that transcends all other concerns – only through dedicating our entire lives to the one completely transcendent ideal – God – can we be truly free. Such dedication can be destructive. Even fanatical. But complete dedication to a God of justice, kindness and love, and renunciation of self-service, can also be, when done right, one of the keys to living one's life in service of justice for all people.

People who live their entire lives as sacrifices to an ideal can be very scary people. They can be evil. They can be totalitarians. But, they can also reach the height of lofty ethical achievement. It depends entirely upon the ideal that they live their lives as sacrifices to.

The Babylonian Talmud notes that the Jews who built the second temple upon the ruins of the first, knew where to place the altar because they saw the ashes of Isaac piled up just in the right spot. Of course we're dealing with a metaphor. But again, I can ask, what is the metaphor a metaphor for? Nachmanides seems to have a suggestion of his own. He states:

And [God] commanded [Abraham] to bring [Isaac] up to that place, because it was the mountain that God desired to dwell upon [in the future temples], and he wanted the merit of the binding of Isaac to be present in the sacrifices for all time, as Abraham says, 'The Lord will see'...
(Commentary to Genesis 22:2)

The idea that the ashes of Isaac should stand forever on the altar of the Temple Mount represents the idea that they should be somehow mixed up with the ashes of every animal ever sacrificed in the temple. This brings out the following theme: animal sacrifices are in some sense *in place* of human sacrifice; and never had two humans shown such willingness to give to the one true God as did Abraham and Isaac, whose merit seeps into every animal sacrifice ever brought subsequently to them.

According to the Rabbis, Isaac died a metaphorical death. That death had soteriological significance. According to the Rabbis, Isaac then underwent a metaphorical resurrection. Indeed, the *Shibolei Haleket* quotes an ancient tradition, according to which the classical benediction 'Blessed art thou, Lord, who resurrects the dead' was uttered first by Isaac upon his resurrection (or by the angels who witnessed it)! What was this a metaphor for? I'm not sure I know exactly. But, the fact that Isaac could return to any sort of normalcy, and go on to live a relatively healthy life as a husband and a father, in service of God, having once had to stare at the end of that knife, in the hand of his father, speaks to a tremendous resilience on his part; it speaks to an ability to overcome trauma that certainly deserves to be treated as a metaphorical *resurrection*, and a source of hope for the resurrection promised to all of us, in the end of days.

I accused Hazony of adopting an anti-Christian tone (Lebens, 2014). My worry wasn't that he might offend Christians. Indeed, he reports that he sent a draft of his book to three Christian scholars to check that his words wouldn't be *hurtful*. But Hazony misses my point. My point is that what he calls a Christian misreading of the binding of Isaac is actually pretty much the most common reading among the Rabbis of the Midrash and Talmuds. How did he miss this? And why does he seem resolutely to refuse to see it? I suggest that he manifests a classic Jewish phenomenon of eschewing anything in our own tradition that might sound too Christian.

A story about an only son, sacrificed for our sins, and resurrected – even if only metaphorically – sounds too Christian to most Jewish ears. We have, indeed, been battered, by generations of Christian anti-Semitism, and by wave after wave of attempts to convert us. It's no surprise that the Jewish people should have developed something of a cultural aversion to things that sound Christian. But, when it leads us to suppress aspects of our own tradition, then, I suggest, *we* have been crippled by our *own* prejudices.

Hazony makes two claims about the binding of Isaac. The first is that it was a complete and utter repudiation of human sacrifice. And though it *was* a repudiation of animal sacrifice, the Rabbis seems to have understood it to be less than *complete and utter* – instead, the Torah recognises a kernel of truth within the horrors of human sacrifice, which it appropriates, even as it rejects the evil act itself. The second claim is that Abraham had no intention of sacrificing his son. The Rabbis also appear to reject this claim. According to Hazony, we can only conclude that the Rabbis were too Christian.

Furthermore, despite Hazony's claims to the contrary (Hazony 2015, 201), Shalom Spiegel doesn't really agree with Hazony's reading of the binding of Isaac. We'll have more to say about Spiegel in what follows. But let me close this section with the words that Hazony seizes upon, and a response. Spiegel says (1993, 73):

The Akedah story [i.e. the binding of Isaac] repels once for all the primitive notion of the sanctity of the human first born and its derivative demand for the literal sacrifice of children. The Akedah story declared war on *the remnant of idolatry in Israel* and undertook to remove root and branch the whole long, terror-laden inheritance from idolatrous generations.

I would caution against taking these words out of context. It's true that according to Spiegel the story of the binding of Isaac, and the Hebrew Bible in general, came to repudiate the horrors of human sacrifice. I also don't deny that. But, Spiegel himself had already noted that that repudiation wasn't *absolutely complete*, because the Torah appropriated something from that pagan culture – the notion that the first born somehow belongs to God – even if first-born humans should be redeemed and never, God forbid, killed. Indeed, just before the quote that Hazony seizes upon, Spiegel says the following (Ibid.):

On Mount Moriah, taught [God], not human – [but] animal sacrifice I require! Here were laid the foundation and cornerstone for the entire complex of divine service on the Temple Mount – human sacrifice,

forbidden, substitution of another living creature for the human, *permitted*. And one may regard the Akedah story as a kind of confirmation from Heaven and approval by the Most High, of the rightness, the propriety of the Temple-service in Jerusalem.

But it isn't quite that substitution of another living creature in place of the human was *permitted*. In fact, it was *mandated*. And, the notion that it was mandated *in place of humans*, rather than having the whole ugly institution of human sacrifice abolished altogether, speaks to Nachmanides' point. From the furnace of the unspeakable horrors of human sacrifice, the Torah appropriates one single spark – a single kernel of truth. We're supposed to want to give everything we have to God. But, given our other duties, not least our duty to innocent human life, God, in his mercy, accepts animals *in place of humans*. The fact that the location of the binding of Isaac became the site of both temples compels us to read the story as centrally connected to the institution of animal sacrifices on that mountain. The Rabbinic reading of our story that I've been sketching¹ – too Christian sounding for some – pays heed to that imperative.

An Implicit Critique of Christianity

At this point, Hazony would say that I'm putting forward an accommodationist philosophy that seeks to air-brush over the differences between Judaism and Christianity. All that we'll have left to discuss with 'our Christian friends' once I'm done, so Hazony fears, is 'how very similar we all are' (Hazony 2015, 199). I've tried to demonstrate that my reading of the binding of Isaac emerges from the Rabbis – not from the New Testament. I've also argued that a fear of sounding too Christian is what leads people to suppress certain strains of Rabbinic thought, even very central strains. But, once we've overcome that fear, we needn't worry that what will emerge will be a mere mirror held up to Christianity so that it can 'gaze at a Jewish-tinted image of itself' (Ibid. p. 197). Our reading of the binding of Isaac is, I think, an excellent case in point. One can only arrive at this reading if one isn't scared of sounding too Christian. But, once we have arrived at our reading, we can see how its Christian appearance conceals a striking critique of Christianity itself.

One way to understand the sacrificial cult, as laid out in Leviticus, is that we can only atone for our sins through the blood of animal sacrifice. Certain verses stand out on this reading; verses that make the process of atonement look almost mechanistic – the blood sprinkled in the right sort of way, under the right sorts of conditions, *causes* atonement (e.g. Leviticus 17:11). Of course there are other verses that undermine this reading, and numerous occasions in the Hebrew Bible where individuals, groups, and even the entire nation, seem to receive forgiveness and salvation *without* animal sacrifice – but, be that as it may, this mechanistic reading has some feet in our scripture.

¹ Not the only Rabbinic reading of the Story. Rabbinic thought isn't monolithic. But, a central reading, certainly.

Some Christians seize upon this reading of the sacrificial rites and declare that, today, Jews cannot receive atonement because there can be no atonement without the blood of a sacrifice. The only escape, so they claim, from the stench of our own sin, is to accept Jesus as the sacrifice par excellence – a sacrifice that still has the power to atone. This is why, they might argue, Jews should become Christians. Of course, the nature of atonement, and Jesus' alleged role in bringing it about are major topics of Christian philosophy to this day. I don't mean to say that my crude presentation of Christian thought comes anywhere near to approximating the sophistication and variety of views on offer. Indeed, I think the most promising avenues for Christian thought would be those that suggest that the sacrifice of Jesus is ineffective until you somehow see yourself bound up with that sacrifice – almost as if you were sacrificed too.² Nevertheless, I do think it fair to say that it is very popular, in certain Christian circles, to say that Jesus' sacrifice brings about a mechanistic sort of atonement that used to be available only through animal sacrifices.

My reading of the binding of Isaac completely undermines this mechanistic claim of that popular Christian theology. The idea is that God, and the process of atonement, never really needed the blood of an animal. That's not really what atones. True: he does *command* us to bring animals; so we're under a *legal* obligation (and would there be a temple standing in Jerusalem today, observant Orthodox Jews would bring sacrifices there). But the bringing of the animal is supposed to be a *representation* of the person's desire to give himself completely. He is supposed to look at the animal and think of it as *him*. What brings atonement is a human being dedicating, or rededicating himself or herself to God. That is why the Hebrew Prophets rail against sacrifices that don't come along with a concern for social justice; for the orphan and the widow. If you're still too selfish to care for others, then your bringing an animal is meaningless, because you haven't really given *yourself*!

The idea that God is waiting for blood before he wipes away our sin is to confuse the letter of the law – that we are commanded to bring animals when and where possible – with the *spirit* of the law – that God wants us to dedicate our lives to him. If what God really wants is for humans freely to dedicate their entire *being* to Him, then this is one thing that God cannot do for us. Abraham and Isaac were human beings. They dedicated their being to God. As their descendants, we hope that God will protect us in their merit if not in our own. But the notion that God could sacrifice himself for *our* sins is, it seems, to confuse what sacrifice is all about. Sacrifice is about humans freely dedicating themselves to God. Nobody can do it for us. Not even God.

Don't get me wrong, I am not claiming to have demolished Christianity in a matter of a few paragraphs. I've already indicated that there are other avenues for Christians to pursue. But I do hope to have demonstrated how the Rabbinic reading of the binding of Isaac only superficially resembles the central story of the New Testament. We do have an only son (metaphorically) dying for our sins before his (metaphorical) resurrection. But, upon a deeper inspection, it becomes clear that the Rabbinic reading of the binding of Isaac stands as a subtle critique of the story of the Passion of Jesus, as many Christians understand that story. Hazony needn't worry that

² Thanks to Dean Zimmerman and Robert Adams for articulating this for me, in discussion.

we'll have nothing left to discuss with 'our Christian friends' once we adopt this Rabbinic reading of the binding of Isaac.

Indeed, I'm not scared of disagreeing with Christians, and have no subtle agenda to air-brush over the differences between our faiths. But I do worry that Hazony's anti-Christian bent is stifling his own exploration of Judaism – blinding him to certain insights put forward by the Rabbis because he can't bear to sound 'too Christian'. My criticism wasn't that he might have hurt the feelings of our Christian friends. My criticism is that he may have straightjacketed himself.

Distinctiveness to What End?

My debate with Hazony actually stands upon a more fundamental debate about distinctiveness. For a long time Jewish philosophy has been somewhat dormant within philosophy departments; studied as intellectual history in Jewish Studies departments, but rarely developed as *living* philosophy by committed Jewish philosophers and theologians. Christian philosophy, by comparison, is alive and well, within theology departments, but also, given the work of a couple of generations' worth of Christian analytic philosophers, within analytic philosophy departments too. One central question that we Jewish philosophers have to face is what relationship do we want to have with analytical Christian philosophy, given that it is already a well-established movement.

Hazony (2015, 194) seems to fear that unless we come up with work that's very distinctive, we will be lost in the much larger sea of Christian thought:

[I]s the point of having "Jewish theology" at the table simply to provide a mirror in which the Christian philosophical tradition can admire itself? Perhaps not everyone is alert to this question, but given the staggering advantage that Christian philosophy has in terms of numbers and resources, this latter option is not only a real possibility, but also the most likely outcome. We need only make a few mistakes, and within a few short years this is where we will find ourselves.

Hazony refers to a comment of Rousseau (Ibid. 196, note 61). Rousseau believed that Jewish thought couldn't be taken at face value until Jews had a State of their own with universities of their own – until that point, they would always be under the threat and influence of external forces impeding free speech and free thought (Rousseau 1979, 301). For Hazony, the establishment of the state of Israel creates an opportunity for Jews to speak in their own distinctive voice, without fear; to purge the Jewish tradition of external influences that sought to dominate us.

I too celebrate the opportunities that Statehood and independence provide for the Jewish people. I *agree* that we have a new found opportunity to feel comfortable in our own skin, but for me that comfort comes along with the ability to see the reflection of others in ourselves, and a reflection of ourselves in others – something that an oppressed minority struggling to maintain their distinct identity can never allow

themselves to do. Minority cultures under attack feel the need to maintain their distinctiveness when assimilation is a pressing concern. Assimilation is still a concern for the Jewish people. I don't doubt that for a second. But, part of what makes statehood so attractive is that it can buy us a certain cultural security not found among dispersed minorities.

Judaism surely has and surely will continue to make distinctive contributions to the conversation of mankind. But there are also going to be some telling overlaps between our thought and the thought of other religions. Not least in the case of Christianity. It's a myth that Christianity broke away all of a sudden from Judaism upon Jesus's ministry. On the contrary, the parting of the ways between our two traditions took hundreds of years to be sealed. In that period, and beyond, we left indelible imprints upon one another.

Daniel Boyarin (2006) argues that for approximately four centuries there were Jewish followers of Jesus that had more in common with the rest of Jewry than they did with gentile Christians (for example: they didn't believe in Trinitarianism, nor did they believe that Jesus was God incarnate, and they believed that Jews should continue to keep Jewish law), and there were Jews who denied Jesus' claim to being the messiah, but nonetheless had more in common with Christians than they did with many other Jews (for example: they believed in the sort of complexity in the Godhead that would later become Binitarianism, and later still Trinitarianism, and they believed that when the Messiah *did* come, he *would* be God incarnate). Jewish and Christian orthodoxies took centuries to crystallise, and they did so in conversation, and conflict, with each other. There is no pure age that we can return to in order to resurrect a Judaism free from external influences.

Not only did the parting of the ways leave an imprint on our intellectual landscape, but our subsequent relationship with Christianity, and later with Islam, had a huge effect on our intellectual evolution. If Judaism is a living tradition, then we can't undo the contribution of Maimonides; we can't undo the contribution of Saadya Gaon, despite their intellectual debt to Islam. We also can't undo the contribution of R. Soloveitchik, who despite his opposition to inter-faith dialogue, and despite the words that Hazony quoted, brought Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Rudolf Otto full square into the arena of Jewish thought.

R. Soloveitchik's attitude to other faiths is too complex to reduce to pithy slogans. His neo-Kantianism and his doctrine of cognitive pluralism, as worked out in his *The Halakhic Mind* (1998), seem to entail something akin to a religious pluralism, or at least to the specter of religious pluralism. On that view, each religion (or at least each of the 'acceptable religions') operates as something of a unique vantage point for studying aspects of reality that can only appear to a person *from* that vantage point. We know that R. Soloveitchik wasn't a pluralist *within* Judaism: witness his trenchant opposition to Conservative Judaism, for example. And, in the final analysis, I would certainly want to resist the conclusion that he was a pluralist *between* religions – but it's worth pointing out that reading *The Halakhic Mind* makes that a difficult conclusion to resist.

Reuven Zeigler makes clear, in his wonderful book, *Majesty and Humility*, that irrespective of the extent to which R. Soloveitchik's thought collapsed into a form of religious pluralism (an issue that Zeigler, unfortunately, skirts around), he *did* think

of different religions almost as distinct languages that don't really admit of inter-translation (2012). Inter-faith dialogue was so disastrous in his eyes because it could only occur if one, or both, of the faiths in question do a certain amount of violence to their own, independent, languages of faith, in order to communicate. The word 'messiah', for example, simply doesn't mean the same thing in the mouth of a Christian as it does in the mouth of a Jew. And the one language cannot actually be translated into the other, according to R. Soloveitchik.

Interfaith dialogue isn't possible, for R. Soloveitchik, without doing violence to one, or to both of the faiths in question. Hence the fear of betrayal; betraying our martyrs. But, that doesn't mean that one can't *read* Christian works – just don't think that it's really speaking the same language as Judaism. Furthermore, it doesn't mean that you can't *appropriate* some of what you read, in Christian works, as long as you realise that by re-housing it in a Jewish setting, you'll be giving it a new meaning. And, it certainly doesn't mean that you should be scared of those parts of your own tradition that sound 'too Christian'.

This all explains why R. Soloveitchik's opposition to inter-faith dialogue didn't stop him from engaging with more Christian theologians than any other comparable Orthodox figure of his age, and incorporating their work into his own. It's true that R. Soloveitchik did discuss (at the end of *The Halakhic Mind*) the desirability of exploring our own cultural heritage in order to recognise what came from the Greeks and what was indigenous – this sounds like the sort of purging of foreign influences that might appeal to Hazony. But it's also clear that R. Soloveitchik didn't want to *purge* those foreign elements so much as to take note of where and when they entered into our tradition – for the sake of better understanding the development of our culture; not for the sake of eliminating developments that came from outside.

Despite my great reverence for R. Soloveitchik, I wouldn't claim him as a philosophical ally on all issues. For one thing, I'm not a neo-Kantian. But, I certainly don't see my reading of the binding of Isaac 'crashing through' any 'barrier that R. Soloveitchik tried to establish' (Hazony, 2015, p. 199).

Sometimes I fear, as I expressed in my review of his book, that Hazony really *does* want to purge all external influences. If the Talmud and the Midrash engage in Christian sounding readings of the binding of Isaac, for example, I could see Hazony just wanting to wash his hands of them. He's looking to return to a *purser* age. He's looking to build a Jewish philosophy from the Hebrew Bible – citing the Rabbis where it suits him, but ignoring them when it doesn't. I called this a Karaite, or a Neo-Hebrew philosophy, as opposed to a Jewish philosophy (Lebens 2014). I compared it to an extreme form of *Sola Scriptura*. But, even if I'm right, and Hazony does want to return to a pure Hebraic form of philosophy, that desire is based on the myth that such a pure philosophy exists.

We have seen that the Bible itself was appropriating notions from its cultural surroundings – such as the sanctity of the first born – even from the cultures that it was looking to repudiate and condemn. As we have seen, Hazony was wrong to claim Spiegel as an ally to his reading of the binding of Isaac. Spiegel accepts, as do I, that the story *was* a repudiation of human sacrifice, but he rejects Hazony's claim that it was a *complete and utter* repudiation. Instead, Spiegel seems to agree with me, and with the Rabbis, that the story rescues a kernel of truth from the very institution that

it was condemning. But Hazony makes a second mistaken claim about Spiegel (Hazony, 2015, p. 201):

Spiegel goes further and makes a claim which I do not, namely, that the principal Christian doctrine of atonement through God's sacrifice of his only son is a "continuation and a return" to ancient pagan beliefs of atonement through human sacrifice—the very beliefs that the authors of the Hebrew Bible had set out to banish from the world.

This simply misunderstands Spiegel, whose claim is unequivocal. His claim is that Rabbinic traditions surrounding the (metaphorical) sacrifice of Isaac *and* Christian traditions surrounding the sacrifice of Jesus, were not so much answers to one another, as they were *both* descendants of a common pagan ancestry (Spiegel, 1993, p. 109):

Both differentiae and parallels in the two traditions of the one bound [i.e., Isaac] and the one crucified [i.e., Jesus] seem to point rather to a common source in the ancient pagan world.

One of Spiegel's central points seems to be this: there is no culturally pure religion. From time immemorial we have been borrowing from one another, influencing one another, and appropriating ideas from one another, even as we radically critique each other. Every layer of the Jewish tradition exhibits this trait. The Hebrew Bible's obsession with the first born, despite its condemnation of human-sacrifice, is an *appropriation* from the pagans. There's no doubt that the medieval poems about Isaac that Spiegel quotes are appropriating imagery from the Christians. But perhaps that imagery had been ours to begin with, and forgotten. As Spiegel puts it (p.119):

In exile, generations of Israel completely forgot the pagan Canaanite inheritance, and it was the peoples of Christendom who retrieved it for them from oblivion ... [Could] it be that in the Middle Ages the Jews recovered once again from the Christians something of the ancient pagan world which had [originally been appropriated even by the Bible – given Spiegel's argument – and by the Rabbis, but had subsequently] been forgotten or suppressed?

Indeed, I think that there are a number of views of the sages that Jewish thought has subsequently buried or 'suppressed' because it sounded too Christian for our liking. But they *are* a part of our tradition. Not just the Christian tradition. Of course, we don't think that *God Himself* could die for our sins. The very idea might strike us as absurd. In fact, my own Rabbinic reading of the binding of Isaac suggests that God *cannot* sacrifice for us. We also don't think that God could be three in the way that Christians do. I have no fear that my Jewish philosophy will collapse into high Christology! But, to ignore a central strand of our understanding of the binding of Isaac because of how it *sounds*, is to be *debilitated* by a phobia of Christianity. Thousands of years of

Christian anti-Semitism can have that sort of effect. But we have to realise that *we* are the ones who stand to lose out if we suppress strands of our own tradition.

Hazoni isn't alone in fearing a lack of distinctiveness. I have had numerous conversations with Jewish philosophers who've been scared that their work will just sound like Christian philosophy without Jesus or the Trinity. What will make a paper on the Problem of Evil, or Divine Omniscience, distinctively *Jewish*, other than the fact that it was written by a Jew? If not peppered with Talmudic quotations, a Christian could easily mistake it for a work of Christian philosophy, especially given the dominance of the Christian tradition in contemporary philosophy of religion.

But I don't think that we should feel handicapped by that fear. If you have something interesting to say about the Problem of Evil, and if saying it is part of your working out your own Judaism, then it *is* Jewish philosophy. Are the chapters of the *Guide to the Perplexed* that don't mention Rabbinic works, or cite verses from the Bible, not still chapters of Jewish philosophy? When a Christian writes a book on the philosophy of religion, including a chapter on the Eucharist, and a Chapter on the Trinity, and a Chapter on the nature of Omnipotence, is the third chapter no long *Christian* philosophy because it's a topic that is equally relevant to other religions? Christian philosophers are not wringing their hands and worrying about whether their work will look distinctively Christian or not. They're just trying to figure out the nature of their Christian commitments. Similarly, the halo of Jewish distinctiveness shouldn't be as important to us as the value of being *true*!

We shouldn't try to purge our religion of things simply because they sound too much like the commitments of others. Perhaps in Christian accounts of a given phenomenon, we'll actually be able to see a reflection (however distorted it might be) of *Jewish* theology. That is to say: hitherto fore *hidden* or *suppressed* aspects of Jewish theology might well become accessible to us through our active engagement with Christian philosophy. The relationship will be mutually critical, but also mutually beneficial.

I have often heard Hazoni talk about what Jewish philosophy can contribute to the wider world – and to our 'Christian friends' (2015, 195):

Among the most significant factors fuelling present-day Christian interest in Jewish explanations of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition is a growing feeling that Christianity itself may stand to gain something important from it: The faith of young Christians is said to be under siege as never before... Time and again, I've heard from Christian scholars and clergy that they feel they know how to teach the Gospel. But when it comes to helping others to understand the teachings of the Old Testament, they are often at a loss, and therefore eager to hear a well-developed Jewish argument that can fill gaps where they themselves are unsure of what to say.

I think it telling that Hazoni never speaks about what Christian philosophy might be able to teach us Jews other than his stated admiration for their institutional and political success in building a strong academic movement. I think it telling because it speaks to his *purism*. He desires a Jewish philosophy purged of all foreign influences

because he seems to assume, perhaps only unconsciously, that foreign influences are always *bad*.

To conclude: my accusation about Hazony's anti-Christian tone (Lebens 2014) was not intended to protect Christians from being offended. As long as debate is conducted respectfully, we should be allowed to disagree with one another, even if doing so may lead to real discomfort. Rather, my accusation is that Hazony's anti-Christian tone leads him to distort his own Jewish tradition in a futile and self-defeating effort to purge it of all external influences. Hazony's anti-Christian tone ends up making his philosophy *less* Jewish than it would otherwise be.

Contra what Hazony claims about my approach, I do not advocate accommodationism, but I also refuse to be straight-jacketed by any anti-Christian stigma, nor do I languish under the faulty assumption that distinctiveness is a philosophical or theological virtue in its own right. Finally, I want to advocate the virtue of humility that allows us, as a culture, to recognise that other people have also been touched by the Divine, and have also come to know God. They may be mistaken on many theological and philosophical issues, and we shouldn't be afraid to discuss those mistakes and to criticise and critique each other unapologetically but we also shouldn't be closed off to the possibility of learning from others.

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