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What About Compassion?: The Role of Compassion in Jewish Culture

Abstract

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# Introduction

Compassion is a social and cultural value, a state of consciousness, with an emotional component. Values are connected to culture, but emotions are also culturally dependent; since the primary role of emotion is communicative, it is acquired by means of social stimuli (Gonen 2003). Emotions direct the individual how to act in society. Every society must regulate and orient expressions of emotion, and for that reason compassion, too, as a value with an emotional component, is culturally and societally dependent. Some cultures encourage and teach compassion and empathetic behavior; other do not. This article will consider the place of compassion as a cultural value in Israeli culture, insofar as it is dependent on its Jewish sources. First, however, we must clarify the emotional and moral components of compassion.

Compassion is the motivation and concern to treat others well. Compassion entails participation, consideration, and showing empathy for the suffering of others. Compassion entails acting justly and acting mercifully (Schantz 2007). Compassion also leads to giving and aid, for a compassionate person cares for others and feels the need to protect them (Perry 1997). The most significant elements of compassion are empathy and giving. The difference between empathy and compassion is that empathy indicates indirect involvement in others’ emotions, thoughts, or opinions, while compassion is a broader value. It leads the individual not only to recognize suffering, but also to act to relieve or eliminate it (Schantz 2007). Compassion is connected to high levels of altruism, sympathy for others, and a high level of self-awareness that leads one to aid those in need. Giving aid to others out of compassion is also accompanied by positive emotions towards the needy person, in contrast to aid that is given out of an expectation of reward.

As mentioned, empathy is the emotional component of compassion. Empathy is learned, as can be seen from studies of the influence of educational programs on hospital nurses’ levels of empathy towards their patients (Bradley 2009). The development of empathetic abilities depends on a positive self-assessment. The more that children develop positive self-conceptions, the better developed their empathetic abilities (Griffin and Shirley 2005). Many studies have shown that empathy (identification) increases one’s wiliness to help, since empathy stimulates the motivation to be altruistic (Harmon-Jones, Peterson, and Vaughn 2003). Just as high levels of individual empathy increase readiness to help, so too the opposite has also been demonstrated: subjects who were less empathetic helped less (Toi and Batson 1982).

Raanan Kukla (2005) presents compassion as a necessary element of the development of the self and its rehabilitation from its tragic fate and argues that compassion is a necessary condition for the formation of human society. The idea that, essentially, human fate inexorably leads to misery is redeemed by the idea that others’ compassion allows the individual to come to terms with this misery. On this point, we must make a distinction between mercy and compassion. Stefan Zweig (2011) argues that there are two types of mercy. One is fearful and emotional, and is, in fact, nothing more than the heart’s impatience and the desire to be freed as quickly as possible from the uncomfortable influence of others’ distress. This type of mercy does not participate in the pain of others and is nothing more than the self’s instinctual defence against others’ suffering. However, the second type of mercy is, in essence, a kind of compassion: a resolution to aid, patiently and tolerantly, until all strength is gone. Compassion recognizes others’ right to be happy just like us.

In Buddhism, compassion symbolizes the aspiration that all creatures will be freed from suffering and from its causes. Compassion is a recognition of our right, and the right of others, to happiness (Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998). The Buddhist conception represents a humanistic position that attributes to the imperative “love thy neighbour as thyself” a human, psychological meaning, constituting and obligating release from suffering and the realization of personal wellbeing and happiness. Buddhism identifies the origin of human suffering with that basic disconnect or lack of acceptance of the fact of our transient and interdependent existence. The Buddhist conception relies therefore on a distinction between the unavoidable pains that arise from living (birth, sickness, death, loss) and human suffering that is the product of the conscious mind and can thus be eliminated (Chödrön 2001). Compassion is understood in this content as the act of alleviating suffering through contact with reality, both in terms of the unavoidable pains that it entails and also the moments of happiness that it invites (Revel and Ricard 1999).

In an attempt to understand the place of suffering in contemporary Israeli culture, one must naturally turn to the Jewish sources of that culture. Religion is a dominant component of culture in general, and of Israeli culture in particular, and is deeply rooted in beliefs, in worldviews, in human behavior, and in the formation of institutions and values. Religion is the very heart of shared culture (Scruton 2000). Emile Durkheim sees religion as a system of mutually dependent beliefs and practices. Law, morality, and scientific thinking were born from religion, combined with it over a long period, and remained imbued with its spirit (Durkheim 1971, 418-421). When, as Carl Gustav Jung (1916) believes, worldviews are deeply rooted in the religious experience, they have a hidden power to remain preserved in the secular experience for a long time.

William James (1929) identifies three basic elements of all religions: faith, a supernatural order, and the necessity of observing commandments. He considers observance of commandments a phenomenon that encourages a connection with an elevated, supernatural world order. According to this conception, moral values and virtues express a psychological need or factor that aids the attainment of spiritual wellbeing and happiness, just as in the Buddhist conception of compassion. However, as will be seen in what follows, compassion and the virtues are given a different meaning in Buddhism than in Judaism, which sees the place of ethics as a discourse of reward and punishment between human beings and an external authority — be it God, an institution, a parent, or the internalized representation of the parent in the authority of the superego.

In the Buddhist conception, morality or compassion appear neither in the context of a conflictual discourse, nor as deriving from a belief in a transcendent being or supernatural order. Instead, compassion is considered a characteristic cohering in harmony with the needs of the self, in the name of release from suffering and the attainment of happiness. This article will consider a number of deeply-rooted Jewish religious constructs that, in my opinion, are in structural conflict with the Jewish value of compassion: they include the differentiation and separation of the Jewish people from other nations; judgment and the biblical doctrine of reward and punishment; intentionality as the motivation for following the commandments; and the subject of repentance — confession and personal responsibility.

# Judaism and the Commandments of Lovingkindness

Lovingkindness in Judaism is the totality of the commandments that obligate the individual to treat others well and to be considerate of their needs; in other words, all the commandments between one person and another. “By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the [Temple-]service, and by deeds of loving-kindness” (Mishnah, Avot 1:2); “Charity and lovingkindness are worth all the commandments of the Torah” (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:1). The commandments to give charity to the poor are counted among the 248 positive commandments in the Torah:

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother… Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

If thou lend money to *any of* my people *that is* poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury (Exodus 22:25).

*Is it* not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:7)

In Judaism, the commandment of lovingkindness is more important than the commandment to give charity: charity usually entails giving money to the poor, but an act of lovingkindness does not only mean giving money and not only to the poor, but rather to all, unlike the commandment to give charity (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 49b). When the Temple stood, sacrifices served as an atonement for transgressions. However, with the destruction of the Temple and the abolishment of the sacrifices, there was a sense of despair and a feeling that Israel had lost the possibility of atonement. Thus it was argued that acts of lovingkindness would atone for sins (Urbach 1975, 383), “for I desired mercy, and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6).

In the Bible, kindness is a positive social concept: “By mercy and truth iniquity is purged” (Proverbs 16:6); “The merciful man doeth good to his own soul: but *he that is* cruel troubleth his own flesh” (Proverbs 11:17). Jacob asks Joseph to treat him “kindly and truly” (Genesis 47:29). David said to the men of Jabesh-gilead, “Blessed *be* ye of the LORD, that ye have shewed this kindness unto your lord, *even* unto Saul, and have buried him” (2 Samuel 2:5); and David to Jonathan, “Therefore thou shalt deal kindly with thy servant; for thou hast brought thy servant into a covenant of the LORD with thee” (1 Samuel 20:8); and in Psalms “I will sing of the mercies of the LORD for ever” (89:1). In the Bible, the commandment of lovingkindness is parallel to compassion: it has a social value and emphasizes the idea of identification. The basis of this idea of identifying with a suffering person lies in the story of the Exodus; because we were strangers in the Land of Egypt, and experienced suffering and humiliation, we can identify with the suffering of others and to feel the pain of society’s downtrodden: “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry” (Exodus 22:21-23). As mentioned, Judaism sanctifies the commandment of lovingkindness — the idea of kindness and compassion —but there are a number of basic constructs in Jewish sources that, in my opinion, are located in a conflictual discourse with the idea of compassion; three of them will be discussed here.

# Differentiation Versus Identification and Unity

Compassion is identification that arises out of a feeling of belonging and unity. When a person understands that he or she is not separate from the world, feelings of loneliness and belligerence decrease, and feelings of compassion and sympathy for the other increase: in other words, he or she feels part of them (Emmanuel 2012). Can compassion, as a central value, coexist with feelings of separation, distinction, and even arrogance? In the same Jewish culture that commands and teaches lovingkindness, there is also a deep sense of aloofness and a rooted conception of “us” versus “them.” In a culture that hierarchically orders nations, tribes, and people, it is difficult to find a common denominator, difficult to identify with the “other” and certainly difficult to have compassion for him or her, despite the existence of the commandments of compassion. Jewish culture teaches compassion between members of the Jewish people, but universal compassion for “others” is a matter of controversy. Universal compassion can be seen in the meeting between the daughter of Pharaoh and Moses in the basket: “And when she had opened *it*, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, ‘This *is one* of the Hebrews’ children’” (Exodus 2:6). “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18) is a well-known and important saying in the Pentateuch, and according to the view of the *tanna* Rabbi Akiva, it is also a fundamental concept (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30:2). An individual must love his neighbor as he loves himself. It would seem that there is no compassion greater than this. Many behaviors are derived from this principle, and for that reason Rabbi Akiva deemed the expression the most central and important principle in the entire Pentateuch. “Thou shalt love they neighbour as thyself” is also a central concept in Christianity, and the verse is presented by Jesus and Paul in the New Testament as the foundation of Christian ethics:

And Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments *is*, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this *is* the first commandment. And the second *is* like, *namely* this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12: 29-31).

This imperative also appears in other religions in different forms. But an examination of the complete verse as it appears in the book of Leviticus — “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I *am* the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18) — teaches us that the commandment “love thy neighbour as thyself” is intended for “thy people.” In effect, this is a commandment to love Israel, and not to universal love; it is a commandment to each member of the Children of Israel to love every other member of the nation. Maimonides explains the commandment in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*: “Love every member of the covenant, as it says ‘thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’” (Maimonides 1958, 206). In other words, the commandment applies only to members of the covenant. Another biblical commandment that teaches compassion, for instance, that commanding the return of lost property — “If thou meet thine enemy’s ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him” (Exodus 23:4-5). The verse does not write “your neighbor’s ox or ass” but rather “thine enemy’s” and “him that hateth thee.” Here, too, compassion appears as an imperative, but does not grow from love, empathy, and identification with the other, but rather from differentiation and a negative attitude.

Regarding the common biblical lexical root P-S-Ḥ, Raphael Weiss (1975) presents the less-well-known use of the root: compassion. In its normal use, the root means to jump or to pass without touching, as in, “And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, ‘How long halt [*posḥim*] ye between two opinions?’” (1 Kings 18:21). The root P-S-Ḥ appears most often in the commandments of the Passover sacrifice in Exodus 12, describing God passing over the houses of the Children of Israel: “and when I see the blood, I will pass over you” (12); “For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood… the LORD will pass over the door” (23); “who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt” (27). In the Septuagint translation of verses 13 and 27, the verb was not translated in the sense of “passing over” (as it was translated in verse 27), but rather in the sense of “protection” (Weiss 1975, 129). Onkelos’s Aramaic translation adopts a similar approach, translating the verb in all three verses with the root Ḥ-W-S. This usage is also confirmed for us by the Sages: “‘I will pass over you’ — I have pity for you but I have no pity for the Egyptians.” Medieval commentators also understood the connection between P-S-Ḥ and compassion. Rashi mentions this interpretation but he does not accept it” (Weiss 1975, 129-130). Overall, the word was understood in the sense of compassion on the basis of the verse in Isaiah: “As birds flying, so will the LORD of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver *it; and* passing over he will preserve it” (31:5), in which “passing over it” parallels the verbs of protection and rescue. The idea that “I will pass over you” expresses compassion — I have pity for you, but I have no pity for the Egyptians — also emphasizes the notion of a differentiating compassion: compassion for “us,” even as we kill “them.” But by its very definition, compassion is universal; treating compassion as if it differentiates in this way is in structural conflict with the very idea of compassion.

Another discussion of Passover concerns the singing of the angels at the crossing of the Red Sea and when they praised God. The Aramaic translation of these verses (Exodus 14:20 and 24) alludes to a tradition stating that the angels did not sing while the Egyptians were drowning, a time when it would not be proper to praise God, and when God would even have interrupted their regular songs of praise. That is, God expresses his horror and pain at the deaths of the Egyptians, who were created in his image. He prevents the angels from singing while the Egyptians drown in the sea, even though their drowning is necessary to save Israel and despite the fact that they deserved their punishment because of their treatment of Israel. The midrashim celebrate God’s special relationship with Israel, which leads to the silencing of the angelic song (Azuelos 2016, 205-206). Even when God expresses universal compassion for his creatures and pain at the drowning of the Egyptians whom he created in his image, there is nonetheless a clear and distinct preference for the Chosen People: God drowned the Egyptians for them.

The phrase, “If any man has caused a single soul to perish, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if any man saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes to him as though he had saved alive a whole world” (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5), which appears in a similar version in Maimonides (1983-1995, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin*, 12:3), expresses universal compassion and relates to the great value of human life in Judaism. This version appears in certain forms as relating distinctly to Jewish life. The Babylonian Talmud states: “If any man has caused a single soul to perish from Israel, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if any man saves alive a single soul from Israel, Scripture imputes to him as though he had saved alive a whole world.” (Sanhedrin 37a). Here, compassion is no longer universal, but rather distinguishes between human life and Jewish life. The presence or absence of the world “Israel” gives rise to lengthy debates: Is this an expression of universal compassion that ascribes utmost importance to the life of every person, each created in the image of God; or is it a differentiating statement that ascribes utmost importance to Jewish life alone? Efraim Elimelech Urbach (1971) argues that reading the statement in the Mishnah in its entirety leads to the conclusion that the version without the qualifier “Jewish” is correct, and that the intention is indeed humanistic and relates to every person (Urbach 1971, 268-284).

In the biblical worldview, there is no unity between humanity and nature, between human beings and all living creatures. The Bible presents humanity as separate from nature, ruling over a hierarchically ordered natural world. The biblical foundation presents a prevailing, clear hierarchy in many spheres of creation. At the top of this hierarchy stands God, after him human beings created in his image, and then other creatures.

And the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels…Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all *things* under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea (Psalms 8:4-8).

But Scripture continues to separate and hierarchically rank even the human beings created “in his image.” The idea of separation from others and competition with them appears in the Bible’s separation between the one God and other gods, between different groups within the Chosen People, and between chosen individuals. There is a ranking comparison that hierarchically separates and examines. This discourse is deeply rooted in Judaism and stands in conflict with the idea of compassion.

The idea of the Chosen People appears many times in the Bible: “to give drink to my people, my chosen” (Isaiah 43:20); “For thou *art* an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that *are* upon the face of the earth… The LORD… set his love upon you, and choose you” (Deuteronomy 7:6-7); “*we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalms 100:3). The People of Israel are presented in the Bible as a community who are chosen, distinguished, separated, and unique in essence. The idea of chosenness stands in opposition to the idea of a universal God. The foundation of the idea of chosenness is a unique entitlement over others, a separation, comparison, and competitiveness. There is no identification, integration, acceptance, or unity with the “other.”

The narrative of the “Chosen People” returns time and again in the biblical text and became the dominant narrative in the Jewish community over the generations. For example, the *Kuzari* by Rabbi Judah HaLevi is written entirely within this narrative tradition. Out of the desire to strengthen the faith in the heart of every member of the Jewish People, HaLevi presents the nation as distinguished by the fact they are the treasured people, holy to God. “Bear with me a little while that I show the lofty station of the people. For me it is sufficient that God chose them as His people from all nations of the world” (HaLevi 1905, 64 [first section]). According to his formulation, Israel bear the “seeds of treasuredness” that make them unique from all others. This narrative also reappears in secular texts of Zionist culture from the earliest period until today, in political writing, and in literature (Gertz 2000, 59). This narrative constructs a barrier between Israel and the rest of the world. Its return in secular texts after hundreds of years, the return of the narrative of the “Chosen People,” testifies to the fact that this narrative fostered long-term motivations for community separation and distinction.

As mentioned above, the idea of chosenness does not appear in the Bible only in the context of the people as a whole, but also at the level of tribes and groups. God distinguishes between the tribes of Israel as well, between the tribe of Levi and the other tribes. “And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel” (Numbers 3:12). From among the chosen tribe of Levi, God chooses the priests: “Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families” (Numbers 4:2). Aaron the Priest, whom all the priests of Israel claim as their ancestor, is the son of Amram the son of Kohath, and Kohath is the second son of Levi son of Jacob: “and to the office of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest” (Numbers 4:16). In their chosenness, they are appointed “to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation. This *shall be* the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation, *about* the most holy things” (Numbers 4:3-3).

In the Bible, the individual is situated as an elevated creature in the hierarchy and separate from nature. However, the polytheist, unlike in monotheism, is not separated from the powers of nature and is entirely dependent on them. The individual is trapped in the interaction of powerful forces within which he must weave his life (Wright 1950, 17). The doctrine of one God, unconditional and transcendental, negates ancient values and proclaims new ones. In so doing, the Hebrews sacrifice a harmonious coexistence with nature. The polytheist lives in a tolerant world in which order, harmony, and integration are emphasized. The worlds of society, nature, and the gods are interwoven. Polytheistic religions tend to be religions of the status quo. In the Bible, on the contrary, there exists a tension between God and creation.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1957) calls this separation and lack of harmony between humankind and nature “Jewish egotism.” In his opinion, the basic assumption of the biblical story of creation adopted by Christianity is egotism. Only where the individual separates himself form nature is it possible to question the sources of existence. Separation, he holds, is the denigration of nature into an object of human will (Feuerbach 1957, 34-35). That is why compassion towards all created life in nature does not appear as an important cultural value in Jewish culture. The Hebrews, Feuerbach argues, connect faith, the subjugation of nature, and gluttony: “At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I *am* the LORD your God” (Exodus 16:12).

In the story of creation, Adam receives permission to conquer and rule over nature and its creatures: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth’” (Genesis 1:28); and in Psalms, “and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all *things* under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea” (8:5-8). Human beings are different than other creatures, and are depicted as independent actors outside nature, subjecting it to their will and reason. The separation between human beings and nature, between the Chosen People and the rest of the nations, between the tribes and among the chosen, created the culture basis for a comparative conception: differentiating and not unifying. Compassion and the commandments of lovingkindness remained very important values, but principally within the bounds of the community of equals — thus their universal value was diminished.

# Judgement and the Biblical Doctrine of Reward and Punishment

A discourse on reward and punishment between the individual and an exterior authority — God — exists at the foundation of Jewish ethics. The most widespread explanation for human suffering is given in the traditional doctrine of reward and punishment, which holds that suffering represents punishment for the sins of the individual or the nation. The nation and the individual determine their own fate by their actions (Jacobson 1965). Judaism depicts a God who judges and tests, and the Bible sets tests in every moment for the biblical Jew. A Jew can be called to stand for tests in which he will succeed or fail to fulfill God’s wishes (Rausch 1978, 10-11). In the eyes of such a Jew, God sets the rules of justice, but God himself is bound in a covenant with the Chosen People; this covenant includes clear, intelligible rules that obligate God, too, to act according to the rules of justice that he set. In what follows I will argue that the Jewish idea of justice is located in a structural conflict with the idea of compassion. Compassion by its very nature is the absence of judgement. In a culture in which judgement is a central value — in a place where the “other” is judged — compassion for others is limited.

Chosenness and destiny burden the People of Israel with the responsibility to serve as a model, and thus to be judged and punished severely for every transgression: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). In the heavenly court, the individual is reminded and obligated to answer not only for his own actions but also for those of his forefathers. Reward and punishment do not only apply within the limited circle of the family, but in society at large as well: “And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless” (Exodus 22:23). Only some three thousand took part in the episode of the golden calf (Exodus 32:28), but the entire people was judged and punished: “And the LORD plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made” (35).

In the Torah, two categories of reward and punishment are depicted side by side, one, collective, and the second, individual. The individual category deals with the sin and punishment of every individual, while the collective category views each person as sharing the fate of the group, and vice versa — in some instances, private acts can determine the collective fate. This is especially true for a person in a position of authority, but also applies to commoners (Weiss 1987). According to the Hebrew conception, the blessing bestowed on individuals is none other than a life force expressed in contentment and success. A curse, by contrast, drains them of all good things. Reward and punishment are the necessary consequences of actions; actions and rewards are joined in a bond that resembles the causal relations of the law of nature (468). “Also unto thee, O Lord, *belongeth* mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work” (Psalms 62:12). The value of an act is determined by the laws of the judge, and the individual acts according to the criteria of the judgment in order to be rewarded with the long-awaited happiness. It is important to note that God’s power to judge and punish – the “attribute of justice,” one of the two basic facets of God’s nature – is considered complementary to divine mercy and compassion, the “attribute of mercy” (Shalom 1992, 168), which is also found in the Bible. Despite this fact, from the perspective of the secular commentary undertaken in this article, it seems that the strict “attribute of justice” is in structural tension with the “attribute of mercy,” which is not even the attribute of kindness and compassion.

According to the Jewish worldview, the individual and the community have the power to influence the future, and the aim of history is well defined: “for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border” (Jeremiah 16-17). Fulfilling the commandments ensures a real reward, just as the opposite inevitably leads to terrible punishment:

If thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes… Cursed *shalt* thou *be* in the city, and cursed *shalt* thou *be* in the field… Cursed *shall be* the fruit of thy body… thou shalt build an house, and thou shalt not dwell therein… Thy sons and thy daughters *shall be* given unto another people… So that thou shalt be mad for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see” (Deuteronomy 28: 15-34).

The traditional doctrine of reward and punishment does not explain the fact that Jeremiah complains that “Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper” (12:1). One of the possible answers is that evildoers’ success is only passing and temporary (Jacobson 1965, 13). Job, for example, does not accept the argument that suffering attests to sin, for he is sure that he has not sinned; he searches for the causal relation between failure and his suffering and does not find it, and feels therefore that he has been punished for no clear reason. “I will say unto God, ‘Do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me’” (Job 10:2). He sees the events taking place around as arbitrary chaos caused by God. Job demands that God show him the truth, and God presents him with a world seemingly without reason, lacking harmony and morals (Weiss 1987, 390). This approach to the doctrine of reward and punishment does not distinguish between suffering and sin, but rather holds that suffering is God’s test of the righteous (e.g., Abraham, Job) and not a punishment for sin. God’s answer to Job includes the idea that human reason is limited and is not capable of understanding the mandate of the world; providence does not adhere to human moral criteria.

Regarding the doctrine of reward and punishment and strict judgement, it is claimed that the “attribute of mercy” exists in God alongside “the aspect of justice.” God’s names attest to his attributes — “And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness” (Exodus 34:6); “*As* I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you” (Ezekiel 20:33) — as do the commentaries the Sages provide to these names. “When I am judging created beings, I am called ‘God’ [*Elohim*], and when I am waging war against the wicked I am called ‘Lord of Hosts’ [*Tzevaot*]. When I suspend judgment for a man's sins I am called ‘Almighty God’ [*El Shaddai*], and when I am merciful towards my world I am called ‘*Adonai*’ for ‘*Adonai*’ refers to the Attribute of Mercy, as it is said ‘The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious’; ‘I AM THAT I AM’ (3:14) — I am called according to my deeds” (*Shemot Rabbah* 3:6). The individual must accept God’s infinite authority, his anger, and even his rage — “God is angry *with the wicked* every day” (Pslams 7:12) — and at the same time he is invited to feel as the close son of a loving father — “Israel *is* my son, *even* my firstborn” (Exodus 4:22).

How is the feeling of authority and distance consistent with the feeling of closeness?[[1]](#footnote-1) Closeness is the “attribute of mercy” ascribed to God, and anger is generally related to the “attribute of justice.” The idea of God’s attributes appeared very early in ancient biblical Judaism, for it is found already in Philo, who certainly learned it from teachers from the Holy Land. The “attribute of justice” is the most prominent attribute, and even takes on a mythic character. It is important to note that the classical documents of the thought of the Sages do not deal with the combination of qualities — this was done later — because sin is the source of all evil and is also the explanation for the destruction of the unity of God. The Talmud likes to emphasize, with great detail, the connection between sin and punishment, and to discuss the “attribute of justice.” Many important rabbis dealt with the punishments ascribed, according to the principle of “retributive punishment” as it is formulated in the Talmud, to those who transgress the long list of the commandments (Shalom 1992, 170-171). *Midat por‘anut* (the recompense for evil deeds) and *midah tovah* (the reward for good deeds) are widespread descriptions in tannaitic literature. It should be noted in this context that the very expression “attribute” is connected to law and justice. Though it is said that the reward for good deeds is greater than the recompense for evil deeds, the proof of this claim shows that even the good reward is included as part of justice. It is said regarding the recompense for evil deeds that God “visit[s] the iniquity of the fathers upon the children” (Exodus 34:7); regarding the good reward, he is described as “shewing mercy unto thousands” (20:6); if so, the good reward is larger than the recompense for evil, but the verse’s promised “mercy unto thousands” is reserved for “them that love me, and keep my commandments” (ibid) (Urbach 1975, 397-398). The good reward is called the “attribute of mercy,” and not the attribute of “compassion,” and, as mentioned, mercy is a feeling identified with the impatience of the heart (Zweig 2011); in mercy, one does not participate in the suffering of others. The discussion over whether the God of justice and “God, merciful and gracious” are two separate or complementary entities is open, of course, to interpretation, but testifies in my opinion to a structural cultural conflict.

# Intention and Personal Responsibility

Compassion relates to high self-awareness, and especially with authentic internal intention. Fulfilling commandments like that of lovingkindness as if one were obediently following the orders of an external judge can distance the individual from reflective awareness and from the search for the deep internal intention that lies behind action. In Christianity, by contrast, “intention” is given a significant place. Not only are external acts judged, but intentions, that is, thoughts and emotions are as well (Schimmel 1997):

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment… Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart (Matthew 5:21-28).

In Christianity, God does not judge according to appearances. There is no need to appear to be a follower of the commandments; the internal intention is what is significant. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites… But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret” (Matthew 6:16-18); “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray… that they may be seen of men… shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret” (5-6). In Christianity, God judges hearts and souls. Whereas in Judaism judgement is meted after the fact, after the act’s external manifestation, in Christianity judgement is meted in response to intentions of the heart, before any action has been taken. In Buddhism, as well, there is a heavy emphasis on intention. An evil intention is more important than the act itself. A conscious intention to harm causes the person greater damage than any a fighter can do to harm his enemies, or a hater those he hates (Schwartz 2008, 41).

In Judaism, intention is important as well, but there is certainly more attention to the external manifestation of behavior, to appearance. For example, when the Talmud defines the concept of “a Sage,” it provides the example of how one who claims the title dresses. “Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba also said in Rabbi Johanan’s name, ‘Any scholar upon whose garment a [grease] stain is found is worthy of death’” (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 114a). The central rationale for this ‘ruling’ is to prevent the desecration of God’s name, but in addition to this literal interpretation there is also a deeper, symbolic interpretation that projects the external appearance of the clothes onto the Sage’s internal world. *Marit ‘ayin* is the prohibition against doing any action that is itself not a transgression but could appear as if it were a sin. The source of the prohibition is found in the Babylonian Talmud, where the text prohibits eating fish blood even though there is no prohibition against it in the Torah, as fish are not considered meat. The prohibition is based on *marit ‘ayin*, lest someone think that a person is, in fact, drinking animal blood: “The Master said, ‘I must exclude the blood of fish and of locusts, for they are always permitted.’ What is the meaning of ‘always permitted’? If that their fat is permitted? Behold also the fat of a beast of chase is permitted and yet its blood is forbidden!” (Babylonian Talmud, Keritot 21b).

The ancient Jewish perspective measured the individual on the basis of his actions alone. On the issue of intention, there was a disagreement between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai: according to the method adopted by Beit Shammai, an individual is judged by his actions. Beit Hillel, however, emphasized the value of intention as a factor in the individual’s judgement. One can find an example that clarifies the difference between the two schools on the issue of intention in Mishnah tractate *Keritot*: “Rabbi Judah said, ‘Even if he intended to gather figs and he gathered grapes, or grapes and he gathered figs, black fruit and he gathered white, or white fruit and he gathered black, Rabbi Eliezer declares his liable to a sin-offering, but Rabbi Joshua declares him exempt” (4:3). That is, there is a disagreement between Rabbi Joshua ben Hananyah from Beit Hillel and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus from Beit Shammai regarding a person who intended to gather figs on the Sabbath, which is forbidden by the Torah, but instead of gathering figs gathered grapes, or vice versa. Rabbi Eliezer sees the act, in which a person transgresses a prohibition from the Torah, as the primary reason for making him liable. Rabbi Joshua, however, absolves the individual, because he considers obligation and punishment to be contingent on intention — the intention is the primary criterion for liability.

In relations with others, forgiveness is a prerequisite for compassion. Forgiveness and repentance that arise from deep, internal intensions are connected to confession. While the culture of confession occupies a particularly central place in Christianity, it also exists in Judaism. Confession and repentance in Judaism differ drastically from their counterparts in Christianity in their character, and especially in their aim. Confession is a person’s recognition of his own guilt, his admission of failure. The rabbinic word *vidui* (confession) does not appear in the Bible, and certain biblical books use the word *todah* instead (Cassuto 1973, 874-878). In the Pentateuch, the essence of confession is closely linked with the religious systems of the commandments. Outside of the Bible, there are famous forms of confession in all religions, accompanied by symbolic and magical ceremonies. Confession was known in the culture of the ancient Near East as well, particularly in Egypt and Babylonia. According to the Bible, when an individual is caught in the act, he or she can give either a positive confession (admit the transgression and ask for forgiveness) or a negative confession (state that he or she did not sin). Generally, the confession is accompanied by a sacrifice. “And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment *is* greater than I can bear” (Genesis 4:13). Cain admits to his sin and expresses regret. The sin is imagined in the Bible as a massive weight that lies heavily on the body and head of the sinner (Kiel 1997, 116).

In Judaism, on Yom Kippur, confession is anonymous and collective, with no explication of names, times, and places. Confession is performed in the first-person plural, with no singling out of the sinning individual: “We abuse, we betray, we are cruel. We destroy, we embitter, we falsify. We gossip, we hate… we are zealots for bad causes… we have sinner, we have transgressed… Our God and God of our fathers, forgive and pardon our sins” (Harlow 1972, 577-579). The request for collective forgiveness — “For all these sins, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement” (581) — but also specific, with a list of offences by categories of sin and failure: “We have sinned against you by misusing our minds… by immoral sexual acts… knowingly and deceitfully… by wronging others… by supporting immorality… by deriding parents and teachers… by using violence… by being foul-mouthed… by dishonesty in business” (465). On Yom Kippur all must give confession. This confession does not have a personal character, it is collective and spoken out loud in the second-person plural and does not entail shame (which does accompany Christian confession). There is no private sin that is not part of the collective situation, and there is no moment in the collective situation that is not influenced by the sins of individuals (Ophir 2001, 134). In Judaism, personal confession is spoken in a whisper, in the heart, with no public pronouncement, on every day of the year and especially before death. On the subject of recounting sins in detail, there are different opinions:

There are commentators who say that the individual needs to describe the sin in detail… on account of its shamefulness… so that the individual is ashamed of his sins… and there are those who hold… that there is no need to describe sins in detail, but instead the individual can say the sins in alphabetical order, even out loud, which is not considered describing the sin in detail, because each one is said equally” (“Vidui” 1965).

When one important day of the year is devoted to forgiveness, and when confession is done in the plural, according to a detailed and predetermined list of sins, taking the personal responsibility necessary for intentional internal emotional work is impaired.

 Christian confession, in contrast to the Day of Repentance in Judaism, began in the thirteenth century (Horowitz 1996, 113-114). It became a public, concrete confession, in the singular, for a particular sin; it also became personal and not public. Though there are serious long-term psychological and social consequences to the Christian practice confession, theologians were aware of confession’s cleansing work, as a release for the conscience and a resolution of internal conflicts whose source is the guilty conscience. The call to self-awareness, to admission of failure, to taking responsibility was a positive component in its own right, but the exploitation of it by extremists caused anxiety, shame, and guilty feelings (Rozenheim 2003, 28). The feelings of guilt are buried deep, as Thomas a Kempis preaches, “No man is worthy of heavenly comfort unless he has diligently exercised himself in holy compunction” (Thomas a Kempis 1959, 42).

# Epilogue

As this article shows, Judaism endows the commandments of lovingkindness and the idea of kindness and compassion with great sanctity, but in the Jewish sources there are basic constructs in a conflictual discourse with the idea of compassion; three of them have been examined here. This discussion shows that compassion as a value is in structural conflict with the feeling of separation and distinction. In a culture that ranks nations, tribes, and individuals in hierarchy, it is difficult to identify with the “other.” Jewish culture teaches that members of the Jewish People should be compassionate to each other, but universal compassion for “others” is a matter of debate. Similarly, we have examined the idea of judgement that is the basis of Jewish ethics, and it creates a discourse of reward and punishment between the individual and an external authority. The Jewish idea of judgment is itself in a structural conflict with the idea of compassion. Regarding the doctrine of reward and punishment and strict judgements, it has been argued here that beside the divine “attribute of justice” God also encompasses the “attribute of mercy.” The reward for good deeds is the “attribute of mercy,” and not the attribute of “compassion.” Finally, we have also examined intentionality: intention underlies the commandment to do acts of lovingkindness because compassion is connected with high levels of self-awareness and especially with authentic internal intention. Fulfilling commandments, such as performing acts of lovingkindness, as if one were simply following orders dictated from an external authority, can distance the individual from the work of reflective awareness and from the search for his or her own deep, internal intention behind the act. In Christianity and Buddhism, “intention” is given a significant place. In Judaism, intention is important, but there is more emphasis on the act and the external presentation of behavior — on appearance.

The thematic discussion undertaken above, focusing separately on each construct, was necessary for the sake of a structured discussion. At the same time, these constructs are not self-sufficient, and, in many senses, interact with each other and are intertwined. Many other factors, not examined here, stand in conflict with compassion as a cultural value. However, even the exposure of these three allows us to see the contingent basis of the phenomenon. The beginning of criticism, of authentic self-awareness, is the attempt to show that what was considered integral in a society, as fundamental boundaries that cannot be crossed, is, in fact, contingent. Such criticism allows us to undertake struggles to transform society in areas that were not considered problematic before, and were treated as if they were phenomena whose existence could be taken for granted.

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1. Ophir, in discussing the depictions of God in the Yom Kippur prayerbook, finds that the question of how the very same God can be both a merciful and forgiving father, and a regal king, a warrior, a judge of secret thoughts is based on a foreign rational criticism. According to his approach, a question such as the one posed here can be answered, with the medieval philosophers, with the statement that God is located beyond all descriptions, and that any such description constitutes an arbitrary and unjustified limitation of his essence and self, and that any attempt to describe him is at base a fabrication (Ophir 2001, 122-123). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)