**The Place of Obedience in Jewish Culture**

**Abstract**

In the past year, against the background of the Covid-19 epidemic, it is evident that civil disobedience is on the rise in Israeli society. While civil disobedience preserves the boundaries of discourse and democracy, it also poses a real danger to society’s existence. The attitude to civil disobedience differs from society to society, and it is related to the core values that characterize the relevant culture. For this reason, the attitude to obedience or disobedience in Israeli society needs to be examined with respect to the religious roots of Jewish culture.

In this article, I examine the attitude to the issue of obedience in the formative texts of Jewish culture. Revealing the religious past of the culture enables a reevaluation of values and stances.

In order to understand the sources of the values relevant to the issue of obedience in Israeli society today, I will engage in the analysis of religious texts using the genealogical method. The subject area of genealogy is the past, but its purpose is to understand and critique contemporary reality.

From the texts examined in this article, obedience and disobedience do not appear to be in dialectical relationship—the function of a dialectic understanding is to present two contradictory sides within one great truth. Obedience and disobedience do not manifest as a controversy or as two sides of a single issue, despite the fact that controversy is welcome and prevalent in Judaism.

**Keywords**

Chosenness; civil disobedience; disobedience; genealogy, separateness

**Introduction**

With the State of Israel having just completed a third lockdown due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the country is also witnessing the various consequences, both positive and negative, of widespread disobedience. The spread of the virus, by all accounts, is attributed to mass disobedience of public safety rules: attending large gatherings, failure to maintain social distancing, and not wearing masks. While his is especially true in some segments of the population, however, Israeli society as a whole has been lax about respecting the various COVID-related restrictions, in comparison to other cultures such as Germany, the Netherlands, etc. On the other hand, disobedience has also been taking the form of mass demonstrations and ongoing protests against the strict regulations, with protesters claiming that the decision to institute a nationwide lockdown was tainted by personal and political motivations.

As with any social and political phenomenon, the current unrest stems from an accumulation of many different factors in Israeli society, all of which have come to a head and erupted violently at this difficult point in time, catalyzed by the pandemic. At the same time, the phenomena of obedience and disobedience in and of themselves are only partially dependent on specific political and social circumstances and have particular cultural attributes that differ from one people or nation to another. In this article, we shall employ the genealogical method to examine attitudes toward obedience and its necessary antithesis – disobedience, in the sources of Jewish culture. Genealogy as a critical methodology is based on the ideas of Nietzsche and Foucault. Nietzsche is considered the father of genealogy, whereas Foucault implemented Nietzsche’s ideas and developed the critical method into what it is today (Deleuze 2006: 2). While genealogy deals with matters of the past, its purpose is to understand and critique contemporary reality. It allows for a re-examination of values and attitudes. Exposing the past thus reduces the control of necessity in our lives (Foucault 1977: 152).

In our attempt to understand the place of obedience in Jewish culture we must naturally turn first and foremost turn to the religious sources upon which this culture is founded. Religion is a dominant element of culture and is profoundly imbedded in human beliefs, worldviews, and behaviors, shaping our values and institutions. According to some thinkers, religion is the beating heart of common culture (Scruton 1999). Emile Durkheim sees religion as a system of customs and beliefs which are mutually interdependent (Durkheim 1971: 418–421). Worldviews that are deeply rooted in the religious experience, according to Carl Gustav Jung (1949) have the hidden potential to be indirectly preserved in secular thought over long periods of time. William James (2002) recognizes three essential components present in all world religions: faith, a super-human order, and the obligation to uphold certain commandments or ordinances. The fulfillment of ordinances is perceived as something that promotes one’s connection to the exalted super-human cosmic order. In Judaism, the observance of divine edicts, or *mitzvoth*, is central to the religion and viewed as highly important: “If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments [*mitzvoth*], and do them; then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit” (Leviticus 26:3–4). This verse indicates that God expects the people of Israel to observe the Torah and uphold the *mitzvoth*. According the doctrine of divine retribution, obedience to the divine decrees is rewarded, while disobedience is punished: “But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: and they walked in their own counsels. Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries” (Psalms 81:11–14).

Obedience is an important and very present value in Judaism, however, the same is true of disobedience, as we shall see further on. In this article we will examine a number of ingrained cultural constructs that are religious in nature and require obedience. Conversely, we shall likewise examine deeply ingrained constructs regarding disobedience, which are culturally perceived as conflictual with the act of obedience. One of our primary objectives will be to determine whether there is a dialectical relationship between these structures of obedience and disobedience or whether they are not necessarily contradictory structures that exist within a broad and comprehensive system of understanding.

**Disobedience from Genesis onward**

For centuries, rulers, kings, priests and parents presented obedience as a virtue and disobedience as a sin. And yet, Western history, argues Erich Fromm, began with an act of disobedience in the story of the Garden of Eden and, conversely, may end with an act of obedience (Fromm 1981:1). Of course Fromm does not hold that all disobedience is worthy and all obedience is a sin, but he makes a psychological distinction between a person who can only refuse – whom he calls a rebel rather than a revolutionary because they act out of anger and not out of conviction – on the one hand, and a person who can only obey and never refuses – whom he calls a slave – on the other (Fromm 1981:5). While this subject clearly has psychological aspects, it also involves religious-cultural elements that we shall examine below.

The first and greatest act of disobedience appears, of course, in the story of the Garden of Eden. The tale that culminates with the fall of man is a founding myth in Western society, mainly due to the central status it acquired in the Christian tradition. Man is expelled from Eden because he commits the original sin, the act that is the prototype of all sin to follow, and as a result, human beings are transformed into vulnerable individuals who must strive and compete with the other individuals around them in order to survive (Shoham 2003: 14–17). This one instance of disobedience brings a slew of punishments upon humanity, including: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16); “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3:19); and the worst punishment of all, “therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden” (Genesis 3:23). One alternative approach to the story claims that the gravest infraction consists not of the act of disobeying God’s command or eating of the Tree of Knowledge – after all, anyone can make mistakes and break the rules from time to time – but in the humans’ failure to take responsibility for their actions and pointing accusatory fingers elsewhere (Zion 2002:107). Adam lays the blame for the action on Eve: “And the man said, the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (Genesis 3:12), while Eve, in turn, blames the snake: “And the woman said, the serpent beguiled me, and I did eat” (Genesis 3:13). As if disobedience was not bad enough in and of itself, the mother and father of humanity refuse to be held accountable for it.

Thus, we can agree with Fromm in arguing that the first human act is an act of rebellion against God’s supremacy (Fromm 1966: 21–22). The story of the Garden of Eden, however, can be interpreted from two different, and seemingly contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, the story can be read as a pagan tale: God has a tree with magical powers and, driven by jealousy and the desire to retain these powers exclusively to himself, he keeps it from man (Rosenberg 1985: 48–49). This motif is recurrent throughout Greek mythology, but is best exemplified by its most well-known example – the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus embodies the character of a rebel who refuses to obey and symbolizes the titanic struggle against the gods. In the series of myths that shaped Western culture, Prometheus symbolizes the liberation of man and humanity (Ohana 2000: 3). The Greek myth of Prometheus sees human civilization as based on disobedience and, just like Adam and Eve, Prometheus too is punished for his defiance of the divine decree (Fromm 1981: 2–3). The other way of interpreting the story of the fall focuses on God’s mercy rather than his jealousy or vengefulness. This foundational myth sees the source of human suffering in knowledge and, as Prometheus too would find out, knowledge is not always a good thing to have: “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). God’s intention is therefore not to prevent mankind from gaining power but to guard his creations from the suffering engendered by knowledge and to preserve the cosmic order, which ends up being disrupted through their act of disobedience.

Hazoni (1998), on the other hand, claims the Hebrew Bible to be the only ancient document to promote the idea of disobedience to unjust rules, a principle completely foreign to the pagan world from which it emerged. He argues that while the Old Testament text calls for unquestioning obedience to the Lord God, it does not endorse mindless submission to human authority. When it comes to God, we get countless examples of faith-based obedience even in the direst circumstances, the starkest of which is the binding of Isaac: “And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad… for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12). Disobedience to God, on the other hand, as we have seen in the tale of the fall, is met with severe punishment. And yet, Hazoni maintains that the Bible also encourages disobedience based on the human conscience, which is instilled in us as the heart of moral independence, for Biblical heroes are not ones to submit to orders, even when they come from God, and have a tendency to act upon their own moral instincts (Hazoni 1998: 25). One interesting argument in support of this claim is the very name “Israel” given to Jacob and to the Jewish people as a whole, which means “struggle with God”: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). Hazoni’s reasoning is in line with the distinction made by Fromm between heteronomous obedience to an institution or an authority, which is submission, and obedience to one’s conscience, reason and beliefs, which is autonomous obedience, expressive of affirmation rather than submission (From 1981: 4–5).

That said, the degree to which our conscience is truly autonomous is also questionable. Human conscience may be essential for action and growth (Rotenberg 1997: 84), however we often admit to acting in a way we think moral due to the urging of our conscience without this impulse undergoing critical evaluation or reflexive thinking. And of course, as we know, plenty of atrocities have been committed in the name of the human conscience (Sagi 2010: 362). Therefore, even while believing that we are acting out of the "humanistic conscience," which is the inner, autonomous voice of our humanity, we may in fact be acting out of an “authoritarian conscience,” which is the internalized voice of the authority we wish to please and are afraid to disappoint (Fromm 1981: 6). Freud (1961) argues that an excessive number of ordinances and prohibitions, and the subsequent development of guilt through religious institutional mechanisms, social pressure, parental pressure, and the pressure put upon us by our own superego creates a dominant “authoritarian conscience” and is therefore dangerous. By the same token, Freud (1961) warns us against culture, which in many cases, is something that is imposed on a refusing majority by a minority that has managed to seize means of force and coercion. When we are faced with an overabundance of rules, it is not always possible to distinguish between the voice of the “authoritarian conscience” and the voice of the “humanistic conscience.”

**“All of Israel are responsible one for the other”: between obedience and separateness**

Obedience is linked, among other things, to a sense of conformity, cohesion, shared responsibility, belonging and unity. The actions of the individual, for better or worse, affect the rest of the community. In Judaism, by realizing that they are not separate individuals but part of a group, people feel less lonely and combative, and more prone to sympathy for those “others” to whom they in fact belong (Emmanuel 2012). When a person obeys the precepts of a religion, the rules of a group, or public opinion they feel protected and safe but in return they risk, of course, losing their autonomy (Fromm 1981: 8).

“All of Israel are responsible one for the other” is an expression coined by the Jewish sages. In the modern era it is taken to mean that every Jew is responsible for the wellbeing and welfare of their fellow Jews, however its original intention is that every Jew bears responsibility for every other Jew’s observance of the *mitzvoth*. The phrase comes from the Sifra *midrash* which comments Leviticus 26:37: “‘And they will stumble, one man by his brother’: It is not written ‘one man because of his brother’ (i.e., in running), but ‘one man by his brother,’ the sin of his brother — whereby we are taught that all of Israel are responsible, one for the other” (Sifra, Bechukotai 7:5). In his commentary of this verse, Rashi too repeats this sentiment, in a slightly different wording: “A Midrashic explanation is: one will stumble on account of the other, for all Israelites are held responsible for one another.” Being responsible for one another conveys a strong sense of unity and accountability to one’s peers: an individual who disobeys the *mitzvoth* brings woe onto others.

The Old Testament too contains a collective aspect of retribution, alongside the individual retribution previously discussed. This collective aspect sees the deeds of the individual deciding the fate of Israel as a whole, especially when that individual has an exceptional status, such as a ruler or a king, for instance. There are also instances when the entire people are punished due to the actions of one of their midst (Weiss 1987).

There is, however, in Judaism a deep-seated construct that is in direct conflict with the principle of obedience to group and community rules out of mutual accountability – and that is the sense of separateness. On the one hand, Jewish culture ordains collective responsibility and love of the other, yet on the other hand, it places great emphasis on the separation between “us” and “them.” The Jewish sources contain hierarchic orders of peoples and nations, as well as internal hierarchies between different Jewish tribes and factions. One can therefore see how easy it is to start perceiving certain groups as “other” and “different,” thereby letting the principles of mutual accountability and shared community fall by the wayside.

The famous decree “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18) is a very important notion in the Bible, what Rabbi Akiva considers “the greatest principle of the Torah” (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30b). Man is commanded to love others as he loves himself. Ostensibly there can be no greater unity and mutual respect, which is why many of the social rules of behavior we follow to this day are based on this one principle. In Christianity too, love of one’s neighbor is a central concept. The verse is presented by Jesus and by Saint Paul as the basis of Christian morality: “And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord… 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).

And yet, a closer look at the full verse, as it appears in 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) – tells us that the commandment to love “thy neighbor” actually refers to members of “thy people”. This not an ordinance of universal love, but of the love of Israel, commanding the people of Israel to love one another. As Maimonides decrees: “It is a positive commandment for each man to love each Israelite as himself, as the verse says: ‘Thy shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’” (Maimonides 1983:44).

As mentioned above, the Old Testament presents a clear and distinct hierarchy between peoples, groups, and even individuals. A relatively significant portion of the Biblical discourse is allotted to ranking, separating, and distinguishing (Nir 2016). This element, as we said, goes against the principle of mutual accountability and obedience for the sake of the group. The idea of “the chosen people,” for instance, appears many times in the Biblical text: “I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people, my chosen” (Isaiah 43:20); “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” (Deuteronomy 7:6); “it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people” (Psalms 100:3). The concept of a “chosen people” is, of course, diametrically opposed to the idea of a universal God. At the very basis of the notion of being “chosen” is the idea of being singled out from the others, of separateness, comparison, and competition. There is no identification, merging, acceptance or unity with the “other.”

The idea of being “chosen” in the Bible, as mentioned previously, is not exclusive to a people, but can also apply to tribes or groups. Among the twelve Israelite tribes, God sets the Levi tribe apart from the others: “And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel…therefore the Levites shall be mine” (Numbers 3:12). And out of the Levi tribe, God selects the *Cohanim* (the priestly caste): “Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi” (Numbers 4:2). Aharon the priest, who is the progenitor of all the priests of Israel, is the son of Amram son of Kohath, and Kohath is the second son of Levi, son of Jacob. Their chosen status bestows onto them the duty “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 4:3–4).

The selection of the chosen people from among all other peoples and of one tribe from among the twelve creates the cultural basis for a comparative perception of various groups – a tribal, sectarian, differentiating and non-unifying outlook. Obedience to the idea that ​​“all of Israel are responsible one for the other "remains an important value in Judaism, but mostly when it comes to the *mitzvoth* between man and God. In the *mitzvoth* between man and his peers, this value is only salient within the boundaries of the peer group and, therefore, it loses its broad societal impact. A great dichotomy arises here between mutual accountability and the principle of obedience derived from it, on the one hand, and distinctiveness from the “others” to whom I am not committed since they are not my “peers,” on the other. This is a built-in conflict that does not necessarily engender a dialectical relationship between internal obedience within the community to which I belong and the external disobedience toward the “others.”

**“We will do and be obedient” – between obedience and a “stiff-necked people”**

In the biblical account of the reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the Israelites are quoted as saying only that they will do as the Lord says: “And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:7–8). The combination of “we will do and be obedient” appears only later: “And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient” (Exodus 24:7). The accepted interpretation of the verse sees this phrase as an expression of the symbiotic relationship between the recognition of the burden of the *mitzvoth* and the recognition of the Divine Power. In the writings of the sages, the expression “we will do and be obedient” becomes a distinct symbol of faith-based obedience that signifies an unconditional acceptance of the Torah: “Rabbi Simai taught: When Israel accorded precedence to the declaration ‘We will do’ over the declaration ‘We will obey,’ 600,000 ministering angels came and tied two crowns to each and every member of the Jewish people, one corresponding to ‘We will do’ and one corresponding to ‘We will obey’” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a). There is however, another interpretation which states that God had in fact forced the People of Israel to accept the burden of the Divine Power out of apprehension that they would be too terrified by the revelation on Mount Sinai: “The Almighty held the mountain over them like a barrel - even though they had already said ‘We will do and we will obey,’ perhaps they retracted when they saw the great fire [on the mountain] that caused their souls to depart” (Babylonian Talmud, Tosafot Shabbat 88a:5).

Absolute obedience and the unconditional acceptance of the Torah are also implicated in the doctrine of Divine retribution. Jewish ethics are based on a reward/punishment dialectic between man, the community and God. The nation and the individual determine their fate by virtue of their actions (Yakobson 1959). The designation of Israel as the chosen people confers upon them the duty to serve as an example to all other nations and therefore they are punished severely for any infraction: “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 divine court of judgment, a man is rewarded and punished not only based on his own actions, but based on those of his fathers. And the repercussions do not stop there, for the whole nation is implicated in the act of sin. Roughly three thousand people participated in the fabrication of the golden calf (Exodus 32:28) and yet the entire nation of Israel is punished for it: “And the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made” (Exodus 32:35). Just as obedience and strict observance of the *mitzvoth* come with the promise of palpable reward, disobedience entails truly dreadful penalties:

If thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes…all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field… cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land… and thou shalt not prosper in thy ways: and thou shalt be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man shall save thee” (Deuteronomy 28:15–29)

The absolute obedience inferred from “we will do and be obedient” is at odds with the biblical description of the people as “stiff-necked,” or obstinate: “And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 32:9); “they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the Lord their God” (2 Kings 17:14). The biblical story reveals that it is because the chosen people is “stiff-necked” that they have a hard time obeying the Lord their God, as well as its own leaders. In the Book of Numbers, the people disobey the laws of the Hebrew God and choose Moabite gods and women over him: “And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods” (Numbers 25:1). In the Book of Judges, the people once again disobey and sin by worshipping foreign gods: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served not him” (Judges 10:6).

The people are not the only ones depicted as “stiff-necked” and disobedient, failing time and time again to fulfill their covenant with God. Their leaders and kings, the chosen among the chosen people, also find it hard to follow directions, as the Bible shows on countless occasions, and do evil in the sight of the Lord. King David fails to obey the tenth commandment – “thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife” (Exodus 20:17). King Solomon goes against the rules Gods lays out for the future kings of Israel: “Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold” (Deuteronomy 17:17). Jeroboam sins by worshiping false gods: “Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt… And this thing became a sin” (1 Kings 12:28–30). In fact, there is a whole dynasty of rulers described in the First Book of Kings who do evil in the sight of God:

And Nadab the son of Jeroboam began to reign over Israel…And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin… In the third year of Asa king of Judah began Baasha the son of Ahijah to reign over all Israel…And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin. (1 Kings 15:25–34)

In the Second Book of Kings we find a description of King Zedekiah’s disobedience: “Zedekiah was twenty and one years old when he began to reign… And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord… For through the anger of the Lord it came to pass in Jerusalem and Judah, until he had cast them out from his presence, that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon” (2 Kings 24:18–20). The punishment for particular king’s acts of disobedience happens to be the destruction of the first Temple. As we can see, disobedience seems to be a dominant motif in the lives of the kings of Israel, one that characterizes the entire period of the ancient kingdom of Israel. The fall of the kingdom is therefore described as a direct consequence of the failure on the part of the kings to accept the limitations placed on their power and authority by the Jewish tradition.

In his dialogical interpretation of the biblical text, regarding the disobedience of leaders, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argues that the Bible came to teach us that the path of truth lies not in the realm of achievement but in the depth of human failure (Buber 2002:36). The biblical author presents repeated acts of disobedience and sins in order to emphasize the gap between man and God. Looking at the text through the eyes of cultural interpretation, which see the text as a constitutive literary work, we find that disobedience to God – as expressed in the many stories involving leaders and rulers – is not revolutionary, in the sense that it does not attempt to produce change or create something new. It is simply a recurring motif of rebellion derived from the failure to gain ultimate authority.

**Obedience driven by the “authoritarian conscience”**

As mentioned previously, Fromm distinguishes between obedience driven by the “authoritarian conscience” that is the internalized voice of authority and obedience driven by the “humanistic conscience” that is the internal, autonomous, and authentic voice that calls us back to our humanity (Fromm 1981: 6). Though the ordinance itself may be humanist in nature, such as *gemilot hassadim* (interest-free loans), for example, the desire to fulfill it can still be driven by the “authoritarian conscience,” thereby preventing the person from exercising their reflexive awareness and seeking out the deeper meaning behind the act. To compare, in Christianity, great emphasis is placed on the internal “intention” – i.e. the emotions and thoughts that underlie the action – as opposed to just the external action itself (Schimmel 1997). We need only look at the New Testament’s interpretation of the ten commandments to see this shift in focus exemplified:

Ye have heard that it was said of 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 Judaism, on the other hand, though intention remains important, there is greater attention paid to the external appearance of conduct, to the visible manifestation of one’s obedience. For example, when the Talmud defines the term “*talmid chacham*” (“Torah scholar”), it describes the clothing of one pretending to this title, among other attributes: “And Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: a Torah scholar on whose clothes a fat stain is found is liable to receive the death penalty” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 114a). The main reason for this Halakha is that dirty clothing causes blasphemy. However there is also a broader interpretation which states that the visible stain on the garment is an external projection of the *talmid chacham*’s inner state. The Jewish Halakha also promotes the concept of *mar’it ayin* (literally translated as “appearances”) which prohibits actions that are not sinful in and of themselves, but may appear to be sinful. The source of the prohibition is found in the Babylonian Talmud, where there is a prohibition on consuming fish blood even though there is no explicit injunction against it in the Torah, since fish are not considered meat. The ban is based entirely on appearances, since onlookers may think that it is the forbidden blood of a land animal: “Rav says: Fish blood that one collected in a receptacle is prohibited for consumption because it would look as though one is consuming the blood of an animal or bird” (Babylonian Talmud, Keritot 21b).

The ancient Jewish view judged a person according to their deeds only. On the matter of intent, there was a dispute between the Hillel and the Shammai schools of thought. The House of Shammai maintained that a person should be evaluated based on their actions. By contrast, the House of Hillel emphasized the value of intention as a factor in assessing one’s virtue. An example that clarifies the difference between the two houses on the subject of intention can be seen in the Keritot tractate of the Mishnah: “Rabbi Judah said: even if he intended to pick figs and he picked grapes, or grapes and he picked figs, white [grapes] and he picked black ones, or black and he picked white ones Rabbi Eliezer declares him liable to a hatat. And Rabbi Joshua declares him exempt” (Mishnah, Keritot 4:3). In this passage, there is a dispute between Rabbi Joshua Ben Hananiah of House Hillel and Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hurkanus of House Shammai regarding the fitting judgment for a man who meant to pick grapes on the Sabbath but picked figs – an action forbidden by the Torah – or vice versa. Rabbi Eliezer sees the deed – the infraction of a law stipulated in the Torah – as the main reason to find the man guilty. On the other hand, Rabbi Joshua exempts the man from punishment since he conditions the man’s guilt and subsequent punishment on his intention, the intention being the main criterion on which the judgment must be based.

The matter of intention and obedience based on the humanistic as opposed to the authoritarian conscience is evoked in the context of confession on Yom Kippur. In Judaism, confession must be general and exclude names, times and places. The confession is made in the first-person plural, without pointing to the transgressive individual: “We have trespassed; we have betrayed; we have stolen; we have slandered; we have caused others to sin; we have caused others to commit sins for which they are called wicked” (Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, The Morning Prayers, Amidah). The plea for forgiveness is likewise collective: “And so may it be Your will … that You pardon us for all our careless sins, and that You forgive us for all our deliberate sins, and that You grant us atonement for all our rebellious sins” (Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, The Morning Prayers, Amidah). However, it is also very detailed, so as to include everyone: “for the sin we committed before You with an utterance of the lips… with knowledge and with deceit… by improper thoughts… by joining in a lewd gathering… by desecrating the Divine Name… by cheating a fellow-man” etc. (Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, The Morning Prayers, Amidah). Confession is therefore not personal, the way it is in Christianity, but collective and spoken aloud in front of the congregation. It therefore also does not involve shame, which is not the case when it comes to Christian confession.

There is no private sin that is not part of the collective moral state, and there is no moment in the collective’s condition that is not affected by the sins of the individuals of whom it is comprised (Ofir 2001:134). In Judaism, the personal confession is whispered internally, without sharing it with the public, on all days of the year and before one’s death (Casutto 1973). In terms of confessing the details of the sin, there is some disagreement on the matter: “Some rule that one must name the specifics of the sin…for the sake of shame…so that the sinner is ashamed of his sins…and some are of the opinion…that the specifics of the sin need not be disclosed, he can speak the sin in the alphabetical order, even out loud, for this is not specific since everyone speaks it equally” (Zevin 1965: 412–455). When there is one day in the year dedicated specifically to atonement and when the confession of sins is done publicly, in the first-person plural, according to a readymade list of sins, we might consider this an impingement on the personal responsibility required to atone for misdoings internally, with intention. Obedience to the ordinance of confession and atonement must be driven by the “humanistic conscience,” whereas the structure of confession as it is delineated in Judaism makes it possible for confession to be driven by the “authoritarian conscience” alone.

**Epilogue**

Biblical law includes civil and criminal laws, moral and social laws, religious and ritual laws, all embedded within historical narratives. In the Old Testament, the laws are divine and apply to all the children of Israel and therefore have a democratic dimension based on the principle of equality before the law, with everyone being subject to one biblical legal system. The biblical text contains many laws that constitute the central values of Judaism. Obedience to these laws is highly rewarded, while disobedience entails harsh punishment (Weiss 1987).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the biblical narrative is replete with stories of disobedience, from Genesis onward. The message that emerges from the narrative sequence, whether it takes place in the Land of Israel or in exile, is that human laws are only binding when they are just (Hazoni 1998: 34) and any person can break the boundaries of the law. An unjust law is a law imposed on a minority that has no part in its devising or enactment (King 1998: 11). These things are consistent with the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau (1998) who argues that the authority of a government is not a pure authority and can only be perfectly just if it receives the approval and consent of the governed. Thoreau, the 19th century author and activist, worked for decades within the confines of the law to promote the abolition of slavery. However, when his struggle against the minority in power proved futile, he finally turned to the doctrine of civil disobedience in order to raise public awareness and bring on the crisis that, following the American Civil War, finally granted freedom to the slaves.

In Jewish culture, while obedience is a supreme value, as derived from the “we will do and be obedient” verse, disobedience remains present and dominant. Obedience is a supreme value in reference to the laws of the Torah given to Moses, as Divine law. Disobedience, on the other hand, is sanctioned in the context of human laws and regimes. As we have seen in the biblical story, disobedience crosses all strata of the people - individuals, families, judges and kings. The latter fail to obey the divine law and their punishment is therefore severe.

Disobedience is an important component of democratic existence since blind obedience can pose a danger. It seems that in Jewish culture over the ages, and especially in the Israeli experience, which is based on tribal-like loyalties to the many and varied groups and cultural divisions in Israeli society, the obedience described in the phrase “all of Israel are responsible one for the other” remains limited to one’s peers, as argued by Maimonides. Obedience for the sake of the unity of the broad community, for better or worse, does not characterize Jewish culture across its various sectors. On the contrary, Israeli society is becoming increasingly polarized in terms of beliefs and opinions, ideologies and socioeconomic disparities.

At times, civil disobedience can preserve the boundaries of discourse, democracy and the mutual guarantee. At other times, however, it poses a real danger to society's existence. Civil disobedience is justified when it is employed as a political action that addresses the majority's sense of injustice in order to provoke a renewed discussion of the protested measures and to raise an alert about instances of governmental or legislative action passed without cooperation (Rawls 1968: 240).

The biblical narratives we have examined in the confines of the present articles do not attest to a dialectical relationship between obedience and disobedience – they are not in conflict and are not depicted as opposite sides of the same coin. Disagreements in Judaism are a desirable and common thing – “every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure” (Mishnah, Pirkey Avot 5:17) – and dialectical understanding has the role of presenting two contradictory sides within one great truth. Both obedience and disobedience out of belief, ideology, or internal and authentic moral rules, are important to the existence of a free society since a society, in general, tends to “normalize” its members (Arendt 2013: 40). Perpetual rebellion and non-acceptance of authority as a way of life or, alternatively, blind obedience are equally a danger and therefore the dialectic between obedience and disobedience is important. The conclusion that emerges here is therefore that a culture in which authoritarian obedience to divine commandments is a central, important and sublime value may find itself rebelling against human authority with greater vigor because these are two separate systems of authority that are neither opposed nor correlated to each other.

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