Consider the Grogger: A Purim Reader

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Consider: Why do we use a *grogger*? In a world in which it sometimes feels like everything makes just a bit too much noise, why do we use these most annoying of noisemakers?

In David Zvi Kalman's award winning piece, "The Strange and Violent History of the Ordinary Grogger," Kalman traces the history of this loud yet under-considered instrument of merry noise-making. As you might (not) expect, the *grogger* has a long history in a less than traditionally Puriminian context: celebrations of the burning of Judas. Judas, betrayer of a famous close friend of his (and namesake to a recent movie), has often been a stand-in for antisemitic anger over history. In Kalman's words:

> The Burning of Judas was never officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church, but it was common practice in Europe until the 20th century and is still frequently performed in Latin America. While details vary by location, the basics are the same: An effigy of Judas is first hanged, then burned. It was in the context of this ceremony that the crotalus first morphed from church object to child object, as children responded to the flaming effigy by twirling their rattles in celebration. It still happens today; you can find images of a Czech anti-Judas rattle procession.
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> Early on, the rattle's distinctive sound became part of the ritual. As elsewhere, people understood it to be a violent sound; some compared it to the sound of nails being driven into Jesus' hands. More commonly, though, it was heard as a grinding noise — specifically, the grinding of Judas' bones. In some communities, from medieval Germany to 19th-century Malta, Grinding Judas' Bones represents a distinct ritual involving the mass twirling of rattles. (The grinding ritual didn't always use rattles; in some places, kids just smashed things on the ground.) It is likely through these semi-sanctioned ceremonies that the rattles came to be a general purpose toy.

And yet, somehow it is we who now use the *grogger*. Figure that one out.

> Out of this bawdy and frequently anti-Semitic rattle ritual, the grogger emerged.
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> In a brilliant piece of ritualistic judo, Jews appropriated all the violence and anti-Semitism contained in the rattle and flipped it around: Where the crotalus castigated Judas for eternity (and Jews by extension), the grogger vilified Haman, antagonist of the Purim story, incarnation of Jewish persecution and perpetual outlet for Jewish revenge fantasies.

Purim: The day of reversals, indeed. The day the world is turned upside down and the devices of Jewish shame become—for a few short hours—symbols of our eternality. The symbol of suffering reversed.

This year has been a year of suffering. Our world has been turned upside down and so much of what we thought to be truth has come apart at the seams. How can we find joy this Purim within a suffering world? How can we approach a holiday predicated on joy, on turning the world upside down with rebellious passion, in a world already in turmoil?

There is no answer to this question and I suspect that people all over the world will be entering this Purim with far different intentions. Many are alone for Purim, far from the festive *seudot* that they usually attend. We have no answer to this question, but we can offer a few words that guide us towards this holiday. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, at the end of his far too-short life, once started one of his iconic stories by saying, "let me tell a story, how they once found joy from within melancholy." Joy within melancholy, within suffering, within destruction. Perhaps something like this.

We turn again to the *grogger*. A great sage, perhaps even the Kedushas Levi, noted the difference between the *grogger* and the *dreidel*—the two spinnable items of the Jewish holidays. The great sage notes that the *grogger* is swung from below, while the *dreidel* is spun from above, drawing from this simple observation a powerful statement about the nature of the miracles of each holiday. Chanukah was a festival from above, a time of a revealed miracle from above, but Purim is a festival from below, a time of a more subtle, concealed, this world miracle. In the original idiom: Upper awakening and lower awakening.

In a year of great scientific advances, perhaps we can appreciate this point. We witnessed the great subtle miracles of this world, of what can be accomplished through the concealed miracles of scientific advancement, and the many people that can be saved by this *grogger*, swung from below.

But consider also an idea from a more contemporary thinker, Rabbi Moshe Wolfson, a chassidic theoretician and lecturer based in Brooklyn. Rabbi Wolfson is curious about the end of *Megillat Esther*, where we are told at the very end of the matter that a tax was levied on the people. Why do we end the *Megillah* on such an anticlimactic note? The great theoretician answers simply: Because life goes on. The *grogger* keeps spinning, propelled ever around and around by the ephemera of this world: the taxes, the mortgages, the new and the old and the new again. Such is life, such is this world, such is the nature of miracles. Life goes on. Through it all, with it all, we keep spinning the *grogger*, the world keeps spinning, and all continues.

How do we approach a Purim in a suffering world? Perhaps with the humble recognition of the ever-spinning *grogger*, and a world that spins beyond control or understanding.

This week, 18Forty spoke with Rabbanit Rachelle Fraenkel, a person whose radical faith and wisdom challenge our usual notions and conceptions. Speaking to Rachelle the week of Purim is no accident – Rachelle's powerful words speak to a life lived with deep joy, even through experiencing the suffering this world can bring.

To prepare for this complicated Purim, a Purim in which the gyrations of the *grogger*-world in which we live matter more than ever, we put together some reading on the powerful ways that people have found meaning in suffering. We start with a piece that Rabbanit Fraenkel read in her interview with 18Forty, by Dr. Achinoam Ya'akovs. Dr. Ya'akovs lost her daughter several years ago, and penned this powerful reflection on the idea of accepting suffering. Dr. Ya'akovs also wrote her doctoral dissertation on "The Descriptions of the Crying God in Rabbinic Literature: Literary, Cultural and Ideological Aspects" (Hebrew), a topic she chose given the terms of her life. For those that are comfortable in Hebrew, the introduction to her dissertation might be one of the most powerful introductions we have. We also include here David Zvi Kalman's aforementioned piece on the *grogger*, which itself is a meditation on what we might make from the symbols of our suffering. That is followed by an essay by Alex Harris, a member of our intellectual community, who contributes his own thoughts on the challenges of approaching the perfection of God in a suffering world. We close off with a story of a Purim amidst a different type of suffering, in the nightmare world of the Holocaust.

Wherever you are, we at 18Forty wish you a blessed Purim, and a day of joy, love, and *hamentaschen*. May we turn the world upside down this Purim, together.

Suffering and Love

February 24, 2021

By Dr. Achinoam Ya'akobs

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Note: This essay was originally written and published in Hebrew, under the name "סורים ואהבה", in חידת הייסורים. Achinoam’s daughter Rotem was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 3, and passed away after fighting for four years. This is a small translation of her longer piece, which can be read in the original Hebrew here.

Every time I heard statements that demanded from me something in the field of faith, or ones that wanted to explain, to make order, or to give a good meaning to Rotem’s illness, I would rebel from within… do we know everything that we need to know about humans that we can presume to say things about God and His ways In the world ?! After all, this is not about a lecture or Mussar class in the yeshiva, it’s a young, dear and beloved girl, and her family, who sees her suffering and embraces her in her agony.

“The torments must be accepted with love.”

They would strike at me… This sentence would echo in my head, and my whole being would scream and rebel from my insides. If a person wants to accept his sufferings with love, let him accept, but how can one accept another person’s sufferings with love? How can a mother accept the suffering of her daughter with love?

This sentence, with its various versions, sometimes it infuriated me, sometimes it invoked sadness, I never understood it and was unwilling to respond to it.

Until one day, as our agony intensified, the meaning of the phrase became clear to me. Like a blind person whose eyes had opened, I discovered that until now I had not understood the teaching of the sages at all.

I suddenly understood that what is written here is that when suffering comes upon a person and those who are close to him, one must enhance and strengthen oneself in regard to the matter of love.

The only thing we could give (and receive) with no limit was love …

The only thing we could do in the face of suffering was to love.

To accept the torment by adding more love to Rotem…

“We must accept suffering with love.” With great love, for others. For humans. This is the best, most beautiful and compassionate advice I have received.

And this love grew purer, it grew stronger and stronger.

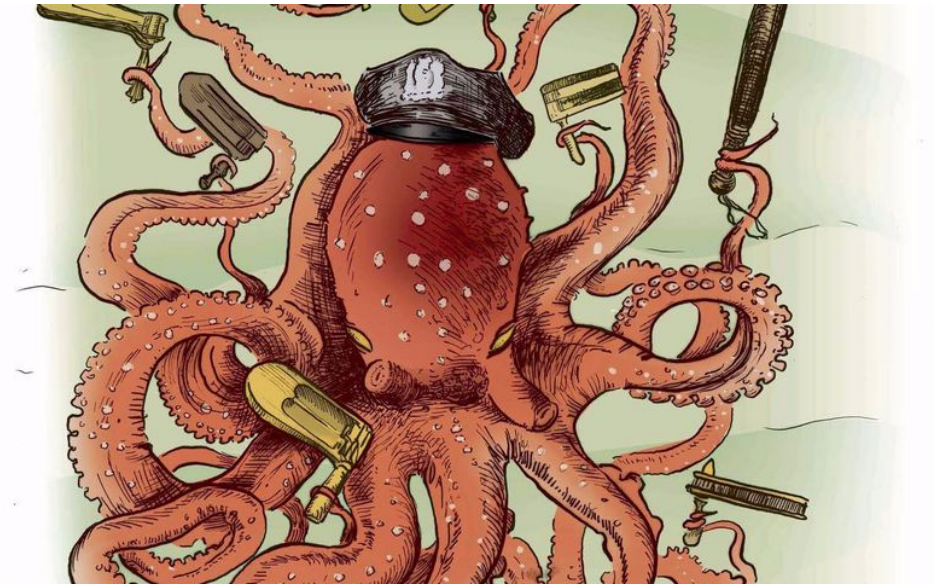
The less we were able to remedy the body, the greater and stronger our love became. until eventually it depended on nothing at all, not even on life itself

> I have loved you with an everlasting love
>
> אהבת עולם אהבתיך

The Strange and Violent History of the Ordinary Grogger

forward.com/culture/335491/the-strange-and-violent-history-of-the-ordinary-grogger

David Zvi Kalman



Some objects look like they have stories to tell, but the *grogger* never seemed as though it was one of them. A single photograph convinced me I was wrong, though. You'll be forgiven if you think it is a photo of two men dressed up in hazmat suits for Purim —how were you supposed to know that those aren't groggers, but World War II gas alarms issued by the Royal Air Force, and that the hazmat suits and gas masks are all too real?

Image by Imperial War Museum
Rattle and Hum: Two airmen wield gas rattles during an exercise during World War II.

Now that you know, your eyes (like mine) might still play tricks on you. The photo has the feel of an optical illusion: You can know what it is, yet it looks like it *must* be something else.

Today you can go a lifetime without ever seeing a *grogger* outside of the Purim context, but this wasn't always the case. Three hundred years ago, you'd be more likely to associate *groggers* with the fire department than with Haman. Three hundred years before that, you'd associate the *grogger* with church.

Over the past couple of months, I've been piecing together the story of the *grogger* in popular culture, trying to understand where it came from, how it was used and how Jews came to be its most prominent users.

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First, terminology. *Grogger* is just Yiddish for rattle. Its basic operation is simple: a wooden cog is attached to a handle, with a freely rotating wood slat fitted into the teeth. When the rattle is swung around, the slat is forced to move around the cog, vibrating every time it passes a tooth. Voilà: noise.

The rattle got its first big break as a stand-in for a more quotidian noisemaker: the bell. Bells and churches have gone together for so long that it's hard to imagine one without the other, but since at least the ninth century there's been a custom not to ring bells during the Triduum — the three days preceding Easter — out of solemn respect for the mournful times between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Though the Triduum are sometimes called "the silent days," there was nothing silent about them — a medieval German archbishop explained that a simple wooden clacker stood in for the bells. Today this clacker is called a *crotalus*, after the Greek word for (wait for it) rattle.

The first *crotali* were almost certainly not *grogger* -like; one early design,still in use today, was made to swing back and forth, as one might swing a bell. Handheld designs like this could replace only the small altar bells, not their larger relatives in the bell towers; the cog mechanism was probably introduced to solve this problem. The bell tower rattle was several feet wide, stationary, and operated by a crank; some are still functional today.

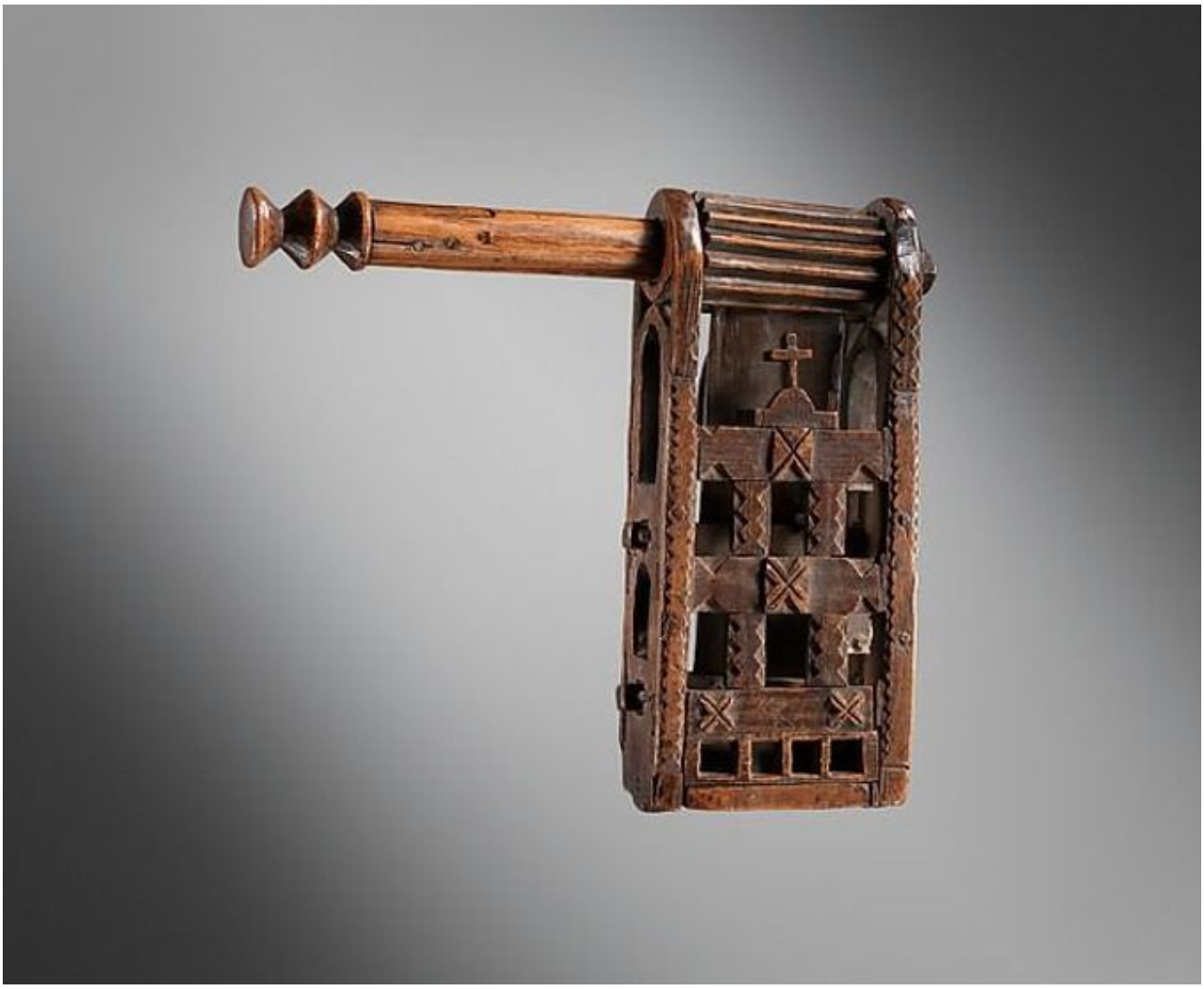

Image by Metropolitan Museum of Ar...
It Might Get Loud: A French cog rattle.

With the rattle in use, miniaturization soon followed, and by the 14th century, churches were already commissioning *crotali* with intricate woodwork.It was inevitable, though, that users would find other purposes for this device. The church gave no special importance to the rattle's distinctive sound; its whole purpose was to be loud and not sound like a bell. It excelled at the latter, but the rattle is ill-suited for the acoustics of a church. Under a vaulted ceiling or in the open air of a tower, a bell's reverberation sustains, while a rattle simply percusses, atonal and staccato. Still, the inferior sound and the device from which it emanated were both unique, and over time, others began to take notice. Beginning in the early modern period, the rattle began to look for other jobs. It found two.

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Before cities had police departments, they had night watchmen. In 1658, Peter Stuyvesant, then the director-general of New Netherland, organized nine men to patrol what would become New York City between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., "to pursue, attack, and capture…pirates and vagabonds" and to arrest "robbers or others who would wish to inflict injury and damage." This was the city's first police force, and it's the direct ancestor of the New York Police Department. Stuyvesant called the group the Rattle Watch, after the devices they carried to sound the alarm. Twenty years earlier, Boston

had organized a similar force, also called a rattle watch. For the next 200 years, both cities supplied their officers with rattles. From the specimens that survive, we know that they were employing the same design as the *crotalus* and *grogger*.

As an officer's alarm, the rattle has three things going for it: It is cheap, it is portable and it is very loud. In Stuyvesant's day, this was a rare combination. To understand why, we need to consider the alternatives.

In an age of loudspeakers, megaphones, sirens and foghorns, our concern is usually noise reduction, not noise creation; these days, anybody can wake up half the neighborhood just by testing a smoke alarm in the middle of the street. But this personal, instantaneous access to ungodly amounts of noise is very new; almost all of the loudest handheld devices were invented in the last century, and most require electricity.

Of course, humans can make a ruckus with nothing but their vocal cords, but shouting at the top of your lungs is hard work: It takes energy to sustain, it strains the voice and it saps energy that might be needed for other things (like pursuing a New York City hooligan). The same rule holds for clapping, snapping, stomping, whistling and striking hard surfaces; sound is just vibrations, and making large vibrations with one's own body is either going to be tiring or painful.

Tools are the clear solution, since they can translate the body's movements into sound and reduce the effort needed to make noise. Until quite recently, though, noisemakers could get louder only by getting bigger or more cumbersome; most instruments small enough for a

patrol weren't loud enough to be useful. (Explosives might have been an exception, but they weren't very practical since they were not only dangerous, but they also wouldn't have made continuous noise.)

The rattle was perfect, though. At less than a foot long, flat and L-shaped (in some police models the handle even folded down), it was easy to carry. Because the noise came with a flick of the wrist, it could be operated with one hand. It was cheap, too. Unlike their elaborate church counterparts, patrol rattles are simple affairs. It was the ideal tool for the job. For more than 200 years, rattles were used regularly in both American and Britain, by both police and fire departments.

The rattle's reign was finally ended by the pea whistle, whose trilling mechanism made it significantly louder than previous whistles. The changeover was swift: In 1884, only a year after its invention Scotland Yard adopted the pea whistle after a convincing demonstration of superiority. Other police departments soon followed suit. Within a decade, rattles had disappeared from civilian use.

The military, however, soon found rattles important for an entirely new reason: the rise of chemical warfare. When British and American forces realized that German forces were employing poison gas, they issued their soldiers masks, but these made blowing a whistle — crucial for alerting fellow soldiers to an impending attack — impossible. Rattles were the solution. During both World War I and World War II, British and American forces produced rattles marked "gas alarm only" to soldiers on the front line. There is actually video footage of these rattles in use during World War I.

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Police and military appropriation of the *crotalus* was probably the most important, but Stuyvesant didn't borrow the rattle directly from the church. That honor almost certainly goes to children, who know a good toy when they see one.

Children have been playing with rattles for a long time. Even after police started using the rattle, European adults could agree that it was primarily a plaything. Although the rattle does show up as a normal percussion instrument in a couple of musical compositions — you can hear a large one in the opening measures of Respighi's "Pines of Rome" and sporadically throughout Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" — it usually appears in classical music *because* of its status of a toy; it was a way of communicating levity to the audience. This is its purpose in the finale of Walton's first "Facade Suites," and when Strauss uses the rattle in "Till Eulenspeigel," it's supposed to be slapstick — in fact, the original "slap stick" looks a lot like the early *crotalus*. The piece in which the rattle gets the most airtime is Leopold Mozart's lighthearted "Toy Symphony," which combines traditional instruments with musical toys.

Kids liked the rattle not just because it was loud, but also because it sounded vaguely violent. To many people, the rattle was a ringer for the din of gunfire. Beethoven apparently thought so; his "Wellington's Victory" orchestral piece uses the rattle as a substitute for a cannon. To others, it mimicked the sound of explosions: In early 20th-century America, colorful rattles were sold as toys under the name "safety crackers," with the word "safety" implying that they were safer than *actual firecrackers*.

But the place where children first encountered the rattle was the church itself, during those three days before Easter when the bells fell silent, as part of a ceremony called the Burning of Judas. This is the moment when our story takes an unsettling turn. It is also the key to understanding why Jews eventually adopted the *grogger* for use on Purim.

The Burning of Judas was never officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church, but it was common practice in Europe until the 20th century and is still frequently performed in Latin America. While details vary by location, the basics are the same: An effigy of Judas is first hanged, then burned. It was in the context of this ceremony that the *crotalus* first morphed from church object to child object, as children responded to the flaming effigy by twirling their rattles in celebration. It still happens today; you can find images of a Czech anti-Judas rattle procession.

Early on, the rattle's distinctive sound became part of the ritual. As elsewhere, people understood it to be a violent sound; some compared it to the sound of nails being driven into Jesus' hands. More commonly, though, it was heard as a grinding noise — specifically, the grinding of Judas' bones. In some communities, from medieval Germany to 19th-century Malta, Grinding Judas' Bones represents a distinct ritual involving the mass twirling of rattles. (The grinding ritual didn't always use rattles; in some places, kids just smashed things on the ground.) It is likely through these semi-sanctioned ceremonies that the rattles came to be a general purpose toy.

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And it was definitely revenge. Like so many rattles before it, the *grogger* expressed violence; some 19th-century *groggers* are constructed to allow users to hang Haman over and over again. Purim itself has long been a repository for such intense feeling. In his book "Reckless Rites," Elliott Horowitz argues that from the medieval period onward, Jews used Purim as a valve for vengeance — or at least vitriol in the form of anti-Christian polemic.

But the *grogger* wasn't the first time Jews turned the Judas ritual on its head — in fact, its appearance in the 18th century makes it late to the party. The uncanny similarity between the carnivalesque vilification of Judas and Haman is incredibly old. Haman is hanged (Esther 7:10) and Judas hangs himself (Matthew 27:5), and both deaths are reenacted. Christians have been burning Judas in effigy for a long time, but Jews have been burning Haman in effigy for longer — in fact, the Roman government was already trying to ban the practice in the fifth century, wary that Haman was just a stand-in for Christians and the Christianized Roman Empire (which it was).

And Jewish children in Christian Europe didn't need *groggers* to attack Haman with sound. For centuries, the noisemaker of choice was a pair of rocks. Each rock was inscribed with the name of Amalek, Haman's tribal ancestor and perpetual Israelite bogeyman. By repeatedly smashing the rocks together, children could solve two problems with two stones (so to speak): They could make a ruckus while fulfilling the Biblical injunction to "erase the memory of Amalek."

In general, Purim is celebrated between late February and late March; Easter is celebrated between late March and late April. In the small towns of Christian Europe, it's not so hard to imagine how the Judas and Haman rituals might have come into alignment. But alignment also masks the tangle of perceived and real antagonisms that fueled these rituals and spurred each religion to mirror the other. Individuals can be passive-aggressive toward each other, but communities can't be passive-aggressive toward other communities. It's too easy for one community to see how another is really feeling and reacting — think of Christian anger over Hebrew anti-Jesus polemics, which in turn were inspired by Christian behaviors. Jews, who were powerless to shut down the Judas burnings, had a special incentive to appropriate: If the rattle was going to grind up Judas' bones, at least it could be neutralized by making it drown out Haman as well.

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Today, the rattle is an obsolete technology: It's a weak siren and a crummy toy. Obsolescence, though, doesn't necessarily entail instant death — technologies can take a long time to die, and some don't die at all. Witness the fax machine, alive and kicking in the 21st-century, or the bayonet, still in service at Marine boot camp despite the fact that it was already obsolete by the time World War I rolled around.

Religions have a particular habit of collecting yesterday's technologies and holding on to them long after they've faded from use and collective memory. There's a simple logic to this behavior: Obsolescence confers a post-facto distinctiveness on religious objects, which is just what the doctor ordered if you're trying to telegraph tradition, continuity or sanctity to practitioners. Shabbat candles used to be special because of how and when they were lit; in the electric age, they're also distinct because they're not lightbulbs.

Still, candles today aren't inherently religious; that won't happen until restaurants and romantics stop using them. When a technology *does* die out in all places but one, something very special happens: The technology moves into an afterlife. The obsolete label finally comes off, and the last user standing gets to associate the technology with itself. Take the humble parchment scroll, for example: 2,500 years ago, the scroll was everywhere; 1,700 years ago, the scroll was obsolete; now, the scroll is Jewish.

Christian rattle use is fast dwindling and not very visible; it's not too early to say that the rattle is effectively Jewish, too. But in becoming Jewish, the rattle/*grogger* has also been divorced from its aggressive history through a long, internal Jewish campaign to forget the vengeful feelings of Purim's past. What remains is just a portable wooden noisemaker. It is still full of sound and fury — but today, for better or for worse, it signifies very little.

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Reconsidering Rightness: Approaching God in an Imperfect World

I've always struggled with the concept of a personal God. As a kid, I was told that "God is everywhere." And yet when I looked around me, I didn't see God. I saw people, animals, buildings, things, but not God. I began to imagine that God was like the wind. Although the wind was invisible and intangible, I could still feel it if I stepped outside and felt a cool autumn breeze. But God wasn't like the wind because I couldn't feel Him. And he certainly wasn't above the wind because I had flown in airplanes and seen pictures of space and never saw Him there.

I was told that He was in the light of the Shabbat candles. I remember closing my eyes tightly, afraid to look at the flames, lest I melt like the Nazis from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

I was told He was the Shabbat Kallah, the Shabbat Bride, and I waited every week to greet Him on Friday nights wondering through which door he would enter.

I was told He was inside of everyone, even me.

So I looked, listened, and waited for God to speak to me. But all I heard was silence. I could imagine a God high above me, beyond my perception, but a personal God was inconceivable. And while there were many moments when I thought I heard His whispers, I was never sure it was truly Him, as much as I desperately believed it to be so.

As I became more observant, I gradually became acquainted with the idea that while God no longer speaks to us directly, we have His word in the form of the Oral and Written Torah. And while I am often skeptical as to the boundaries of the divinity of the text, I take it for granted that the tradition we live today is binding and an expression of His will.

Yet, I look at aspects of Jewish tradition and struggle deeply with much of what I see, particularly around questions of gender, sexuality, and particularity. The simple answer is that my sense of morality has been corrupted by society, or that I don't understand or appreciate our traditions sufficiently. It seems obvious that whatever God decides must be followed absolutely. However, deep in my heart, I feel a knot tighten and grow, begging me to ask the unaskable question: could it be that God too reconsiders His handiwork?

Can God Err?

At first glance, this question seems blasphemous. God is described as omniscient: "[God] knows the secrets of the heart" (Psalms 44:21); "His seal is truth (Shabbat 55a); as well as omnipotent: "All that God wishes, he does, in heaven and earth, in the seas and all the deeps"

(Psalms 135:6). Rambam's "Thirteen Principles of Faith" elucidate God's perfection. God is described as the ultimate unity, utterly unique and not comparable to physical beings, eternal, and omniscient.

Yet, it is immediately clear that this view is far from universal. God is engaged with the world and is a being who changes His mind based on human actions. This occurs following the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:14) as well as Avraham's intercession on behalf of the people of Sodom (Genesis 18:25). In the latter example, Avraham explicitly refers to an external standard of justice, to convince God that it is wrong to destroy innocent lives along with Sodom.

Moreover, God Himself recognizes the need to reconsider His ways. Following the Flood, God regrets having created man: "And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened." (Genesis 6:6)

This motif appears in the Talmud as well. In one case God's *halakhic* rulings as presented by Rabbi Eliezer are trounced by a majority of Rabbis. Even when God intervenes and explicitly states His opinion of the correct *halakha*, He is overruled by Rabbi Yehoshua and the other sages. Yet, God accepts His defeat, laughing, "my children have defeated me, my children have defeated me." (Bava Metzia 59b). Strikingly, God appears to accept the opinion of the Rabbis contrary to His own.

Lurking beneath the surface is a troubling question. It appears that God changes His mind when confronted by human beings as in the examples of Bava Metzia and Genesis 6:6. But why was God convinced by these arguments in the first place? If one can only be wrong when transgressing an external standard, what standard did God transgress?

One possibility is that there is a natural ethic that exists outside of both God and humanity to which both are beholden. This position is discussed in a number of places and most recently Rav Aharon Lichtenstein addresses this point in his seminal article "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha." Rav Lichtenstein writes, "the traditional acceptance of some form of natural morality seems to me beyond doubt…[the issue is] whether, for the contemporary Jew, an ethic independent of *Halakha* can be at all legitimate and relevant at an operative level." In other words, Rav Lichtenstein's question is: given that a natural ethic exists outside of *halakha*, is this ethic normative?

While a full treatment of this question is beyond the scope of this article, it suffices to say that Rav Lichteinstein's answer is that "traditional *halakhic* Judaism demands of the Jew both adherence to *Halakha* and commitment to an ethical moment that though different from *Halakha* is nevertheless a piece with it and in its own way fully imperative." For Rav Lichteinstein, the "ethical moment" is normative. He identifies the "ethical moment" as the extra-*halakhic* obligation to act *lifnim mishurat hadin*, beyond the letter in the law. Rav Lichteinstein grounds this obligation in Ramban's commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18: "[God] said that you should observe the laws and statutes which He had commanded you.

Now He says that, with respect to what He has not commanded, you should likewise take heed to do the good and the right in His eyes." For Ramban and for Rav Lichtenstein, the Torah is limited and cannot legislate every unique situation which may arise in one's lifetime. However, this does not excuse a Jew from acting in a proper fashion. One must act according to "what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord." Therefore, this "ethical moment" is not something outside of God, but the very expression of His will.

This leads to an even more radical conclusion. When Avraham, Moshe, and Rabbi Yehoshua argue against God, the standard by which they judge God is not an external ethic, but rather the standard of goodness and righteousness that God Himself created. But if God is judged by His own standard, why isn't He always right?

What Does it Mean to be Right?

The answer requires us to rethink what it means to be right. We are used to treating "rightness" as a binary. Something is correct or it isn't. *Mutar* or *Asur*. *Tahor* or *Tamei*. However, this is not a fixed binary. Sometimes there is no single right answer. This is expressed in the Midrash Breishit Rabbah 12:15,

"The Holy One of Blessing said: if I create the world with the attribute of [*rahamim*] compassion alone, no one would be concerned with the consequences of their actions. With the attribute of [*din*] judgment alone, how could the world stand? Rather, behold I create it with both the attribute of judgment and the attribute of compassion, and hopefully it will stand."

The world was not created solely through strict justice, nor complete compassion. It was a combination of both. We can then overlay *din* and *rahamim* to Rav Liechtenstein's distinction between the "*halakha*" and the "ethical moment." *Halakha* is the cut and dry, "yes or no" answer. It is an explicit expression of obligation. Without *halakha*, "no one would be concerned with the consequences of their actions." *Rahamim* is the realization that human beings are fallible and there are extra-legal considerations that must be accounted for in order to fulfill the spirit of the law.

In the example of Sodom, God sees a city teeming with sinners. The simple *din* is that they deserve death. Avraham's intercession on behalf of the people of Sodom focuses on *rahamim*. It would undermine the system of divine justice for innocents to perish by the hand of God. Similarly, in the episode of the Golden Calf, God expresses the *din* of the situation. Bnei Yisrael committed the sin of idolatry at the foot of His holy mountain. Moshe urges God to have compassion on them because they are "stiff necked" and destroying them would result in the Egyptians' claim that "He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth." While the *din* may be to kill idolaters, doing so in this case only strengthens their hand. It is important to note a further distinction. In these stories, God embodies an ideal (absolute *din*), whereas humans embody the real (*rahamim* for sinners).

This distinction is the underlying motif of the gemara on Bava Metzia 59b. While God may express his support for an ideal opinion, Rabbi Yehoshua defends the expression of the ideal in the real world. While an individual like Rabbi Eliezer may claim that his opinion is correct or authentic, it is up to the majority to decide on opinions that function properly in the world and do not undermine the entire purpose of the law itself.

Conclusion

Is God always right? The answer requires us to reframe the relationship between God and humanity. God expresses the absolute ideal form of a given law. It is the responsibility of humans to express that law in a specific context. This leads to a shocking conclusion: the freedom that God gave to humanity is so great that, at times, we can establish a law in situ contrary to what God originally established. Thus it appears that God was "wrong" in His initial assessment. In actuality, this is merely the translation process for God's "ideal" law to its "real" application. It is in these moments of "translation" or "expression" that we encounter the divine. What I learned as a child was not wrong. God is everywhere, but we only encounter Him where we let Him in.

When translating God's "ideal" into the human "real", we must strive to fulfill God's will. We cannot act for human desires. Unfortunately, this process is incredibly dangerous. This is why God was saddened over His creations in His reflections on the flood. His gift of free will was abused and distorted. This is not antinomianism, but a deep commitment to God's will. We must strive to discern and fulfill His will in our lives, attempting to align our moral compass with "what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord." Yet, in the end it is up to us to decide how God's will is expressed.

Rabbi Tarfon describes this situation in *Pirkei Avot* 2:15-16, "The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the master [God] is demanding." Yet he continues with words of comfort, "It is not upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

We should not fear because this is the purpose of humanity: to express the will of God in this world. In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l*, "those who choose Judaism have made space in their minds for the most life-changing idea of all: Whether or not we have faith in God, God has faith in us."

Purim in Nazi Hell

chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/4668804/jewish/Purim-in-Nazi-Hell.htm

Pinchas Menachem Feivlovitz March 6, 2020

Tired, starved, and downtrodden, we Jewish prisoners plodded into the barracks where we spent a few miserable hours on hard bunks before another day of backbreaking labor. We were too exhausted to think, but when our minds wandered back to times long gone, we could not help but wonder if it had all been a dream. Would we ever live again as we once had, before our parents and children had been murdered, and we were dropped into an unending hellish existence where death seemed to be a welcome (and inevitable) reprieve?

It was Purim eve, but what was there for us to celebrate in the German concentration camp of Gross-Rosen?

Suddenly, one of us leaped down from his small space on the bunk and began an impassioned speech that will forever remain in my memory:

“My fellow Jews,” he called out, “dear brothers in suffering! Today is our Purim, when we remember the miracles G-d did for our ancestors. He who dwells in Heaven saved our nation from being decimated. The enemy fell into the pit that he himself had dug. Today we once again have a double-edged sword pressed against our necks. Our enemies are trying to destroy us, but do not allow terror into your hearts! The Haman of our day, Hitler and his lackeys, will not be able to overcome G-d’s chosen nation. The eternity of Israel will not lie.

The bells of freedom are already ringing in the distance. We will yet live to see justice meted out against our enemies, just like our ancestors in Shushan of old. Be strong, brothers, the Jewish nation lives on!"

Beads of sweat appeared on his face. His lips trembled, his eyes glinted, but he said no more.

Then another prisoner jumped down from his bunk and took his place next to the orator. Sweetly, with a voice laden with nostalgia and hope, he sang the words of the blessing said after the Megillah reading, in which we thank G-d "Who fights our battles and pays comeuppance to our mortal enemies."

As the rest of us absorbed the last echoes of the tune, the two men lithely climbed back into their spots on the tiered bunking and silence reigned once again.

In our minds, we were blissfully transported back to the happy Purims of years past, but we knew the joy would not last.

The following morning, the block commander stormed into the barrack: "Cursed Jews!" he shouted. "Last night someone here spoke disparagingly of our Führer. Tell me who it was! If I do not know who it was, you will all be punished before the day is done!"

His words were met with defiant silence.

His face appeared angrier, and his voice became louder. "Dirty Jews!" he called out shrilly. "I am giving you 10 minutes to identify last night's speakers. Make no mistake about it, your lives are on the line."

Ten minutes passed, and no one uttered a word.

"Run, swine, run!" the commander barked, and we Jews began to run as fast as we could, while the guards rained down a shower of rifle butts and whips upon our heads and backs.

"Quick, quick," they shouted as rivers of blood spurted from our heads and our arms. Our backs sagged and our feet ached.

But we had only one fear: that last night's brave performers, who had gifted us with hope and courage, would give themselves up in order to save us from further suffering. One even tried to run out of line to identify himself, but his neighbors didn't allow it. "No, no," they hissed with clenched teeth, "Stay strong. We are all responsible for one another."

I have no way of recalling how long this went on, because every moment felt like eternity. We ran with our last strength, panting, with no air to breathe. Our tongues hung out, and tears mingled with sweat on our cheeks. But no one even considered ratting on the heroes of the previous night.

Yes, even the prisoners of Gross-Rosen merited their own Purim miracle—two miracles, actually: That no one dropped dead from the diabolic run we were forced to endure, and that we all had the courage to keep the identity of those two men secret.

The late Pinchas Menachem Feivlovitz was a Holocaust survivor who fought (and was wounded) in Israel's war of independence. An adherent of the Gur Chassidic group, he devoted much of his energy to chronicling and telling the atrocities of the Holocaust, through his personal experiences of five years under Nazi rule. Together with his wife and fellow survivor Cipora (whom he met and married after liberation), he raised a family in Israel. At the time of his passing in 2007, he left behind dozens of descendants, devoted to Torah and Jewish life. This vignette was recorded by Feivlovitz in his (Hebrew) book, Odeni Zocher *(I Still Recall).*