

Analysis of *Aaron and the Wrath of God*

by Dr. Jeffrey Schein

This article originally appeared in The Reconstructionist Spring 2002.

It has been lightly edited for style and grammar.

Reflections on the Role of Teacher

There are two frequently heard assertions about teaching that *al abat kama v'kama* (all the more so) apply to the teaching of spirituality. They are: 1) good teaching is more often "caught" than "taught" and 2) you cannot teach what you do not believe. To these aphorisms, I would like to add the absolute imperative of teacher self-awareness in the domains of both Jewish thought and educational philosophy.

In regard to the former, I am much indebted to my own teacher Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z"l. Rabbi Eisenstein believed that there indeed are many different ways to understand the spiritual topics of God, Torah and Israel. One could employ naturalistic, transnaturalistic or supernatural strategies for teaching any of the concepts.

The key challenge, Rabbi Eisenstein taught, is congruence of the three concepts. A supernatural God is congruent with the notion of a divinely revealed Torah and a chosen people Israel. An equally congruent example from a natural or transnatural perspective is that of a people Israel who searched for the Divine and developed the Torah out of that search.

Congruence

When a teacher is reasonably "congruent" (which is not the same as fixed or static) in his or her beliefs about these three related and fundamental Jewish ideas, good teaching can take place. When, however, incongruent concepts about God, Torah and Israel are employed (e.g. Torah is the product of human wisdom, but God must have revealed it), teaching often becomes either contradictory or insipid.

In regard to pedagogic assumptions, I now return to the opening of the essay. A teacher must be self-aware [that] his or her goal in relationship to a given Jewish text is to promote Jewish belonging and peoplehood, [to] teach particular Jewish values or help a student explore his/her relationship with God. As I hope I have shown in the lesson plans regarding *Shirat HaYam* and *teshuvah*, these goals are not mutually exclusive. But to be taught effectively, there needs to be a "bracketing" off of the two other goals in order to focus on the third.

What happens when a teacher crosses - rather than separates - these pedagogic purposes? I offer now as testimony the story of "Aaron and the Wrath of God" (see Appendix). The story portrays a father who - as the informal bedside teacher of his son - has crossed his pedagogic wires as he presents the God of the "*Shema*" and its blessings, the succeeding three paragraphs, to his son.

A Story

Aaron's father starts out by treating the second paragraph [of the *Shema*] as narrative for a bedtime story. The telling itself is all bound up with the narratives of peoplehood: "This is something I remember my parents doing with me." The father wants to initiate the son into the same Jewish traditions that were part of his childhood.

Nine out of ten nights, seven-year-old Aaron would simply have processed "*vehayah im shamoah*" (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) as part of the Jewish initiation as well. This passage connects the Israelites' listening and following God's commandments to God's causing natural things to occur, such as rain and the growth of plants. Reciprocally, the Israelites' ignoring of God's words and commandments is linked to the precipitating of God's wrath.

But, on this night, Aaron processes the God who rewards and punishes, who shows generosity and anger, through the more intimate and vulnerable sense of spirituality. Aaron's [father] must then sort through the different modes of experiencing God, in order to teach his son. Since his son has perceived God in the values and spiritual modes, the father, too, moves the story into the mode of seeking God as the divine support behind the values of compassion and justice.

We learn from the story that good insight can come out of our naiveté about teaching God if we 1) roll with the punches as lovingly and openly as does Aaron's father; and 2) distinguish between "primary" and "secondary naiveté" in our own teaching. "Primary naiveté" is the result of not having confronted rational contradictions in our own understanding of prayer, while "secondary naivete" is a commitment to surprise and wonder once such a rational examination has actually taken place.

Although these lessons are of great value, I trust that teachers might avoid such dilemmas if they develop congruent Jewish understanding of related conflicts and greater awareness of how they relate to the three goals of spirituality discussed in this article.

Appendix

Ninety-nine nights out of a hundred, the seven-year-old son would have processed the *va-hayah im shamoah* — a symmetrical affirmation in Deuteronomy of just and unjust rewards as a consequence of the observance or flaunting of the *mitzvot* — in a narrative acculturation mode. But on this particular night, Aaron processes the God of the second paragraph of the *Shema* through his more intimate and vulnerable sense of spirituality.

"Who's going to punish us?" he asked, his voice and gaze still far away. "What?" said his father.

"You said if you're bad you get punished. Who?" He seemed a little annoyed by my apparent dullness.

"Now let me see if I understand your question. You mean. . ."

"Daddy! Who punishes us? The police?"

"No, son, take it easy. God says that . . ."

"God punishes us? God does it? God?" He was actually huddled up in a ball and his eyes were welling with tears.

[Aaron's father must then sort through the different modes of experiencing God in order to teach his son. Since his son has perceived God in the values and spiritual modes, the father, too, moves the story into the mode of seeking God as the divine support behind the values of compassion and justice as embodied in the story of Abraham, God and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.]

"Dad, can you argue with God?"

So, what could I say? I told him briefly the story of Abraham arguing for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. I've never seen such an enraptured audience for that tale, either before or after.

[Spirituality is as much hard work as it is an effortless appreciation of God's gifts, so Aaron must work all these thoughts over. . . in his mind and in his dreams. Before going to bed that evening, Aaron announces that he plans to argue with God.]

"What are you going to argue about with God, Aaron?" I asked seriously.

"About this business of punishments. I'm going to tell God to stop."

"Why don't you ask God to stop it? That seems a lot more polite."

"Okay. But if God says no, I'm going to argue."

"Aaron?"

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Why shouldn't God punish?" I wanted to hear what [God] would be up against.

"Because it's just not fair. God is too big to be punishing people. People get too afraid of God for that. It's not good. God is too smart for that. God can think of something else to do, instead. I'm going to tell God that."

I listened and I knew. God had no chance in this argument. God was clearly outmatched.

"You'll let me know what the answer is?"

"I'll tell you in the morning. Good night, Daddy." And he left.

"Good night, little prophet," I called after him.

The next morning, Aaron came downstairs a little draggy, but clearly happy.

"Well?" I asked.

"God said yes!" he told me brightly.

"God won't punish anymore? He promised *me*."

I sat beholding him over the cornflakes. My small giant, ready in the name of justice and mercy to take on anyone, including the Almighty. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Aaron," I said, "you are the best."

"I know," Aaron said.

I kissed him. I watched him as he walked off to school. And despite my will to disbelieve, despite my wish to laugh at this childish nonsense, despite my strong desire to attribute it all to an overactive seven year old imagining a voice in his head, despite all this, I found myself feeling incredibly good and very much at ease that in a small corner of the world such a response had been given to such a request.