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Ivan Karamazov Revisited: The Moral Argument For Religious Belief

Open a file of sessions for any *kiruv* organization or yeshivah high school and you are almost guaranteed to find a session on “Ethics and Religion.” Although the specifics of this session varies from file to file, and not every individual runs this discussion in the identical manner, the frequent common denominator is the argument that only a Divine command can create ethical demands. A secular philosophy fails to provide adequate grounds for ethical obligations, so there remains no recourse but to rely upon *devar Hashem*. Common texts employed for this session are a passage from Dennis Prager and a citation from Dostoevsky in which Ivan Karamazov declares that “if there is no God, all is permitted.” It is this author’s contention that the essential argument of this session, as often presented, is flawed on educational, philosophical and historic grounds.

Of course, the above argument appears in contexts other than adolescent sessions. Indeed, the moral argument for theism plays a prominent role in religious writings of the last three centuries and contemporary Jewish works aimed at encouraging faith often incorporate it. While the following analysis should prove relevant to the broader usage of the argument, the analysis will focus on the high school setting because such a context encourages the educational and pedagogic aspects of the question to remain prominent.

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On educational grounds, the session potentially presents a problematic message. On the one hand, the session could imply that the worth of religion consists solely in its safeguarding of ethical principles. This critique applies both to the cruder version of the session (religion prevents societal breakdown) and to the more refined version (religion bolsters ethical ideals). The common denominator remains that religion becomes reduced to a handmaiden to ethics. Surely the ideals of *kedushah*, Torah study and closeness to the Divine imply that Judaism resists any reduction to ethics alone.¹

One reader of an earlier draft of this essay argued that the “religion as means” problem exists for any attempt at *ta’amei ha-mizvot*. After all, offering reasons for the commandments suggests that those commandments are only a vehicle for achieving some other good. I contend that the problem is far more acute in the case of the ethical argument for religion. Writers do not suggest *ta’amei ha-mizvot* in the context of an argument for being religious. Standard motivations for finding reasons for the commandments include the attempt to appreciate the Divine wisdom and the effort to find more meaning in *mizvah* performance, but the finding of reasons is not taken as an argument for religion *per se*. Furthermore, reasons for *mizvot* might incorporate a large variety of ends, whereas the moral argument for religion reduces the desired target to a single end. For these two reasons, the moral argument for religion encourages viewing religion as subsidiary to something else in a way that *ta’amei ha-mizvot* do not.

Avoiding this implication mandates conveying the notion that the moral argument is not the sole argument for religious practice but rather a reason for the doubting individual to look more seriously into the religious option or a way to bolster faith for the believer. The students should see the moral argument in a broader religious context. The apologetic literature may avoid this problem as it usually employs the moral argument as one of a series of reasons to take religion seriously.

On the other hand, the session may lead to a diametrically opposing problem. Rather than reducing religion to ethics, the argument can reduce ethics to religious formalism. It can be a small step from the notion that the Divine command is the only solid foundation for ethics to the idea that human ethical worth is restricted to the demands explicitly made by *Halakhah*. Indeed, once we decide that our ethical intuitions are invalid absent Divine approval, we might choose to ignore those intuitions altogether. Although some readers might not be troubled by this conclusion, I believe that most would like our students to feel that

theft from gentiles is seriously wrong irrespective of the Talmudic discussion as to whether such theft is prohibited biblically, rabbinically or permitted altogether.

Of course, this problem is not insurmountable. The Divine command itself demands that we rely upon human ethical intuitions in going beyond the letter of the law. Concepts such as *ve-asita ha-yashar ve-ha-tov, mah Hu raḥum af attah raḥum* and *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* reveal that *Halakhah* itself places a value in ethical behavior not clearly mandated in the halakhic system.² Thus, one could think that all ethics must be grounded in a Divine *mizvah* and still not limit ethical behavior to precisely defined norms. Nonetheless, I suspect that this point is often left out of the “Ethics and Halakhah” session and I believe it must be added if the problem referred to above is to be avoided.

However, the philosophical problems prove more difficult to escape. After we assert that God exists, what leads to the conclusion that we should listen to His commands? Both Rabbenu Bahya³ and R. Sa’adyah Gaon⁴ argued that obedience to God stems from gratitude for all that He does for us. This contention clearly assumes that gratitude is a moral value preceding the Divine command as it serves as the rationale for adherence to that command. Thus, according to both those authorities, morality must exist independent of *devar Hashem*.

Some modern philosophers⁵ argue that gratitude fails to provide sufficient grounds for a total religious commitment and it may be necessary to supplement the argument from gratitude with other motivations for adhering to the Divine command. Love of God and reliance upon Divine wisdom might provide added rationales for obedience. Yet these additional factors might also assume the independent validity of ethics. As John Stuart Mill argues: “Why should I obey my maker? From gratitude? Then gratitude is itself obligatory, independently of my maker’s will. From reverence and love? But why is he a proper object of love and reverence? . . . Is it because he is just, righteous and merciful? Then these attributes are in themselves good, independently of his pleasures.”⁶

One may try to neutralize the problem by arguing that we serve God because He will punish us if we don’t (Hobbes)⁷ or because it is pointless to rebel against an omnipotent being (P. T. Geach).⁸ Such a claim does provide motivation to perform *mizvot* but reduces religious motivation to pragmatic calculation devoid of idealism. In this context, it is even conceded that God’s authority differs from Hitler’s only because His power is greater. Rather than emptying religion of idealism, it behooves us to employ the previous arguments, including the one from gratitude.

Furthermore, both Leibniz⁹ and Mill¹⁰ point out that the ability to call God “good” depends upon some standard of goodness distinct from His command. If “good” is equivalent with the Divine will, it becomes somewhat meaningless to talk of Divine goodness. As we should be reluctant to give up the possibility of calling God “good”, we must assert that such a standard exists independent of God.¹¹ Finally, there is the historic weight of positions taken in the last twelve hundred years of rabbinic writing. Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman argue persuasively that the overwhelming majority of rabbinic authorities view morality as independently valid.¹² Sagi and Statman do not point out that *rishonim* formulate the point in terms of the relationship between revelation and reason and not in terms of religion and morality. Nevertheless, the standard examples of reason come from the moral sphere and the change in categories does not affect the essential point about moral obligations having independent validity.

Rabbenu Nissim Gaon,¹³ Ramban¹⁴ and Hizzekuni¹⁵ affirm the binding quality of natural morality to explain how those who never received Divine command, such as Cain, the generation of the flood and gentiles throughout history, could be punished for their ethical shortcomings. Ramban writes that God floods the world due specifically to the practice of *hamas* (theft and extortion) and not other transgressions because “it is a commandment known by the intellect and there is no need for a prophet to forbid it.” R. Yehuda Halevi also accepts a binding morality to which the Torah adds further obligations.¹⁶

R. Sa’adyah presents a particularly strong expression of this position. He holds that when a prospective prophet tells us something we know to be false, we must deny that person’s prophetic status irrespective of what miracles he might perform. As an example, R. Sa’adyah mentions a prophet who calls for theft or sexual immorality. At the end of this discussion, R. Sa’adyah mentions the position that murder, theft and sexual immorality are only forbidden due to the Divine command and forcefully asserts that there is no point in talking to a person who takes such a position.¹⁷ Along similar lines, R. Sa’adyah assumes that human reason could have worked out enough of the Torah to ask why revelation was needed to begin with.¹⁸ Such a question certainly views human reason as self sufficient in the creation of obligations. As other *rishonim* and *aharonim* took similar positions, the central argument of the “Ethics and Halakhah” session may deviate from much of the rabbinic tradition.

One possible response to the above arguments might state that despite the problems raised, it remains true that it is difficult to find a

secular basis for ethical obligations. My reply to such a response would be that it is similarly difficult to establish the existence of a Supreme Being. Some of the arguments (though not all) used on behalf of belief in God, such as human intuition, the corroborating beliefs of masses of people, could just as easily work on behalf of secular ethics. If so, basing ethics on God does not clearly place it on surer footing.

Some arguments for belief in God, such as R. Yehudah Halevi's historical approach based on the large-scale testimony for miraculous revelation at Sinai, do not work for secular ethics. If we restrict arguments for God to that of R. Halevi or parallel arguments, then an ethic merging from a Divine source does indeed stand on firmer ground. However, many of the significant arguments for God also work in a similar way for ethical duties and the assertion that ethics find a firmer foundation by beginning with the Divine remains dubious.

Despite these criticisms, we need not jettison the session entirely but should revamp it instead. Some of the *rishonim* who accepted the independence of ethics also wrote about the advantages of Divine ethics. Following the model they established allows us to formulate a more sophisticated approach to the topic. R. Sa'adyah argues that Divine revelation was needed even for rational *mizvot* in order to define the parameters of those *mizvot*. For example, our intellect tells us that theft is wrong but does not mandate how acquisitions should be accomplished. Furthermore, our intellect often fails to guide us regarding the relative severity of the injustice and the appropriate punishment for the crime. This model allows us to affirm the validity of a secular ethic but still see the benefits of the Divine word.¹⁹

David Shatz pointed out to me that R. Sa'adyah's argument might emphasize in some cases the practical advantages of a Divine command and not the ethical advantages. Moreover, in theory the choice of a given detail might be completely arbitrary but arriving at a consensus would prove difficult absent revelation. To use one of R. Sa'adyah's examples, deciding whether acquisition should depend on a verbal agreement or a symbolic act and choosing which symbolic act will create the acquisition theoretically could be viewed as arbitrary choices between which the law selects. Reaching agreement on such choices might prove troublesome without a Divine command to settle the matter. Shatz's points are well taken but it seems to me that R. Sa'adyah's example of deciding the severity of respective punishments certainly does not reflect arbitrary decisionmaking and probably represents an application of ethical rather than practical wisdom. Even if my reading of R. Sa'adyah is

incorrect, another *rishon* clearly utilizes a parallel argument to assess the ethical benefits of *mizvot*.

R. Yosef Albo develops this model considerably further. Interpreting a series of verses in *Tehillim* (19:8-10), he lists six advantages to religious ethics. He certainly assumes that conventional ethics have worth, but at the same time sees it as inferior. The advantages include the joy of feeling secure that Divine wisdom guides one's actions. Secular ethicists, on the other hand, remain permanently unsure if they have worked out their ethical obligations correctly. R. Albo also repeats R. Sa'adyah's argument that *Halakhah* defines parameters. He points out that Aristotle writes of the golden mean but is unable to pinpoint exactly when the various character traits are to be employed. The *mizvot* guide us in this regard. The *mizvot* regarding food items and marital relations define the boundaries of enjoyment and asceticism.²⁰

Some contemporary examples might focus on moral dilemmas such as euthanasia and abortion. Our clear sense of murder as moral failure does not cover some borderline situations. In these cases, our ethical intuitions may pull us in contradictory directions. Asserting the validity of those intuitions does not clearly help us when we feel that those intuitions might justify a number of positions. In those scenarios, Divine ethics provides us with the proper guidance.

R. Albo also argues that the Divine word saves us from the perennial errors inherent in relying upon human intuition. As an example, he employs Plato's position that wives should jointly belong to an entire class of people such as merchants, artisans or officers. Several twentieth century examples come to mind. A teacher might discuss the widespread belief in the early parts of the century that communism represents a great ethical achievement. The fact that significant segments of the secular intelligentsia continued to maintain this claim through Stalin's purges only strengthens the example.

An example more relevant to current students might be some of the reigning assumptions about sexual liberation. Though other factors also play a role, it seems that sexual freedom contributes toward the destruction of the traditional family structure as it undermines marital loyalty and tends to emphasize utilitarian relationships over truly loving ones. This example is an educational advantage and drawback for the same reason. The issue of sexual morality certainly speaks to the existential concerns of adolescents more than issues of abortion or euthanasia. At the same time, too many adolescent discussions return to sexual ethics and other themes deserve independent analysis.

Another example comes from the pen of a prominent Jewish feminist. She expresses her gratitude for Jewish values about the importance of bearing and raising children which prevented her from adopting a more radical feminism that rejects raising a family as part and parcel of women's subservience.²¹ In the theory she rejects, a secular ethicist takes valid ethical sensitivities about fairness to women and extends them to a degree where other crucial values erode. Successful portrayal of such examples allows our students to appreciate how Halakhah prevents Jews from adopting wholesale the assumptions of surrounding cultures.

Of course, perceptive students may mention *halakhot* such as the mandate to destroy Amalek and the institutions of slavery, *mamzerut* and *agunot*. These challenge the argument that Halakhah always shows greater ethical sensitivity than the competition. While each of these difficult areas requires individualized discussion that lie beyond the scope of this article, I will suggest some general points as the broad outline of a response. That response would include the arguments that Halakhah tends to severely limit the applications of these categories, that some of these *halakhot* (slavery is a classic example) could be understood as concessions to a given historical context and that these *halakhot* represent exceptions to the dominant thrust of the Halakhah. A frank admission that we cannot fully understand the ethical reasoning behind isolated *halakhot* need not derail a general assertion about Halakhah's ethical wisdom and its guidance in helping us through areas where secular ethics fails.

Now a critic could contend that admitting the failures of human ethical intuition brings us back to the model of this session rejected above. However, this need not be the case. The fact that human ethical systems make mistakes does not clearly lead to the conclusion that they are worthless. If we conclude that they frequently offer excellent advice but mess up occasionally, it would still be worthwhile to employ those systems. Indeed, we all rely upon the advice of others or on the work of machines even when that person or machine falls short of a perfect record.

The preceding analysis helps counter another possible criticism of the adjusted session. Allowing for the validity of secular ethics leads to clashes between such ethics and Halakhah. The old approach of rejecting any obligations not rooted in Divine command forecloses the problem as no possible other source of authority exists to challenge halakhic duties. Our approach, on the other hand, renders the problem acute. We can respond that an understanding of the miscalculations of human intelligence with an appreciation for the wisdom of the Divine mandates that Halakhah trump ethics when a clash emerges. Of course, making this

point successfully means somehow educating students to appreciate the wisdom of Halakhah. Yet such an educational endeavor remains a necessity no matter how one chooses to teach about ethics and Halakhah.

The conclusion that Halakhah must trump ethics when clashes emerge need not mean that halakhic authorities must stifle their ethical intuitions when analyzing halakhic issues. Ethical concerns can motivate a decision to select a particular halakhic approach and reject others, as long as the chosen approach is significantly rooted in the tradition. Secondly, ethical concerns can impact on interpretation in situations when the correct interpretation remains unclear. However, when ethical intuitions clash with an unambiguous halakhic pronouncement, people may justifiably feel conflicted about the situation but they must follow the halakhic ruling, as we argued above.²²

One final critique deserves mention. Students may contend that some of the ethical dilemmas are only worked out in *Torah She-be-al Peh*, the Oral Law, and not in explicit Scriptural verses. The more the human element had a hand in the decision making, the harder it becomes to argue for the superiority of Halakhah's Divine wisdom over error prone human reasoning. This critique is less troubling for the old version of the session as the basic ethical commands find explicit support in Torah. The more subtle version offered here must explain how medieval discussions of abortion reflects Divine wisdom.

Responding to this point depends somewhat on the position one takes regarding how much of the oral law was given at Sinai. Clearly, adopting the Geonic view that traces the totality of Halakhah back to Sinai erases the question entirely. Yet even if we take the more likely position that God did not tell Mosheh every *hiddush* of the *Kezot*, we should still convey the idea that to a significant degree, the oral tradition is Divine. If enough specific rulings came down from Sinai or even sufficient guiding principles, it remains possible to speak of the halakhic rulings as products of Divine wisdom. For example, the various halakhic positions on abortion all agree that abortion does not merit the same punishment as murder and also concur in vigorously rejecting abortion on demand. We can view this unanimity as reflective of an older tradition. Admittedly, the old version finds the going easier on this point, but I believe that the earlier argumentation still mandates switching to the updated version of the session.

If so, a new version of the session will not deny the possibility of a secular ethic. This will reduce the dangers of reducing ethics to explicit *halakhot* as well as preserve our ability to talk of Divine goodness and to

partially base religious observance upon gratitude. At the same time, it will assert the advantages of Divine ethics in avoiding mistakes and in translating our broad ethical intuitions into concrete obligations. I am aware that this revamped version of the session draws a more subtle distinction and will thus, seem less appealing to some teachers and students. However, much of education requires teaching our students to appreciate finer distinctions as they usually reflect reality far more accurately.

Appendix

I see the above argument as the best version of a Jewish moral argument for religious belief and I believe that it can be utilized in various educational settings. At the same time, some other related arguments deserve mention and this appendix will mention two of them. These arguments do not attack either the logical coherence of a secular ethical system or the ability of secular ethics to answer difficult questions. Rather, they move the argument from the intellectual basis for ethical obligations to the factors that enhance implementation of those obligations. The following arguments offer practical reasons why a religious system leads to more successful performance.

Hastings Rashdall argues that religion's advantage over secular morality consists of the personal relationship with a perfectly ethical being. "When God is conceived of as the realization of our highest moral ideals, love of God and love of duty become one and the same thing, with all the additional strength which love of a person can claim over the love of an abstract law."²³ We often find greater motivation to perform duties we already know to be right when a person we respect encourages fulfillment of those duties. This motivation becomes magnified when the source of wisdom is God, the model of perfection. Thus, the presence of God adds both the force of a personal relationship and a model of perfect behavior to emulate.

Iris Murdoch's writings inspire a different argument, although Murdoch herself does not argue for a religious position. She criticizes modern moral philosophy for emphasizing personal will at the moment of ethical choice and ignoring the significant work done in between choices. This work includes states of mind, dispositions and beliefs. "The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial."²⁴

Both Kantian and Utilitarian ethics tend to focus exclusively on the

moment of choice. Religion, on the other hand, includes various ritual acts that demand attention to the inner life even when not confronted with ethical choices. Prayer and repentance represent the best two examples of such rituals and it is difficult to imagine an atheistic parallel. Murdoch refers to “techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly.”²⁵

The recent return to Aristotelian virtue ethics does blunt the distinction somewhat as this approach is an example of a non-religious ethical theory that does emphasize the human personality and not just the moment of choice. However, proponents of virtue ethics do not have the ritual tradition of religion to rely upon and it remains unclear whether or not such an approach will successfully create virtue ethic rituals. In other words, declaring the importance of the inner life does not mean one has a mechanism for working on the inner life.

Although the arguments from Rashdall and Murdoch certainly lack overwhelming force, they do point to advantages of a religious lifestyle and could fortify the religious attachments of a struggling believer or motivate the wavering agnostic to give religion another look.

Notes

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1. A similar critique appears in an address of R. Aharon Lichtenstein. See the adaptation by Rabbi Reuven Ziegler of “Being Frum and Being Good,” in *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God—Based on Addresses by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein* (Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2002), 118-121. R. Lichtenstein is also critical of the attitude in which a religious person rejoices in the ethical failures of secularists because such failures support his or her beliefs.
2. See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Is There a Morality Independent of Halakha?” in *Modern Jewish Ethics*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, Ohio, 1972), 62-88; Walter Wurzbarger, *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* (Philadelphia, 1994); Avi Sagi, *Yahdut: Bein Dat le-Mussar* (Tel Aviv, 1998) and my “The Implications of a Jewish Virtue Ethic,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 19-41.
3. *Hovot ha-Levavot*, introduction to *Sha‘ar ha-Shelishi*.
4. *Emunot ve-De‘ot, ma’amar* 3, perek 1.
5. See the literature cited in Y. Y. Ross, “*Lamah Yesh hovah le-Zayyet le-Mizvotav shel Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu*” in *Bein Dat le-Mussar* ed. A Sagi and D. Statman (Tel Aviv, 1993), 43-63.
6. “Sedgwick’s Discourse,” in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10

- (Toronto, 1969), 53.
7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 31.
 8. Peter Geach, "The Moral Law and the Law of God", in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford, 1981), 165-74.
 9. Cited in James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1993), 48.
 10. "Blakey's History of Moral Science," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill Vol. 10* (Toronto, 1969), 27.
 11. For a helpful discussion of these and other arguments, see David Shatz, "Remembering Marvin Fox: One Man's Legacy To Jewish Thought," *Tradition* 36:1 (Spring 2002), 76-78 and 'From the Depths I Have Called to You': *Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism* (New York, 2002), 11-13.
 12. A. Sagi and D. Statman, "Teluto shel ha-Mussar ba-Dat ba-Masoret ha-Yehudit," *Bein Dat le-Mussar*, 115-144. The authors argue that traditional texts that seem to deny independent morality actually only cast doubt on human ability to successfully work out such a morality but do not deny its existence.
 13. Introduction to the Talmud, found on the opening page of the Vilna Shas.
 14. *Commentary on Bereshit* 6:13.
 15. *Commentary on Bereshit* 7:21.
 16. *Kuzari*, 2:48.
 17. *Emunot ve-De'ot*, 3:8.
 18. *Ibid.*, 3:3.
 19. See previous note.
 20. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 1:8.
 21. Blu Greenberg, "Why We Stay and Keep Fighting," *The Jerusalem Report* (March 5, 1998): 55.
 22. For an essay that ascribes awe and reverence to the experience of ethical duty, while maintaining that Halakhah trumps ethics, see Shalom Carmy, "Pluralism and the Category of the Ethical," *Tradition* 30, 4 (1996): 145-163.
 23. Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise in Moral Philosophy* Vol. 2 (London, 1948), p. 267.
 24. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1999), 37.
 25. *Ibid.*, 54.