

Socrates vs. Avraham

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Historically, the Jewish People have expressed the claim that the Greek's and their philosophers had "stolen" their wisdom from the Jewish sages and prophets. So Socrates is said to have received his wisdom from Achi'tofel,¹ Plato is said to have learned from the prophet Yirmiyahu, and Aristotle is said to have learned from Shimon HaTzadik.²

Whether or not these claims relate historical occurrences or not, such claims communicate the assertion by Jewish scholars that there are important Judaic truths in the wisdom of the Greek Philosophers.³ For if there is no truths and values in their works, there would be no reason for our sages to say that their wisdom derived from Torah.

While much of Judaic philosophical literature has championed the ideas postulated by Aristotle—and his works have reigned supreme in many areas of Judaic thought for much of Jewish history—there is perhaps another character that is more appreciated for his morals, and ethics rather than the ideas he created.

This individual is Socrates.

Socrates in his unbending dedication for what he perceived to be goodness and truth is perhaps seen as someone dedicated to Jewish morals—if not Jewish thought.

Indeed, if one reads the Medrashic descriptions of Avraham in a superficial manner one can assume that there is a certain correlation between the two men.

What we will demonstrate in this paper that similarities are merely external; as the difference between the actions of Avraham and Socrates are like the difference between night and day. The actions of Socrates remain in the realm of the logical, rational and the selfish, while Avraham's actions were completely G-dly and on an entirely different level.

A seat next to Avraham

In Chassidic hagiography there is a story told allegedly by the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, about difference between our forefather Avraham and Socrates:⁴

The Alter Rebbe said, when Socrates died and came to the heavenly tribunal he requested that he be given a seat next to Avraham.

¹ Me-e'ver Yabok 3:33

² Ari Nohem, Pg. 53

³ See similar statements by Numenius of Apamea. Although there is doubt whether these statements were expressed by Christians and merely attributed to Numenius.

⁴ Reshimot Devarim, Pg. 101

His claim was that just as Avraham had given his life in Sanctifying G-d's name, so had he. He therefore requested a seat next to our forefather Avraham.

The Heavenly Tribunal responded: "You cannot be compared to Avraham. For Avraham forfeited his life for no reason or reward, rather because of pure faith, however you have merely traded one pleasure for another.

This story expresses that although superficially it may seem that Socrates died sanctifying G-d's name, this is really not the case, as Socrates was rather motivated by his selfish desires. Not so however with Avraham who was completely dedicated to the Almighty and did not—G-d forbid—think of any self-centered end.

Indeed the accusation brought against Socrates in the *Apology* is that he denies the existence of the G-d's and teaches about new ones—this can be seen as an affirmation of monotheism, which eventually results in his demise.⁵

Two Martyrs

The apparent commonality between Avraham and Socrates is that both were outstanding in that they were willing to lay down their life due to the strength of their beliefs.

Socrates continuous questioning of all matters under the sun is reminiscent to the medrashic description of Avraham's discovery of G-d.⁶ Similarly Avraham's sacrifice in Nimrod's fire is reminiscent of Socrates' willfully dying on account of his convictions.

Though the Torah only explicitly expresses that Avraham was willing to lay down his son's—Yitzchok's—life and not his own, the Mishna (Avot 5:3) expresses that Avraham was tested with Ten Tests that proved his faith. Included in those tests is the act of martyrdom:

With ten tests our father Avraham was tested and he withstood them all—in order to make known how great was our father Avraham's love [for G-d]. G-d had Avraham go through various ordeals, hardships, and adversity to declare to all generations the great devotion that he had for the Almighty.

⁵ Although Socrates' in other places does seem to believe in false G-ds, so for example in Euthyphro dilemma he states: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" Possibly though this can be an expression of irony of questioning Euthyphro for ideas he himself does not believe in. Indeed, in Socratic literature there is much discussion of "The One." It is important to realize that Socratic literature is soaked with irony and his statement that seem to affirm other G-d's—such as his discussion concerning the oracle—seem more to mock his listeners than to express Socrates' own beliefs. Additionally, being that these works were written by Plato rather than Socrates, it is possible that although Socrates was willing to denounce the "G-ds," and martyr himself, his student, Plato was not so keen about dying and therefore wrote his teachers words in a cryptic manner.

⁶ See for example *Maimonides, Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:3* concerning Avraham: "After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve...Ultimately....he realized that there was one G-d...He knew that the entire world was making a mistake...When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path.

Though there is some argument as to what were the specific ten tests,⁷ there is an accepted Midrashic tradition that amongst these tests that are enumerated, is an episode where King Nimrod, threw Avraham into a fiery furnace for teaching his monotheistic views and G-d saved him from the fiery furnace⁸:

Nimrod found Avraham doing actions that desecrated the idols. Nimrod said to Avraham: Are you Avraham, son of Terach. Avraham Responded: yes.

Then Nimrod said to Avraham: Do you not know that I am the master of all things; the sun, the moon, the stars, all constellations and people are controlled by me, why have you destroyed my idols?

At that moment G-d gave wisdom to Avraham and Avraham responded to Nimrod saying: "My master the king, ...the nature of the world is that from the time of creation until now the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, tomorrow command the sun to rise in the west and set in the east, then I will testify that that you are indeed the master of creation...you are not the master of the world, you are the son of Cush. If you are indeed the master of the world, why did you not save your father? Rather, just as you could not save your father from death, you too cannot be saved from death.

Terach stated, that because he burned my G-d's his judgement will be with fire...He was bound and placed atop a stone and surrounded by five cubit-feet of wood on all four sides that were high five feet...G-d immediately had mercy and Himself went down to save him as expressed in the verse (Bereishis 15:7) "I am the Lord, Who brought you forth from the Ur (furnace) of the Chaldees."

The Medrash tells us that Avraham was willing to martyr himself and would have perished were it not for G-d's miraculous intervention.

Socrates was not as lucky to be saved by G-d's grace and mercy. Instead, due to the strength of his beliefs and his commitment to the Athenian system, he willingly drink a cup of poison hemlock, which gradually brought paralysis and death, as expressed in the end of Phaedo⁹.

Then raising the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drank off the poison. And hitherto most of us had been able to control our sorrow; but now when we saw him drinking, and saw too that he had finished the draught, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept, not for him, but at the thought of my own calamity in having to part from such a friend...

Socrates alone retained his calmness: "What is this strange outcry?" he said. "I sent away the women mainly in order that they might not misbehave in this way, for I have been told that a man should die in peace. Be quiet then, and have patience."

⁷ See *Bartanura ad loc*, *Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer* Ch. 26 for alternative versions of the tests.

⁸ There are various versions of this episode throughout Medrashic Literature, for the sake of simplicity we have brought the version expressed in *Tana D'Bei Eliyahu Zuta* Ch. 25

⁹ *Phaedo*, Translation by Benjamin Jowett (1892)

...He was beginning to grow cold about the groin, when he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said--they were his last words--he said: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?"

"The debt shall be paid," said Crito; "is there anything else?"

There was no answer to this question...

Such was the end . . . of our friend; concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best.

In the end of his life, Socrates cheerfully goes to his own death. Instead of pondering his own end, he considers that he still has some debt that he owes to another. It seems that the morality, character and goodness of Socrates is something that we should all aspire to.

Yet, notwithstanding this perceived greatness, the above story alleges that it no way compares to the manner in which Avraham martyred himself. A Jew is not to look to Socrates as the paragon of who to emulate. Indeed, the Alter Rebbe denigrates Socrates' actions.

Instead a Jew can and therefore must learn from Avraham to learn the proper way how to live and die as a Jew should.

An Argument for Death

In order to appreciate the distinction between Avraham and Socrates it is important to analyze the way in which Socrates himself argues as to why he is not afraid to die.

In the Apology, Socrates makes various statements that express that not only is he not scared of death, but that he happily awaits it. He clearly expresses—as the Alter Rebbe said—that he was merely exchanging one pleasure for another.

He says "that life without this sort of examination is not worth living," which expresses that he would not accept living a life not being Socratic. For Socrates, he was not "sacrificing" himself by dying, for to him a life not examining the purpose of life is not worth living. Indeed for him his life came to the natural end of the individual that epitomizes the pursuit of thinking—and was not a "sacrifice" at all.

Similarly, when convincing Crito as to why he does not desire to escape from Athens, his essential reason is that a life not in Athens is not a life worth living.

When he refuses to beg for his life and grovel before the court he states:

No doubt you think, gentlemen, that I have been condemned for lack of the arguments which I could have used if I had thought it right to leave nothing unsaid or undone to secure my acquittal. But that is very far from the truth. It is not a lack of arguments that has caused my condemnation, but a lack of effrontery and impudence, and the fact that I have refused to address you in the way which would give you most pleasure. You would have liked to hear me weep and wail, doing and saying all sorts of things which I regard as unworthy of myself, but which you are used to hearing from other people. But I did not think then that I ought to stoop to servility because I was in danger, and I do not regret

now the way in which I pleaded my case. I would much rather die as the result of this defense than live as the result of the other sort. In a court of law, just as in warfare, neither I nor any other ought to use his wits to escape death by any means.

His statement “. I would much rather die as the result of this defense than live as the result of the other sort,” is essentially expressing that he believes that a life not true to himself is not worth living.

As we will see further this logical conclusion that life is not worth living is not at all self-sacrifice as it is a human expression about the worthlessness of his life rather than a submission to G-d.

But more importantly, just as in the above story the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi expressed that Socrates' martyrdom is incomplete as he “merely traded one pleasure for another,” so too, we indeed see Socrates expressing a similar motif in his statement regarding the evils of death.

When expressing the reason why he is not afraid to die, he expresses that the reason is essentially because that he is sure that the pleasure that awaits him is beyond the pleasure available to him in this world:

We should reflect that there is much reason to hope for a good result on other grounds as well. Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change--a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain...

If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this, gentlemen? If on arrival in the other world, beyond the reach of our so-called justice, one will find there the true judges who are said to preside in those courts, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and all those other half-divinities who were upright in their earthly life, would that be an unrewarding journey? Put it in this way. How much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true. It would be an especially interesting experience for me to join them there, to meet Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other heroes of the old days who met their death through an unfair trial, and to compare my fortunes with theirs--it would be rather amusing, I think. And above all I should like to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people's minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is. What would one not give, gentlemen, to be able to question the leader of that great host against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or the thousands of other men and women whom one could mention, to talk and mix and argue with whom would be unimaginable happiness? At any rate I presume that they do not put one to death there for such conduct, because apart from the other happiness in which their world surpasses ours, they are now immortal for the rest of time, if what we are told is true.

Indeed, Socrates expresses that death is either pleasurable as it an eternal sleep or pleasurable as it is a migration into an afterlife whose happiness surpasses ours. He is “willing to die ten times over if this account is true,” and states that “it is the greatest blessing that can be.” Instead of fearing death, he seems to relish its arrival.¹⁰

Certainly then, the point that Socrates was willing to give up his life because of the pleasure of the afterlife, is indeed expressed in Socrates’ own words!

Now that Socrates’ martyrdom is clear, what is left it to appreciate the axiomatic difference between him and our forefather Avraham.

Avraham

In Chassidic literature, Avraham is seen as the ultimate example of self-sacrifice and complete submission to the Almighty. Indeed, his actions are said to have opened the spigot that gives each and every Jew the ability to be completely submitted to the Almighty.

While we usually define martyrdom as the act of dying for our beliefs, the Chassidic concept martyrdom is explained to be that not only does the person die for their beliefs, but they give their entire being to G-d in a way that completely transcends reason.¹¹

This is expressed by the Alter Rebbe. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, as follows:¹²

Because the concept of self-sacrifice is specifically when it transcends reason...even a person who actually gives their life for the sanctification of G-d’s name, if their intent was to achieve something such as a reward, for example, this is not true self-sacrifice. For how did he sacrifice himself; will he not gain immensely in that he will receive great reward?... The true concept of self-sacrifice is that a person has no other desire besides G-d, as the verse (Tehillim 73:25) says, “For whom do I have in heaven, and I desired no one with You on earth.”

Merely dying for a cause does not show—according to Chassidic thought—that one’s whole identity is sublimated to G-d, as it is possible that the reason the person is willing to die is one of personal benefit.

This is the axiomatic difference between Socrates and a simple Jew and all the more so Avraham. For, although Socrates sought his own reward, the manner in which even the most simple of Jews martyrs himself in at an entirely different level!

¹⁰ While in the Apology Socrates seems to be unsure of the future of the soul and is weary to express any positive doctrine, in Phaedo he seems sure that the soul indeed will go to an afterlife.

¹¹ *Ikarim*, *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* 3:36 expresses a similar thought about the difference of Avraham to all other martyrs, saying: “It is for this reason that we constantly mention in our prayers, Avraham’s binding of Yitzchak, more than the sacrifice of the righteous and the martyrs that sacrificed themselves for G-d, blessed be He—for example, R’ Akiva and his colleagues, and the martyrs in every generation. This is because all other martyrs sacrificed themselves as a fulfillment of the commandment, “You shall not desecrate My Holy Name. I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel.” Concerning Avraham, however, even if there would have been a commandment, it would not have compelled him.”

¹² *Torah Ohr* 120d-121a

While one can perhaps argue; that for Socrates the afterlife that he hoped was secondary to the primary reasons that Socrates found it logically incongruous to escape Athens, and that he viewed his life as not worth living for, this too is not considered self-sacrifice.

For the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi expresses that martyring oneself because of logical reasons can hardly be considered sacrifice.

When a person gives up their lives because of their beliefs it is because—as Socrates himself expresses—staying alive would be antithetical to his life and would not be a life worth living.

Essentially then, his giving up of his life is not in contradiction to his identity, but is rather an expression thereof.¹³

However, when a Jew sacrifices his life for G-d, he does it—as inherited from the Patriarchs—in a manner that completely transcends logic.

This is expressed in Tanya as follows:¹⁴

Therefore even the most worthless of worthless and the transgressors of the Israelites, in the majority of cases sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of G-d's Name and suffer harsh torture rather than deny the one G-d, although they be boors and illiterate and ignorant of G-d's greatness. [For] whatever little knowledge they do possess, they do not delve therein at all, [and so] they do not give up their lives by reason of any knowledge and contemplation of G-d. Rather [do they suffer martyrdom] without any knowledge and reflection, but as if it were absolutely impossible to renounce the one G-d; and without any reason or hesitation whatever...

Essentially then there is a marked difference between the Chassidic concept of self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of Socrates.

Chassidic thought sees dying for one's belief, or for the purpose of an after-life, as the greatest act of self-expression rather than submission to G-d. Dying for one's pleasure or beliefs is not expressive of G-d but the person.

Indeed, the sacrifice of one the greatest philosophers of all time, does not compare to the sacrifice of the most simple of Jews!

May we indeed not only die for G-d's will but live as well in a manner—where unlike Socrates served himself and his own mind—we instead should live in a manner that is completely given over to Torah and to G-d—with no will of our own.

When we act in such a manner G-d too will respond in kind with the greatest expression of his dedication to us—with the coming of Moshiach Now!

¹³ See *Schneerson, Menachem, Likutei Sichos* Vol. 20 Pg. 73ff that makes this argument.

¹⁴ Tanya, Ch. 18