

SHALOM CARMY

## *Flowing Upstream: Reflections on Studying Gandhi at Yeshiva*

Our academic culture is, as a matter of course, oblivious, when not actively hostile, to the living presence of traditional religious thought. It is impatient with the idea that our primary work is the service of God. Hence few contrarian voices of our era, opposed to the great dogmas of economic and sociological and therapeutic man, are invited into the lecture hall, and those are unlikely to belong to traditional Jews or Christians. Among those who are given a sympathetic hearing, the maverick Hindu Mohandas Gandhi, whose life and work was the subject of the 2000-2001 Book Project at Yeshiva College, may well be the most popular and impressive spiritual alternative. For that reason alone it behooves us to learn about Gandhi's ideas, to judge them from a Torah perspective, and to understand why they continue to excite and attract many Western minds half a century after his death.

Gandhi first became known as the head of a national liberation movement. Were it not for his political notoriety, it is doubtful whether his thought would have gained him international attention. How much the value of his ideas depends on their results in the world of action is a question we will touch on later. For the moment let us recall that other successful nationalist leaders of Gandhi's era promulgated various spiri-

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tual-economic ideals, and even enjoyed a following outside their nation-state. Yet today, David Ben-Gurion or Eamon de Valera (or Ze'ev Jabotinsky for that matter) are hardly recalled except as molders and shapers of their national self-interest. Gandhi, no better educated or eloquent than they, survives as a philosopher.

Gandhi offered three ideas to contemporary man: pacifism; asceticism; and the rejection of industrialization. We will concentrate on Gandhi's advocacy of absolute non-violence, and use it to shed light on the asceticism which he adopted and recommended to others, and where he proposed a standard that, in the eyes of modern secularity, is strange to the point of offensiveness, and which, in some areas, goes well beyond the behavior required of traditional Jews and Christians. Gandhi also objected to modern man's love affair with technology. His economics were "small is beautiful," and he did whatever he could to maintain what others (including his anointed heir Prime Minister Nehru) regarded as India's deplorable industrial backwardness. These social-economic views seem to be based on his overall conception of life rather than vice versa. Therefore the Gandhi who can speak to us, whether or not we want to listen to him, is essentially the preacher of *satyagraha*, the pacifist.

## I

At the height of his newsworthiness, Gandhi's opinions were much sought after on a remarkable range of subjects, from deity to diet. He thus found himself offering advice to oppressed groups around the world. By the 1930's, non-violence, for Gandhi, was not merely a technique useful in the struggle to get the British out of India. It was an absolute moral imperative. Therefore he did not hesitate to prescribe pacifism to all humanity. Many of us come to Gandhi with a measure of initial hostility due to the unrealistic and callous remarks he directed towards the Jews of Europe at this time, together with his harsh rejection of any Jewish right to establish a national center in Palestine. To sidestep such prejudice we approach Gandhi's pacifism through "Hitlerism and Aerial Warfare," in which the persecution of the Jews does not figure.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi's moral-psychological premise in this article is that passive resistance disarms injustice by forcing the oppressor to think about what he is doing to other human beings. Not long before, Mussolini's son-in-law, fresh from the bombing of Abyssinia, had shocked the world by exulting in the elegant, impersonal new methods of warfare. Because pilots killing people from the skies have no personal contact

with their victims, Gandhi's visitor claims that passive resistance, in such cases, is ineffective. I discern three elements in Gandhi's response. Midway through the discussion he suggests that the objection presupposes that "dictators like Mussolini and Hitler are beyond redemption." Gandhi, by contrast, insists that "human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love." Confronted by non-violent resistance, it is "inevitable" that they would recognize its superiority.

This assertion about human nature and the "inevitable" effect of non-violence is meant to bolster the remarkable psychological insight with which Gandhi opens his discussion. The tyrant persecutes relentlessly only when the victims fight back. If the tyrant is given all that he wants, he will eventually be sated and lose interest in the persecution. If all the mice in the world "resolved that they would no more fear the cat but all run into her mouth, the mice would live." Gandhi reports that he has actually seen a cat play with a mouse, releasing it and then pouncing when the mouse tried to escape.

Granted that persecution invariably contains an element of sport, and that occasionally the unwillingness of the victim to play the game dulls the oppressor's appetite for it, the notion that the cat is motivated *only* by the pleasure of the chase is extravagant. No amount of feline psychology can change the fact that sooner or later the cat must eat, and that cats are biologically programmed to hunt and eat meat. A late novel by the great Indian writer R. K. Narayan is called *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and narrated by the title character. Captured and ostensibly tamed, he is put to work in the circus where, as the climax of his act, he laps milk (which he detests) from the same saucer as a goat, while his trainer sings the praises of India's non-violent contribution to civilization. But the tiger remains a tiger, and both goat and trainer pay the price of the latter's overconfidence. Naive argumentation and far-fetched analogies are, unfortunately, not uncommon when charismatic men of the spirit deliver themselves of political profundities. Yet were an eminent rabbi or Christian cleric to concoct anything as unrealistic as this, the jeers of the secular liberal elites would be far more pungent than Narayan's gentle satire.

Lastly, Gandhi asks his audience, what have the victims to lose. If powerful dictators cannot be influenced, the worst that can happen is that victims, like the Czechs to whom he refers, will be annihilated. But if they take arms against ruthless adversaries possessing an overwhelming military advantage, they will be annihilated in any event. Why not achieve at least a glorious spiritual triumph, a victory that may sow the seeds of moral regeneration among the German people?

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## II

Most critics of Gandhi challenge his view that all human beings can be reached through the moral force of non-violence. They allow that Gandhi may have been right about the British, who lost their stomach for the Raj once it became evident that their Indian subjects now occupied the moral high ground. But he was wrong about the great dictators of the '30s, who were impervious to the nobility of *satyagraha*. Let us, for the sake of discussion, concede Gandhi's view of human nature. I believe that this intellectual experiment will sharpen, rather than minimize, the different outlooks of halakhic Judaism and Gandhi.

In "Zionism and Anti-Semitism" Gandhi presents non-violence as the only solution for Jewish suffering under Hitler. Preparation for voluntary death he does not consider particularly difficult for a people who believe in a personal God:

For to the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep.

If Gandhi's observations on cats and mice are ridiculous, this passage, to Jewish ears, is rank. Yet it does not seem right to take it simply as the disingenuous performance of a politician who opposes Zionism to curry favor with his Muslim neighbors. Gandhi was an extraordinarily tough-spirited person, who again and again was prepared to suffer injury and risk death for his goals. He frequently expressed a yearning to be rid of the burden of bodily existence. If we react to his preaching with anger, it is not just because of the politics. We are reacting to an alien spirituality. For in the final analysis, Gandhi speaks in the name of a religiosity that does not value the world, whereas halakhic Judaism believes in this world.

The idea that "halakhic man" is a this-worldly personality is, of course, familiar from *maran ha-Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik's study with that title. We need not rehearse the Rav's work in detail, other than to mention the significance of halakhic man's horror of death, which is strongly supported by numerous biblical texts and halakhic dicta, and the halakhic concept of *pikkuah nefesh*, according to which the obligation to save a life overrides almost all the *mizvot*. The Rav contrasts the halakhic view with the otherworldly attitude typical of *homo religiosus*. Perhaps Gandhi's hope that, in the long run, the worst human beings can be reached through his ideals, is correct. But if this world is a matter of moral-religious concern then the short run matters too.

### III

One classic criticism of Gandhi's outlook is George Orwell's "Reflections on Gandhi".<sup>2</sup> Orwell writes as a morally decent secularist. He regards Gandhi as a saint, but concludes that such characters are not to be emulated. What he finds particularly off-putting is Gandhi's militant asceticism. Gandhi did not simply fast as a political gesture; he converted the act of fasting into a political expression only because he valued the discipline of physical self-abnegation in itself. Gandhi's enthusiasm for renunciation and his distaste for everyday pleasures cannot appeal to the secular mind. His teachings make sense only if man is not the measure of all things, "on the assumption that God exists and that the world of solid objects is an illusion to be escaped from." Gandhi's refusal to permit chicken soup to his daughter when her health hung in the balance, Orwell cannot help regarding as reprehensible.

A Jewish position on Orwell's strictures is not as obvious as might appear. On the one hand, Gandhi's sexual asceticism and the mortal danger he is willing to risk in the name of his vegetarianism are halakhically unacceptable. Reading about Gandhi's practices, we find ourselves in Orwell's camp. On the other hand, respecting the principle that acts of renunciation are an ongoing and legitimate part of the life dedicated to God, the religious Jew stands together with Gandhi against Orwell. From this point of view, the difference between Judaism and Gandhi is quantitative, not qualitative—Judaism requires the same degree of commitment to self-sacrifice, but less extremely in practice.

Intuitively, one senses an estrangement between Gandhi and Judaism that runs deeper than a merely quantitative calculation of sacrificial rigor. In the light of our previous discussion we can conceptualize this fundamental division in orientation. As noted above, Halakhah insists upon the reality of this world. While this world must be sanctified and redeemed by accepting the yoke of *mizvot*, and there are moments when man must serve God by withdrawing from the legitimate quest for worldly fulfillment, halakhic man is committed to the solidity and meaningfulness of our interactions with this world. As the Rav maintains in *Halakhic Man*, asceticism, which negates the world by treating it as a means to abstract ecstasy, is as alien to Halakhah as the orgiastic attitude that negates the world by turning it into a means toward sensual ecstasy. Jewish life, to be sure, accommodates mystical strains that value otherworldliness, and that accordingly espouse ascetic philosophy and behavior. Nevertheless the intellectual and practical centrality of Halakhah in

our lives points to the gap that separates Judaism from Gandhi. For the materialistic mind, bound to the spirit of the utilitarian calculus, the worldliness of halakhic existence is hardly distinguishable from asceticism, since both agree, against the materialist, that there are forbidden trees in the worldly garden. Our acquaintance with Gandhi highlights the difference between the abstinence and catharsis required by Judaism and that characteristic of otherworldly asceticism.

#### IV

Let us return to Gandhi's third argument for non-violence in the face of Hitler— his claim that being murdered is not worse than the alternatives. *Satyagraha* is more than abstinence from violence: literally it means "truth-force" or "soul-force." The Gandhian pacifist reaches out to the oppressor through the force of his or her character. If passivity is nothing but a reflex of weakness, the resister cannot command the attention and respect of others, nor is his action a manifestation of self-respect.

This is not the place to develop a full-blown Jewish theology of war. Halakhic restrictions on the practice of *milhemet reshut*, discretionary war, when applied to present day conditions, entail the abrogation of any war not waged in self-defense. To that extent Judaism is very far from the elective aggression that has been the norm throughout the history of peoples. But the stress on preserving life when it is threatened, and the theoretical possibility of non-defensive war, curtails any attempt to find significant affinities with Gandhian pacifism. It does not, however, prevent us from considering parallels between the kind of self-respect and self-understanding that stands behind *satyagraha* and the kind of personality that Judaism cultivates and admires.

The conduct of some *gedolei yisrael* and countless simple Jews during the Holocaust exemplifies these principles, even if it does not derive from Gandhi's pacifistic absolutism or his faith in human nature. Consider, among numerous possible illustrations, the deaths of R. Elhanan Wasserman and R. Avraham Grodzinski (the *mashgiaḥ* of Slobodka). With the Germans poised to massacre their community, R. Avraham prepared and delivered a musar discourse on the theme of *Kiddush ha-Shem* (martyrdom) and R. Elhanan presented a halakhic lecture on the same topic. Having composed their souls for the inevitable, they faced death in the manner that befitted them. I don't know whether murderers or spectators were moved to moral regeneration by this scene, though one can wish it were so, and I doubt that the

rabbis were preoccupied with the effect their behavior might have on the gentiles. Yet the strength and dignity with which they met their end surely testifies to the force of truth.

We tend to ignore the force of soul exemplified by the martyrdom of men and women like R. Avraham and R. Elhanan. For reasons beyond the scope of this essay, our educational system has paid little attention to them. We are taught that there is only one authentic model of resistance to Hitlerian evil, namely violent resistance, however futile. A dead Jew who didn't attempt the death of his murderer is an object of pity at best, a target for contempt at worst. Thus we have lost contact with the very real courage and strength of these Jews. R. Elhanan's Talmudic insights are honored in our Beit Midrash, yet we deny ourselves access to the strength of character from which they emerge. To think of R. Elhanan, or R. Avraham, or any of their confrères, as Gandhians is laughable. But if we need Gandhi to restore our knowledge that force of truth exists without the force of arms, that R. Elhanan and R. Avraham responded to evil as eloquently and authentically, in their way, as the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto did in theirs, then our study of Gandhi requires no apology.

## V

We have spoken of Gandhi's contribution from a Jewish perspective. What does Western culture gain from him? Why does his popularity persist?

Is it because history proved him right? Hardly. As Gandhi himself recognized, Britain's will to maintain the Empire was severely undermined by World War II. Colonialism would have ended sooner or later. In Palestine, for example, a fairly limited insurrection encouraged the British exit as effectively as Gandhi's decades-long non-violent struggle. Gandhi had welcomed members of the untouchable castes into his community, despite the discomfort of his wife, but did not assign their struggle for equality a high priority that would interfere with his goal of national unity. Under the rule of his Congress Party they continued to be treated like dirt. Dismissing Gandhi's other social-economic ideals from the start, India has not been too proud to fight wars of aggression and now boasts possession of the atomic bomb. Most tragically, Gandhi lived to see His Majesty's Government's hasty abandonment of the Indian subcontinent, which led directly to massive internecine slaughter, with hundreds of thousands dead or grievously harmed.

A cynic might quip, not without justice, that Gandhi's attractiveness is a consequence of his unreality and irrelevance. Western seekers after spirituality are often more fascinated by exotic ideals than by the daunting prospect of making their lives conform to the ideal. Unconventional personalities and faraway ideas satisfy this kind of spiritual grazing very well. This is one reason for the relative popularity of Eastern religion among people who disdain the do's and don'ts of traditional religion.

But there is something more real to Gandhi's power than the allure of the Oriental and a lack of realism about the facts of an ambiguous political legacy. There is something in us that yearns for a world of surpassing peace. Believing Jews (and Christians) embrace the eschatological vision of Isaiah 2:4: "One nation will not raise the sword to others, and they will study war no more." And secularists, committed only to the enhancement of human welfare, cannot escape its enchantment. If anything, the disappearance from their lives of a concrete, pervasive relationship with God bestows a special glow on this one point of contact between their worldliness and the realm of the transcendent, as if the Utopian dream were a solitary star in a darkened firmament.

"The wolf will dwell with the sheep," the prophet teaches (Is. 11:6). One may take this vision of reconciliation literally, like the Ravad, or figuratively, like the Rambam (*Hil. Melakhim* 12:1). Either way we are being asked to consider the miraculous, and our belief in the glorious future cannot become real (in John Henry Newman's sense of the term) and genuinely hopeful unless we apprehend some trace of it in the present. Sainly individuals provide one kind of evidence for the possibility of a radically better existence. But what is required is not so much a few more exemplary, triumphant sheep than a transformed model of wolf. In short, we yearn for evidence that not only isolated individuals, but also entire societies, can realize the ideal of peace.

What makes Gandhi an unusual, perhaps unique figure in the modern world is not simply his personal courage and consistency in living by his convictions, but the fact that he more than once carried the populace with him. In 1919, for example, one of Gandhi's major protest campaigns was marked by mob violence and looting on the part of his partisans. A remorseful Gandhi decided that the breakdown was the result of his "Himalayan miscalculation." Against the views of his followers, more focused on the nationalist bottom line, he successfully called off the campaign. In his last days, when Great Britain's headlong rush to evacuate its Indian dominion opened the door to hideous riots and pogroms between Hindus and Muslims, Gandhi undertook his last great fast, in which he persisted until the killing of Muslims stopped.



What is extraordinary is that these spiritual expressions wrought a change, however fleeting, in Hindu society. Why Gandhi's tactics worked, where other great men would probably have failed, is no doubt due to a combination of the strength of his conviction, shrewdness, charisma, and the collective mentality of the people he led. But the political analysis is not crucial for our purposes. Nor does it matter that his influence was temporary, that history continued in its current as if Gandhi had not, for a moment, diverted its flow. Nor is it relevant that the crises in which Gandhi's spiritual power triumphed were largely the result of his own miscalculations. The heart of the matter is that on these and other occasions, it became possible to imagine the eschatological transformation of the human heart.

For religious individuals, as we aspire to become, the encounter with world culture is naturally fraught with tension. Judged in the light of the divinely revealed Torah, the ideals of the world are always deficient in varying degrees. If we are to contend with the world in which we exist, and if we are to understand our own affiliations with the world, there is no alternative to that critical encounter. Yet in the midst of our creative grappling, at the very moment when we are engaged in distancing ourselves from foolishness and worse, there is always the prospect that we shall uncover something valuable, even inspiring. For a few magic moments, Gandhi made human nature run upstream.

### Notes

This essay was originally delivered as a lecture closing the Yeshiva College Book Project for the fall 2000 semester. The book project, which involves the year-long study of a single book by all students throughout the academic year and a series of oral presentations and discussions, was initiated by Dean Norman Adler and is currently coordinated by Dr. Joanne Jacobson. I am grateful to Yitzchak Blau, Erica Brown and Jeffrey Saks for their helpful comments.

1. The essays cited here may be found in the *The Gandhi Reader*, ed. Homer A. Jack (Bloomington, IN, 1956). They include "Hitlerism and Aerial Warfare" (339-41) and "Zionism and Anti-Semitism" (317-22).
2. In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV, *In Front of Your Nose*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York, 1968), 463-70.