

## History and Truth in Religion

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IN JUDAISM, as well as in Christianity and some other religions, historical events in the form of canonized stories provide essential points of reference. A fundamental question arises: Is the historical accuracy of these stories really important for religion? Or rather, to make it personally relevant rather than an issue of erudition, is it important for my own religiosity? An additional question is: Is there anything in religion that is constant; that, while belonging to the human, historically conditioned realm, remains outside history, does not change with time? Again, is it important for *me* to perceive an unchangeable essence in my religion?

The problem with answering these two questions emerges from the development and achievements of the critical and scientific approach to history. According to it, everything is subject to evolution, and change is also inevitable in the way we as human beings perceive past events. Therefore, there is no perennial essence of any religion, nor is our picture of past events that engendered the religious tradition accurate. It can't be. The issue is general, and philosophical. As philosopher Bernard Williams puts it, 'accounts which have been offered as telling the truth about the past often turn out to be biased, ideological, or self-serving. But attempts to replace these distortions with "the truth" may once more encounter the same kind of objection, and then the question arises whether any historical account can aim to be, simply, true.'<sup>1</sup> How can one as a religious and modern person address this situation? Let us deal first with the issue of the (unchangeable) essence, and then with the probably more unsettling problem of the accuracy of historical accounts.

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

## Our Belief in Eternal Essence

Historically speaking, everything is subject to change, birth, growth, decline, and death, including cultures and civilizations, peoples and religions. After all, according to modern science, even nature and its seemingly most stable phenomena undergo evolution: species arise and pass, stars, including our Sun, sooner or later burn out, and the cosmos itself is expanding or perhaps pulsating. From the scientific perspective, Judaism and Jews must have changed, and no aspect of Jewish religion may be claimed to be completely stable. And indeed, if we look at any specific issue, we can point out the change of views concerning even the most fundamental tenets of faith. Let us consider a specific example of an issue in Judaism that seems to have been obviously constant for millennia.

The incorporeality of God has been taken for granted for a long time, but a thousand years ago or more it was less than obvious for Jewish thinkers, who could easily mention many Torah verses that refer, for instance, to God's arm or hand. To be sure, the passages can be interpreted in a way that is compatible with the tenet of strict incorporeality, since we all follow Maimonides and know that *ein lo demut haguf ve'ino guf* ('He has no semblance of a body, nor is He corporeal'). Yet this was not the only way. Thus Nathan Shtkln writes, 'the huge number of manuscripts available to us today reveals that in medieval Europe, and especially in Rashi's homeland of France, it was by no means unthinkable to believe that God possesses form. The Tosafist R. Moshe Taku asserts that God sometimes takes on human form, and considers it heretical to deny—as Rambam does—His ability to do so.'<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the issue of the exact content of opinions expressed by medieval rabbis has been debated by experts, but it seems safe to state that the views on this fundamental question, held by the most Torah-true rabbis, were diverging. If this seemingly simple matter exhibits the presence of evolution and change, then is everything in our religious outlook subject to change? Has everything changed?

Well, it seems imperative to state that, whatever scientists and historians can say, we do feel that not everything is subject to change. We have this feeling independently of what historians have found or will discover. I am saying

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Shtkln, 'Was Rashi a Corporealist?', *Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, 7 (2006), 81–105. Shtkln's piece can also be found on his website, <zoortorah.com>. For more claims about ancient Jewish concepts of incarnated deity see Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature', *Harvard Theological Review*, 88/2 (1994), 171–95, as well as Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), and other books by him.

this without the intention to slight historians' achievements. They are valuable and form a basic framework in which we can operate. However, at the same time, their approach is not sufficient for a living faith. This is so important that it mustn't be minimized. As the outstanding German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote about a hundred years ago, when we Jews say 'we', we hear 'we are eternal'.<sup>3</sup> This is not a historical description; clearly, even according to the biblical account, during the time of Noah there were no Jews. This statement is also not a prediction; clearly, we can imagine the earth without Jews. Yet Rosenzweig's dictum aptly expresses something fundamental to Judaism. We feel that we do touch something beyond and above history, something that historians have no way to grasp as historians. We also assume that the essence of the relation between the Creator and Jews has not changed. That is why my faithfulness, or attempted faithfulness, to the tradition of Judaism reaches beyond historical contingencies. This is more than just a feeling opposite to the picture presented by science. It says something essential about the Jewish tradition.

It is possible to see the contradiction between tradition and science in an even more direct way. Not only is it easy to imagine the future when there will be no more Jews. Actually, we can imagine the future with no human beings, for example after a major cosmic or natural catastrophe. For the Jew who treats the tradition seriously, the question arises immediately: How does this relate to the Torah's statement that God will never send another flood (Gen. 9: 11)? While one can look for consolation in the hope that such a catastrophe will never happen, it is hard to find an answer other than just an expression of this hope, namely, sheer faith. A less extreme situation can be considered. To propose a thought experiment, let us imagine a catastrophe that leaves alive only a group of people on a spaceship. Most of the existing civilizational divisions and group identifications would then lose sense. However, if there were some committed Jews among the survivors, they would probably try to recreate the Jewish 'people' in relation to the tradition. (The same applies to committed Christians, who would try to recreate the Church.) This thought experiment seems to offer an 'empirical' illustration of the thesis about the perennial nature of the Jews. Rosenzweig's statement is thereby confirmed, which does not mean that there exists some guarantee of Jewish perpetuity. How is it then possible to combine the thesis about the absolute rule of

<sup>3</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 317, where this is seen as a property of 'the community of blood', and then for example p. 322, where it is stated: 'the eternal people purchases its eternity at the price of temporal life'.

history, the ubiquitous character of change, with the view that there is something unchangeable, something that reaches beyond the rule of history? I believe that no easy solution is possible. We must remain modest but firm. The situation reminds us of the problem with proofs of the existence of God. Philosophers generally have come to the conclusion that no proof is possible. Every argument assumes at some point the very thesis one attempts to demonstrate. At the same time, I would add, some arguments do sound convincing in the ears of some people. This means that the properly worded assumption seems true to *them*. They believe. Similarly with the supra-historical point of reference. This cannot be objectively demonstrated; historians, sociologists, and other scientists will reject that concept if they are true to their profession. We—and also they, for that matter, when they transcend their professional capacity—can express our belief that we reach, or at least point to, something beyond history. We would also claim an even more comprehensive belief: human beings, in order to see a meaning in the world, must reach beyond the world, towards the realm of transcendence.

Can the belief in something beyond history help deal with the problem posed—in the presence of historical sciences—by the belief in the historical veracity of the stories that make up our religious tradition? Or rather, can this approach help us deal with the apparent necessity to abandon the traditional naive trust in the literal truth of those stories? This is the fundamental question, mentioned at the very beginning.

### The Story of Job and the Stories in the Torah

Before proceeding to an analysis of the problem of the truth of biblical stories, let us notice that there exists a general problem of language, that is, of the unavoidable relativity of language. This can be applied to the thesis about the belief in a stable essence beyond history. Namely, assuming the presence of some unchanging supra-historical 'point', we do not need to assume that there exists a perpetual linguistic description of it. Every method of talking about it is relative, proper to its historical period. In the course of history, the understanding of any given description can change. The description can become impossible to understand. In the realm of language, of the means of expression, there is no unchangeability. History reigns supreme. No formulation of an article of faith is ultimate. Only the reality pointed to by an expressly formulated article of faith can, perhaps, be perennial, never its formulation. The form of expression can change; the essence remains. Each formulation is tentative. This picture of the situation is well attested to in the

tradition of Judaism. Only a wide enough fragment or even the totality of the tradition can express the truth; never can an isolated statement be sufficient independently of the context. 'Torah speaks in the language of man', as is repeatedly stated in the tradition.<sup>4</sup>

The thesis that dogmatic formulations are impermanent may seem to contradict the Jewish need to preserve the letter, not just the spirit, of holy texts. The stress on the smallest details of the text seems to mean that the literal meaning of the text is given. The contradiction is not really there, however, as each verse, being indeed stable, needs interpretation, or rather a variety of interpretations.

To some extent this disregard for the literal truth of some otherwise highly significant stories is present in the Jewish tradition. Maimonides summarizes the attitudes with respect to the existence of Job:

Some of our Sages clearly stated Job has never existed, and has never been created, and that he is a poetic fiction. Those who assume that he has existed, and that the book is historical, are unable to determine when and where Job lived. Some of our Sages say that he lived in the days of the Patriarchs; others hold that he was a contemporary of Moses; others place him in the days of David, and again others believe that he was one of those who returned from the Babylonian exile. This difference of opinion supports the assumption that he has never existed in reality.<sup>5</sup>

And yet we should treat the problems raised in the book with utmost seriousness:

But whether he has existed or not, that which is related of him is an experience of frequent occurrence [and] a source of perplexity to all thinkers. . . . This perplexity is caused by the account that a simple and perfect person, who is upright in his actions and very anxious to abstain from sin, is afflicted by successive misfortunes, namely, by loss of property, by the death of his children, and by bodily disease, though he has not committed any sin.

What is more, some key parts of the story of Job are seen by Maimonides as literary fiction:

According to both theories, viz., the theory that Job did exist, and the theory that he

<sup>4</sup> Sifvei, Num. 112. It is an important motif, stressed by Rabbi Ishmael against Rabbi Akiva, in the exposition of rabbinic theology by Abraham Joshua Heschel in *Heavenly Torah, as Reflected Through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 22, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1904), 296 ff. The next two quotes are also from there.



did not exist, the introduction to the book is certainly a fiction: I mean the portion which relates to the words of the adversary, the words of God to the former, and the handing over of Job to him. This fiction, however, is in so far different from other fictions that it includes profound ideas and great mysteries, removes great doubts, and reveals the most important truths.

Can the treatment of the book of Job be applied to the Torah? Commentators who stand outside the tradition of Judaism have no problem with such applications. For those who locate themselves inside the tradition, the situation looks different. To a pre-modern-style traditionalist, the traditional belief in the truth of the Torah is not to be questioned. To those who combine tradition with modernity, the problem is acute. The approach to the Torah must not be the same as to the book of Job. The story of Job teaches us something important by referring to something we all know from experience—the suffering of innocents. The accounts in the Torah teach us by referring to the reported events as facts. It is not possible just to ignore this if one wants to remain within Judaism. And historians generally deny the truth of those accounts. To give just one example, archaeologists say that no evidence has been unearthed about the presence of walls in Jericho during the period believed to be the time of Joshua, and, more generally, ‘the archaeological findings blatantly contradict the Scriptural picture: the Canaanite cities were not “great”, were not fortified, and did not have “walls sky-high”.’<sup>6</sup> Referring to this, to the improbability of having the crowd numbering 600,000 adult males depart from Egypt and wander through Sinai without leaving any trace detectable to us, and to many other examples of discrepancy between historical findings and the account of the Torah, one cannot but conclude that ‘as far as we can judge from the factual evidence, the Israelite conquest of Canaan as described in the Scripture never took place, nor did the Exodus from Egypt.’<sup>7</sup>

Faced with these challenges, a believer may of course ignore historians and dismiss their findings. However, this is not an acceptable move for those among us who treat science seriously. One can choose the approach that Mainonides took with respect to the book of Job. Even fictional stories can be highly significant. However, contrary to the story of Job, the stories about the patriarchs, the Exodus, and much of the rest have the character of historical accounts, and are treated as such in the tradition. It seems impossible to ignore the question of their veracity. And the two extreme answers—the

picture of their full accuracy and the view of them as literary fictions—seem too simplistic. Is there a way out?

### Persistence of a Minimum of Historical Facts

In order to see how a middle way between literal historical truth and literary fiction can be taken, let us consider one of the best-known Torah stories, *akedat yits'hak*, the binding of Isaac. It is so well known that it needs no repetition. It is important, however, to stress the fact that new renderings and novel interpretations of the story keep appearing. One recent interpretation is worth mentioning. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. . . . Torah seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. G-d does. We are merely their guardians on G-d's behalf. Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented—even unintelligible—in the ancient world. That is what the story of the binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to G-d. All children belong to G-d. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. G-d does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. G-d wants him to renounce ownership in his child. . . . G-d creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever interpretations have been given and will be made, the story of the Akedah remains unexhausted. It is undeniable that, from the perspective of Judaism, this story constitutes an inexhaustible well of meaning. It has become a fundamental point of reference, a durable pillar of tradition, or rather of several traditions. This has been the case despite the fact that there exist no extra-biblical data confirming the reality of the events described in the Akedah story. What is more, in some sense, even for non-religious people, the story functions as a description of reality. Indeed, it is a reality that is always available, more real than most of the events we have witnessed. And, even more important, it really constitutes a point of reference, a source of interpretations important for our lives, much more than most events we experience. We can say that, independently of everything else, that story has

<sup>6</sup> Z. Herzog, ‘The Bible—No Evidence on the Ground’ (Heb.), *Haaretz*, 3 Nov. 1999, quoted in Nahali Zeligman, ‘Letter to My Rabbi’ (2009) on the [talkreason.org](http://talkreason.org) website.

<sup>7</sup> Zeligman, ‘Letter to My Rabbi’.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Sacks, ‘The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation’ (commentary on ‘Vayera’, 2010 [5771]), [Covenant and Conversation](http://www.covenantandconversation.com) website.

become a touchstone, a fundamental truth, and a pillar of Bible-based civilizations as a result of its presence, its interpretations, and even the recurring opposition to the disturbing scene of the offering of the beloved son.

And yet one cannot escape the simple question: Is this pillar really true? No amount of relativizing to a narrative can obliterate the naive question: Did it really happen?

It is important to realize that most modern people, that is to say, people living according to modern values, among which the acceptance of scientific history is so important, will refrain from any defence of the literal meaning of the story. I think that, while nobody can exclude the possibility that it happened in the way it is presented, the certainty that it so happened is completely unjustified by today's standards and expresses a textual fundamentalism. On what grounds may we think it is more than literature?

Even assuming a critical attitude, we see that the story happens in a setting that we treat as real, even though the assessment of the veracity of particular elements can vary. If asked what the angel who stopped Abraham looked like, we can say that it is inessential. The only essential aspect of that motif is that Abraham heard the voice. The voice was 'heavenly', but how it would have been recorded by a microphone is beside the point. Perhaps it could have been heard only by Abraham himself. The ram, however, is described as real, so we can ask how it looked, how it would have been recorded by a camera. Presumably it looked normal, but, as we know from our tradition, *eloh shel avraham avinu* (Abraham's ram) was one of the few things created at dusk on the sixth day of Creation (Avot 5: 9). The vision behind this statement is beautiful, and expresses an important insight about miracles, but it is very far from science, a scientific description of events. I think that it should be treated as a metaphor. If so, does it mean that the whole story of the Akedah is a metaphor?

Many modern readers would say that the story is metaphorical and there is nothing more to it than literature. In the pre-modern era, for centuries virtually everyone believed that the story was quite literally true. Even though the approach used by Maimonides to handle the story of Job was available, Torah was considered to be simply true. Today, the approach 'fiction but highly significant' is easily used, for example by saying that 'we believe that, whether the story of Pharaoh, the Exodus, and the Wilderness "actually happened" or not, our present situation calls upon us to relearn and rethink the story. It calls upon us to learn in order to act.'<sup>9</sup> The two extremes are easily

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Waskow and Phyllis Berman, 'Relearning and Rethinking the Passover Saga', Jewish Telegraphic Agency website.

definable. If there is nothing in between, one can either be modern and against the traditional religious approach, or anti-modern and traditionally religious. If, however, a middle course is possible, one can be critical and believe in the fundamental veracity of the story. How is this possible?

It should come as no surprise that some elements of any given story can be less than accurate. This happens often in accounts of events, even by eyewitnesses. Additional explanations and details are meant to make the story easier to grasp for the listener. If this is done with good will, with no intention to lie or to manipulate, the story remains true in an important and significant sense, even if, when taken with all its details, it is not true in the literal sense. What is even more important, though, is that something did really happen. This 'something' may constitute only a fragment of the story, or may even be present only in an indirect way. However, to this 'something' the standard correspondence theory of truth applies, that is, the literal truth. I claim that, however large the amount of the content of the story that is outside historical testability, there remains a residue that is subject to the 'usual' truth and testability. Of course, I mean a theoretical testability. No practical test is thinkable at this moment with respect to the Akedah story. The extent of our belief in the historical facts behind the story may be difficult to realize. Yet it is its very presence that is unavoidable if we want to remain believers along the traditional lines.

### The Second Step: Treat the Whole Story as if It Were True

I have proposed we assume that *some* historical truth remains to be believed; we cannot explain away everything. The line between literally true and not literally true but significant depends on what other sources of authority one adopts, in addition to one's religious tradition. For example, I accept the findings of natural and historical sciences, with no reservation other than the general claim that they are hypothetical, and, however well confirmed, are always subject to revision.

Let us see some more examples of how historical criticism can be combined with belief in the truth behind the story. Jews and Christians (unlike many Muslims) treat as literally true the fact of the existence of the Jerusalem Temples. This does not mean that all details of the stories connected to them must be literally true—for example, the destruction (*harban*) of both on the same day, 9 Av. To some this was simply the case; to other Jews this can mean that a degree of rabbinic creativity can be detected. One can doubt the claim that the two cases of *harban*, and, in addition, some major disasters in later



times, such as the capture of Bethar (135 CE) and the ploughing up of Jerusalem, occurred on that same day, as is stated in the tradition (*Tan.* 4: 6). To use the phrase of David Roskies, perhaps the rabbis cut down history 'to manageable size'.<sup>10</sup>

We do not need to agree on every detail. We may put the border between the literally true and the not literally true at various points. My only point is that the border must be set somewhere. The non-literal truth can be called metaphorical, or better, truth relative to a narrative. The residue of the literal truth can be much smaller for us, moderns, than it was in pre-modern eras. It does not need to contain all traditionally conceived truths. The extent of literal truths about history seen in the Torah can change. Something must remain historically accurate, but what exactly is not predetermined.

The above view differs drastically from the traditional approach that assumes as literally true the totality of the Torah. It makes possible a combination of some traditionally conceived religiosity with modernity. What is more, contrary to the initial impression, it does not require the abandoning of the traditional reverence for the received text. We can assume only a limited part of the account to be historically accurate, and still treat the text as if it were literally true. That is, I believe that we are supposed to take two steps. First, as explained above, some truths are relativized to the narrative, and only the remaining residue is taken as simply true. Second, the traditional story is affirmed in its entirety, and it remains an essential ingredient of the religious infrastructure. Let us see how this works.

Let us take, for example, the account of Moshesh Rabenu. We know a lot about him from the Torah. Some historians say that there is no independent proof of his existence, so there is no reason to believe he was a historical figure. The lack of evidence is hardly a disproof, but even if some hints in the direction of disproving his existence were found by historians (nothing more than possible hints seems imaginable), I would not feel threatened. Whatever aspects of the description of Moses are relegated to the realm of unhistorical, metaphorical truth—and there may be many of them—some historical core remains. It may be much smaller than the tradition has it, but there must be something literally true beneath the story. I may be unable to identify that core, but I can still assume its existence. Moreover, and here comes the second step, I have no other choice than to accept the whole biblical story. Some past events—I believe, unique events, without precedent and never repeated—crystallized as the story of Moses in the Torah. To relate to them I must

<sup>10</sup> See David Roskies, 'Memory', in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendel-Folb (eds.), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 58a.

refer to the whole story, including the person of Moses and the events in which he took part. As long as I believe that there are some unique truths in the Jewish traditions about Moshesh Rabenu, I have to treat the received story of him as if it were literally true. No amount of historical findings can change that.

If we agree to use the term 'myth' in its noble sense, we can say, with Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, that by affirming a story in a non-naïve way, we arrive at a 'broken' myth—understood as a myth, but not removed or replaced.<sup>11</sup> Actually, it is not very different from what Maimonides told us about Job. He was ready to see Job's story as fiction. Let us extend this to other stories. I propose to underline an aspect that is usually at most implicit in the modern reappropriations of the biblical stories, namely the persistence of some propositions, relegated to the background and hard to identify, that can be seen as simply true.

### The Consequences for Interfaith Relations

It is perfectly possible that the realm of direct historical truth is delineated differently by various believers belonging to the same denomination. This should not be seen as problematic. It is unavoidable, since we can differ in so many respects, including the level of trust in historical findings and hypotheses.

The differences can be much bigger if, for two different religions, the same initial event constitutes an important point of reference. Or, to put it better, if the same initial story constitutes a common point of departure. Sometimes, even in the case of different religions, there may be no significant differences. Probably Jews and Christians can have much the same attitudes to the Akedah story. The interpretations offered by Jews are usually acceptable to Christians. I have no doubt that the above-mentioned new interpretation by Rabbi Sacks sounds interesting and illuminating to Christians, and quite possibly to virtually everyone. Many Christian interpretations can be of interest to Jews, I mean Jews as Jews; only the strictly Christological ones would constitute exceptions. Actually, in the rabbinic period, which coincided with the first several centuries of Christian theology, there existed mutual inspirations and influences. Edward Kessler has called them 'exegetical encounters'.<sup>12</sup> In that era the Akedah story was seen as simply true. Nowadays we can still

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 49.

<sup>12</sup> See Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

exchange interpretations. Can we agree about the extent of the literal truth in the story? It seems to me that we can, that the Jewish and Christian attitudes to its veracity can be the same.

This convergence of Jewish and Christian attitudes is in sharp contrast with the contradiction between the Akedah story and the similar one in the Islamic tradition, where it is Ishmael who was about to be sacrificed by Abraham. I am sure I am not alone in feeling very significant difficulties in any attempt to treat the story about Ishmael with the same seriousness as I treat the standard (for Jews, and Christians) story of the binding of Isaac. And I suspect that a vast majority of Jews (and Christians), also those who do not care about religious belief, would share the feeling. It seems also sure that many completely non-religious and anti-religious people from Jewish and Christian families would say the same: the 'real' story is about Isaac. If this guess is correct, this reaction reveals a highly interesting truth about the Jewish and Christian world: at least some of the fundamental stories are seen as true in some unclear but deeply rooted way. Perhaps it is easy to offer some explanation. Many people would probably say that the Akedah story is much older, so it must have been the source for *surat* 37, where a similar story is told—without, however, identifying the name of the son who was ready for sacrifice. This explanation amounts to the simple fact that the Torah is much older than the Quran and the Islamic tradition. Yet it seems that, for almost everyone, the knowledge of the historical facts regarding the dates of the appearance of holy books of various religions comes much later than some familiarity with the Jewish Akedah story. The more important reason for considering it more 'true', in some sense, than the Islamic story would then be one's family education or one's cultural environment, in which it was only the Torah or the Bible that was seen as revealed or at least deserving a special place. Thus, even if no claim about the literal truth of the Akedah story is made, this story is considered not as just one of many possible fictions, but as a special story, treated as if it were a true historical description. And, to repeat, it seems that a large majority of Westerners would be inclined to think that way. Obviously, it is just the opposite with Muslims. Is there a way to overcome the potential for conflict?

In order to see whether it is possible to avoid the conflict over the identity of the son who was about to be offered, let us use the idea of the residuum of literal truth in a significant story as distinct from the rest of the story, which can be only metaphorically true, or rather, true relative to a narrative. The residual literal truth is very hard to pin down. Whatever it is, it can be assumed to belong to both the Jewish and the Islamic stories. Now, let us

assume it is the rest of the story that really counts, which means that there are two stories that are true only within their own narratives. If so, the divergence of the accounts is not threatening. After all, the Jewish story is about Abraham and Isaac, and the Islamic story is about Ibrahim and Ismail. They are different, so the contradictions are only apparent; the conflict is not inevitable. At the same time, they are not just fictions; they have grown, we can assume, out of real events, and to the extent they refer to those events, they are factually true.

The Islamic account of the sacrifice attempted by Ibrahim is the basis of the festival Eid al-Adha, also known among Polish Muslims as Kurban Bajram. I must avow that I have no problem whatsoever with Muslims celebrating this festival. The interpretation I have just given provides a good reason: let them celebrate, we can support the celebration; after all, the festival is about Ismail rather than Ishmael. It refers to their story, and it is not really essential what is its relation to our story. The two stories may share a hidden core that is simply true, but it is the way each one functions within its own tradition that is practically important.

The above method of handling the potential conflict is not necessarily applicable in all cases. If, for a religious tradition, a specific story provides a definition of its own fundament, then opposing narratives about the same person or the same event constitute a major source of discord. This can be illustrated by the Christian account of the life and death of Jesus. It is known to Christians and to the wide world from Christian sources. No independent account from that era is known. There exist also later, but ancient, Jewish 'anti-Gospel' accounts of Jesus, such as those gathered in the *Toledot yeshu*. They present an image completely different from the stories known from Christian holy books. To say, as we did before with regard to the Akedah, that a common factual core, even a small one, persists in both accounts seems highly inadequate. The stories that are most fundamental for Christians are ridiculed by the clearly polemical Jewish account. If it is treated as true, even metaphorically true, it has a high potential to engender conflict. Let us remember, however, that those stories about Yeshu are by themselves absolutely marginal to Judaism. The way to avoid the Jesus–Yeshu clash would be to ignore those accounts precisely because of their marginality. Nothing essential for Judaism changes if we ignore them—as has been indeed done in practice by most Jews for a long time.

To put the strategy in more general terms, if an event lives in two traditions, that is, in two contradictory narratives, each fundamental for the life of its tradition, then conflict is unavoidable. That is why emerging sects, the

beginnings of new religions within established ones, are necessarily controversial and easily engender antagonism, and also violence. If, however, the event lives in one tradition only, and the account of it in the other tradition performs no vital role, the other account can be rather easily ignored. This strategy can hopefully help avoid a good part of the conflicts generated by religions and perpetuated around us. What is more, it provides hope for ending some conflicts that are at the moment unavoidable because the conflicting narratives continue to play important roles in two traditions. Probably in the future only one tradition will retain the narrative as central, while the other will develop in a way that marginalizes the counter-narrative.