It Is Not Magic, It Is Smith: Comparison in a Study of Jewish Theology

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Abstract

In a search for a theoretical framework that would structure and orient a comparative analysis of diverse Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust, the author reached for J.Z. Smith's discussions of comparative enterprise. The questions of similarity, difference and of the putative goal of comparison loomed large over her project. In J.Z. Smith's work, the author found helpful clues, illuminating insights as well as somewhat confusing and counterintuitive examples.

I like to trace the origins of my preoccupation with Judaism and the Holocaust to an encounter with a photograph that took place many years ago at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The photograph had been taken in the Warsaw ghetto and portrayed a Jewish man wrapped in his prayer shawl. In my recollection, I see myself standing in front of the enlarged image and wondering how that man lived his faith when the terrible realities of his daily existence must have seemed to negate its fundamental premises.

I doubt this situation ever took place. Like many stories of origin, it is most likely a construction rather then re-construction, an imaginative rendering of the past in service of the present that has less to do with things as they happened and more with things as it would make sense for them to happen. The question of God and the Holocaust or rather of Jewish imaginings of God vis-à-vis the Holocaust was real, however, and it led me through documentary films, to memoirs, diaries, works of fiction, to reflections of philosophers and theologians. In 2006, I attended a few day seminar at the USHMM Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies and it was there that from Gershon Greenberg I learned about several ultra-Orthodox rabbis who recorded their thoughts about the destruction they witnessed as it was unfolding. By then I was familiar with the writings of Jewish theologians who struggled with the question of Judaism after Auschwitz in the post-war years. As I began to immerse myself in the war-time writings of Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, Yissakhar Teichthal, and Kalonymus Kalman Shapira I could not help but compare their reflections to the ideas I knew from the works of Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, and others.

"But that makes no sense," a senior colleague whose field was Jewish history shook his head at a seminar a few years later in response to my declaration that I intended to compare the writings of ultra-Orthodox rabbis who wrote about the Holocaust as it was unfolding with the most-known works of the post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers. "What's the point of comparing things so different from each other?" he asked, and his tone left no room for doubt: there was none. Somewhat intimidated and not entirely prepared to answer, I let the question hang in the air. As I continued my research, it haunted me. Augmented by my own doubts, over time it morphed into a copy of Damocles' sword. Not less threatening for being purely mental, it continued to undermine my faith in the validity of the project. I was comparing, right from the start, in an unsystematic, haphazard and unreflective manner. I was comparing but I did not really know what I was doing. My mind behaved like a frenzied kangaroo jumping from place to place. It was rather exhausting, and it did not lead me anywhere. I had no time to

embark on a thorough study of the history of comparison in the study of Judaism. Instead, I turned to the writings of Jonathan Z. Smith to see if there was something in his account of comparative endeavors that I could use for my own purposes, however wooly my idea of the latter was at that point. Reading J.Z. Smith helped me clarify both what it was that I wanted to achieve and how did I want to get there.

"In no literature on comparison that I am familiar with has there been any presentation of rules for the production of comparisons; what few rules have been proposed pertain to their post facto evaluations," Smith wrote in "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" (1982: 21). This essay was one of the first, if not the first, of Smith's treatments of comparison that I reached for and I did not find that sentence comforting. It was those very rules that I had hoped to find! "Perhaps this is the case," Smith continued,

because, for the most part, the scholar has not set out to make comparisons. Indeed, he has been most frequently attracted to a particular datum by a sense of its uniqueness. But often, at some point along the way, as if unbidden, as a sort of déjà vu, the scholar remembers that he has seen 'it' or 'something like it' before…. This experience, this unintended consequence of research, must then be accorded significance and provided with an explanation. In the vast majority of instances in the history of comparison, this subjective experience is projected as an objective connection through some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like. It is a process of working from a psychological association to an historical one; it is to assert that similarity and contiguity have causal effect (1982: 22).

This, Smith declared, is not science but magic, as the Victorian anthropologists, E.B. Taylor and J.G. Frazer, understood it. Thinking themselves scientists, they were, in fact, not different from the objects of their analyses who, in their opinion, confused a subjective relationship, an association in their own mind, with an objective one, an association in the material world. In the essay, Smith proceeded to identify four modes of comparison (the ethnographic, encyclopedic, morphological, and evolutionary), identified their respective strengths and weaknesses to conclude that the "embarrassment remains" (1982: 26): "Each of the modes of comparison has been found problematic…. We know better how to evaluate comparisons, but we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice" (1982: 22). The making of patterns is easy. The task of explaining the how, the why, and the so what is much more complicated.

However interesting or even entertaining, this was not a comforting read. In the essay I was able to find only one positive injunction: "Comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end" (Smith 1982: 35). In their comparisons, Smith argued, scholars have been engaged chiefly in the "recollection of similarity." As a result, "the issue of difference has been all but forgotten" (1982: 21).

The question I wanted to ask, I realized as I thought about these words, was that of difference. I was not interested in the similarities between various theological interpretations of the Holocaust but, on the contrary, in what I saw as a particularly interesting disparity between them. This difference I wanted to flesh out and explain. But maybe that senior colleague of mine was right? Maybe the objects of my analyses were *too* different. How does one measure or parse the degrees of difference and similarity? How different and how similar things need to be in order for a comparison between them to be worthwhile? I could, say,

compare my cat and one of the fleas that, possibly and lamentably, live in the depths of his fur. Both are living organisms that inhabit space. That certainly counts as an affinity, but it does not take me very far. I can compare their sizes and reach an immensely enlightening conclusion that the cat is significantly larger. I could go on and compare various aspects of cat and flea physiology or behavior but none of the discoveries made in the process would teach me anything interesting about either. There is a gap here, but it seems too vast to be played across. I might, however, instead choose to compare my cat to his cousin leopard to realize that the former, contrary to occasional appearances, is not only a fluffy ball of fur, but also, at least potentially, an excellent killer. In this case, the gap is considerably smaller, and the comparison brings results that make a significant difference in my perception of my cat. Or does it? Truth be told, I still do not know. "There is no interest," Smith wrote, "in distinguishing between red and white wine. They are sheerly different; nothing more needs be said. All the efforts at thought are directed toward distinguishing two examples of the same varietal from different vineyards or between various years (vintages) of some vineyard's production. These differences among items that, to a lay palate, appear to be the same are the differences that count" (2004: 28). I find this example counterintuitive and confusing. Comparison between red and white wine makes perfect sense to me. Both are wines. There are important characteristics that they share and important characteristics that distinguish them. A comparison between beer and wine also appears sensible because both belong to the alcoholic beverages taxon and can be valuably compared with respect to many of their qualities. Does comparison need to focus on subtle differences, on nuances that are difficult to perceive? And if so, then what makes a nuance a nuance? How does a distinction become fine rather than crude?

When I related the "they are too different" comment to another colleague of mine, a scholar of Buddhism, his response was, "I don't get this objection. Of course, they are different, but they are also similar." Is it not the case that for an experienced sommelier or even for a somewhat discerning wine drinker the difference between, say, Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay is of such magnitude that there is nothing left to talk about? Likewise, an alien, say, a Klingon, might learn quite a lot from a comparison between a cat and a flea. In the end, neither similarity nor difference exist objectively, out there. Comparisons do not exist out there, either. While comparing seems to be the most natural thing in the world, an activity in which human agents are incessantly involved, there is, in reality, Smith observed, "nothing 'natural' about the enterprise of comparison. Similarity and difference are not given" (1990: 51). My colleagues' assertions were, just like Smith's, in the latter's words, "judgment[s] with respect to difference" (1987: 14), judgments in each case affected by their makers' own intellectual reasons. For a historian, the differences between the authors whose writings I set out to analyze were of such magnitude as to erase any similarities. His perspective, however, needed not be mine. The differences he saw as overwhelming, I saw as those that could be "defensibly relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual tasks at hand" (Smith 1987: 14). In the end, the lesson I drew from Smith was not that every comparison between things that caught my eye was equally justified because, when the chips are down, similarities as well as differences were relative and resided not in the reality but in my scholarly gaze. Quite the contrary. Rather than sanction an intellectual laissez-faire, Smith made me realize that what I needed was a clear formulation of the intellectual purpose of my comparative project because this purpose, the putative gain or the what's at stake, is the decisive factor. Without that clarity, as Smith pointed out in *Drudgery Divine*, one may derive but "arresting anecdotal juxtapositions or self-serving differentiations" (1990: 53). Comparison may, perhaps, be described as a game and there may be a dose of playfulness about it. This friskiness, however, masks a serious intellectual effort of the comparativist who must be able to present

a satisfying account of both the assumptions standing behind and the cognitive gain resulting from her comparison. Comparison is not just a matter of personal whim and subjective opinion. In its strongest form, I read in *Drudgery Divine*, comparison "brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons. It is the scholar who makes their cohabitation—their 'sameness'—possible, not 'natural' affinities or processes of history" (1990: 51). "That is to say," Smith continued, "the statement of comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always an implicit 'more than,' and there is always a 'with respect to.' In the case of an academic comparison, the 'with respect to' is most frequently the scholar's interest, be this expressed in a question, a theory, or a model" (1990: 51). The scholar's interest that, in turn, is shaped by an interplay of many factors ranging from lofty personal passions and intellectual ideals to more mundane institutional history of one's academic discipline, to painfully prosaic research funding availability, etc.

What, then, was my task? "The 'end' of comparison," Smith wrote, "cannot be the act of comparison itself. I would distinguish four moments in the comparative enterprise: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification" (2000: 239). In his view, the aim of a carefully constructed and meticulously carried out comparison is a "redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined" (2000: 239). In "The 'End' of Comparison," I have found language to say what I wanted to say. My project was occasioned by a perception of incongruity and it was this incongruity, or a certain aspect of it, that I wanted to flesh out. It was the very act of imaginative tossing of the two comparanda into one pot that brought the interesting disparity to light. The pot was not a cauldron. My project was not a potent magical concoction, and I, despite my cat's constant presence, was not a witch. I decided which differences and similarities to emphasize and which to downplay to bring the features I was interested in into sharp relief. Through a redescription of each side of the comparison in light of the other, what I assumed, in light of the history of scholarship in the field, to be well familiar to my intended audience (i.e. the post-Holocaust theology), became less so and the less familiar (i.e. the ultra-Orthodox Holocaust thought) showed a more recognizable face. As a result of this dual redescription, there emerged a modulation of a central category, that of theodicy. My project is complete or at least as complete as it is going to get for now. My conversation with Jonathan Z. Smith has only just begun.

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