

Engaging with God and Sustaining Faith: Analyzing Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* Through the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Buber

In this paper, I discuss Will Eisner's 1978 graphic novel A Contract with God alongside the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to explore maintaining faith in the face of absurd loss. First, I will compare and contrast the story of Abraham and Isaac with Frimma Hersh's story in A Contract with God. Borrowing from Kevin Hoffman's interpretation of Fear and Trembling in his paper "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling," I argue that both stories are about maintaining faith in the face of loss. I will then interpret each character's relationship with the divine using Martin Buber's framework of I-Thou and I-It relationships. I argue that Abraham remains in faith because he confronts God as Thou, while Hersh gives up on faith because he fails to enter into an unmediated relationship with God. Finally, I will discuss the significance of faith as something that gives meaning to absurd events. I conclude that there is still value to maintaining faith through loss, because a relationship to the divine gives meaning to otherwise meaningless events.

Introduction:

Will Eisner's 1978 graphic novel *A Contract with God* and the biblical story of Abraham both concern the tension between

faith and the absurd nature of human existence, and I will demonstrate my views through the connection of the term “absurd” to irrationality and incomprehensibility. Frimme Hersh, the protagonist of Eisner’s story, is a devout Jewish man who abandons his relationship with God after the death of his adopted daughter. Hersh conceptualizes his relationship to the divine as a contract because he believes that God will protect and take care of him as long as he lives a good religious life. When Hersh’s daughter dies despite Hersh’s piety, he believes that the contract between him and God has been broken and Hersh loses his faith in the end. Like Hersh, Abraham’s faith is challenge by the loss of a child, although in this case the loss is merely expected and not realized. At the start of his story, God promises that Abraham and his wife Sarah will have a child, despite Sarah’s old age. This promise is completed, and Abraham has a son named Isaac. When Isaac grows up, God commands Abraham to sacrifice him. Abraham follows God’s command to the point of raising his knife to kill Isaac, but God intervenes in the last moment which shows that Abraham’s faith was put to test, but Abraham passes the test because his faith in God is strong. In these two stories, Hersh and Abraham are both placed in an irrational situation because for both characters God seems to act without any underlying plan or reasoning, therefore Hersh and Abraham are tasked with reconciling the absurdity of their losses with their devotion to God.

In this paper, I will use these two stories as an entryway into a larger discussion of the tension between religious belief and the absurdities of human existence. I argue that the losses that both Hersh and Abraham face are representative of the everyday threats to human wellbeing that often appear in human lives without any reason behind them, such as the death

of a loved one, the loss of a job, or falling ill. The central challenge in *A Contract with God* and the story of Abraham is reconciling the absurdities of these losses with a belief in a just and loving God. Hersh's response to this challenge is to give up his religion while Abraham's response is to deepen his faith, therefore the two stories portray two conceptions of the divine because Hersh confronts God as a means to an end while Abraham confronts God as another being that he is drawn into a relationship with. While the conception of God as a means to an end is not compatible with the absurdities of human existence, a conception of God that emphasizes the relationship between humans and the divine can be reconciled with the kind of threats to human happiness that both Abraham and Hersh experience.

I also discuss the tension between faith and the absurdity of human life that is central to *A Contract with God* and the story of Abraham. After I focus on the conception of God emphasizing one's relationship to the divine as it can lead to a resolution for this tension. First, I will compare *A Contract with God* and the story of Abraham and Isaac. Borrowing from Kevin Hoffman's interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* in his paper "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," I argue that both stories are about maintaining faith in the face of the absurdity of human love and loss. I will then interpret each character's relationship with the divine using Martin Buber's framework of I-Thou and I-It relationships found in his book *I and Thou*. I argue that Abraham remains faithful because he confronts God as Thou, while Hersh gives up on faith because he fails to enter an unmediated relationship with God. Lastly, I will argue that in failing to confront God as Thou, Hersh loses a source of comfort and meaning in his life whereas Abraham maintains a source of meaning through his

relationship with the divine, even when confronting the expectation of loss. I conclude that there is still value to maintaining faith even if faith cannot protect us from loss because a relationship with the divine is valuable in and of itself and not simply as a means to an end.

Comparing and Contrasting Hersh and Abraham:

A Contract with God opens as Frimme Hersh returns from his daughter's funeral. The narrator explains that, although the loss of a child is common, it should not have happened to Hersh because he "had a contract with God" (Eisner, 28). The narrator after explains that when he was a child, his village pooled money to send Hersh to America because they believed he was "favoured by God" (33). On his journey, Hersh learns that God is both just and all knowing thus he concludes that if he is good, God will reward him. Hersh then draws up a contract with God and devotes himself to religion. When Hersh reaches America and establishes himself in his community, a mother leaves her child on his doorstep and believing that this is "part of his pact with God" (36), Hersh decides to raise the child as his own. When the child becomes a young adult, she suddenly dies which devastates Hersh. Believing that the death of his daughter is a sign that God has broken their contract, Hersh gives up his religious life. This view leads us to understanding the novel's central question which is whether we can ever make a contract with God and if we can expect rational and consistent behaviour from God, especially in the form of providing rewards for faith and good behaviour. Like Hersh, Abraham's faith is tested through the loss of a child although in this case the loss is only expected and not realized. At the beginning of Abraham's story, God promises to make Abraham the father of nations in return for his worship (The New English Bible, Genesis 17.6). God then

gives Abraham a child, Isaac, which is a miracle because Abraham and Sarah are too old to have children (The New English Bible, Genesis 17.15). Later, God seems to violate his agreement to continue Abraham's line when he commands Abraham to sacrifice his "only son Isaac" (The New English Bible, Genesis 22. 1-3) and Abraham agrees to this command and goes to sacrifice his son, with the full expectation that Isaac will die. In the end however God spares Isaac because of the trust that Abraham put in God. But it is important to notice here that in the moment that Abraham raises the knife to sacrifice Isaac, he expects Isaac to die therefore the contradiction that Abraham experiences is the same pain that accompanies the loss of a child.

There are different parallels in these stories. Hersh and Abraham, both represent themselves as people who are favoured by God. They are both given a child from God and after they both must confront the absurdity of losing this child. While Abraham speaks directly to God, Hersh starts his story with a firm belief that God favours him as he is chosen by his village to go to America. From this initial position, God draws Abraham into a covenant, and Hersh creates a contract between God and himself. Due to these initial contracts, Abraham believes that God will continue his blood line and Hersh believes that God will reward him for being good thus both Hersh and Abraham receive a child which they believe is given to them because of their relationship with God. In both cases, the appearance of this child is a miracle because they believe it is part of the contract that they made with the divine. But what is important to notice here is that this child is also taken away in what seems like a breach of their original agreement which shows that there are consequences that lead to punishments. God's previous actions indicate that He made plans for Hersh to raise the child and for

Abraham to become the father of nations therefore taking the child away in both cases is a deeply irrational and incomprehensible action.

Hersh and Abraham are both forced to reconcile the absurdity of their losses with their original faith in God. In his article, "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," Kevin Hoffman argues that Abraham confronts the same threats to human wellbeing that every person faces over the course of their lives. He argues that "fear and trembling is about the common challenges of love and loss, and that Abraham is extraordinary in facing ordinary threats to earthly felicity" (Hoffman, 439) thus what makes Abraham's story compelling is that he can face the absurdity of human existence without abandoning his faith. This is a key point of divergence between these two stories because Abraham maintains his faith through this breach of agreement while Hersh does not. Since God violated the contract that Hersh drew up as a child, he reasons that he is no longer obligated to worship Him. In the face of loss, and in the face of God's irrational nature, Hersh abandons his relationship to the divine whereas Abraham on the other hand maintains his faith even when he is confronted with the dread of the expectation of loss.

God as Thou and God as It: Abraham and Hersh's Comportment Towards the Divine

The divergence in these two stories can be understood using the framework of I-It and I-Thou that Martin Buber outlines in his book *I and Thou*. Buber argues that there are two essential ways of relating to the world. The first way of being is by speaking the coupled word I-It. This refers to a mode of being in the world where things are objects of experience (Buber, 5). Things that we experience in this way can only be confronted

partially and as such the coupled word “I-It can never be spoken with the whole being” (Buber, 3). By treating things as objects of experience we encounter them only in so far as they are useful to us. We try to derive knowledge or use out of the things that we experience as an It but we do not enter a relationship with these things. For example, I can come across a flower and count its petals, take note of its colour, and understand the way it draws water from the ground into its roots. In these ways of confronting the flower, I see it only as something to be understood. I do not enter a relationship with the flower therefore I experience the flower while speaking the basic word “I-It.” In contrast, the word I-Thou is spoken when we enter a relationship with another being and when I confront something as Thou, “I take my stand in relation to him” (Buber, 9). In an I-Thou relationship we confront something as another being. In this relationship, we experience the whole of the other being, and not just a part of it, as we do when we treat something as an object. When I confront the flower as a thou, I recognize it as another being in the same world as me, who affects me in some way, and to whom I am bound up in. The essential distinction here is between the disengaged experience of the coupled word I-It and the engaged relationship of the coupled word I-Thou.

Throughout his story Abraham confronts God as Thou which allows him to remain faithful and this is shown through Abraham’s constant dialogue with the divine. Abraham is constantly addressing himself to God as seen in the biblical passage that reads “God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am’” (The New English Bible, Genesis 22.1). In here we are introduced with the view that God and Abraham enter into an I-Thou relationship through their dialogue. When God calls Abraham by name, he gives Abraham

the opportunity to enter a direct relationship with God. Abraham accepts this offering and announces his presence to God therefore Abraham's test of faith begins before he sacrifices his son and only after Abraham commits to sacrificing Isaac, he commits to being in relationship with God. It is significant that this relationship comes first because it influences Abraham throughout the story therefore, I argue that Abraham can remain in faith because in addressing himself to God, Abraham confronts the possibility of loss while having a relationship with God to draw strength from. This relationship provides a comfort that allows Abraham to maintain his faith throughout the story.

Hersh on the other hand is not able to remain in faith because he never enters a direct relationship with the divine as he relates to God only through his contract. Through direct dialogue Abraham experiences an unmediated relationship with God and address Him as Thou whereas Hersh never directly addresses the divine. He draws up a contract with God without speaking to Him and thus assumes that God agrees without confronting Him in any way. Hersh's relationship with God remains mediated through his contract which he uses to speak to God while God remains silent. In experiencing God through the mediation of a contract and not through dialogue, Hersh treats God as a mechanism through which he can be protected and rewarded. When God no longer works as this mechanism, Hersh abandons his faith and this is because despite his outward devotion, Hersh is never able to enter a relationship with the divine because Hersh requires both consistent and a rational behaviour from God that must benefit Hersh in order for him to keep his faith. Hersh also assumes that God is an equal party to humanity and is obligated to his agreements in the same way we are because "if God requires that men honour their agreements,

then is not God, also, so obligated?" (Eisner, 41-42). This view tells us that by confronting God as a party that can be reasoned with and used as a means to an end, Hersh never confronts God as a Thou as he goes even further to actively resist an I-Thou relationship with God by ending all association with Him after a breach of their contract. Instead of seeing God as a comfort and companion, Hersh's relationship with the divine is limited by what he can get out of it as we see it when Hersh's daughter dies and he does not have his faith as comfort because his relationship with God was dependent on good things happening to him which shows that Hersh was doubting his faith unlike Abraham who was not.

Why Be Faithful:

Although an unmediated relationship with the divine cannot protect someone from the absurdity of life, I argue that this relationship with God is still valuable in and of itself. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that if Abraham had given up his faith in response to God's test, he would have lost the value that his relationship to God provided which is that "He would have borne witness neither to his faith nor to God's grace but would have testified only how dreadful it is to march out to Mount Moriah" (Kierkegaard, 16). What Kierkegaard is saying here is that Abraham's relationship with God is what makes his struggle as he emphasizes that it is the relationship to the divine that gave meaning to events that would have otherwise been accidental. The only way to preserve meaning in absurd events is to give yourself to the kind of relationship with God that Abraham inhabits. Abraham's test was absurd, but it was meaningful because in the end Abraham moves through the possibility of loss by leaning on his relationship with the divine. His faith in God turns out to be well placed and that is because

God did not require him to sacrifice Isaac in the end which makes Abraham's faith a source of strength through the possibility of losing what was dearest to him. Hersh's loss is equally absurd but because he never enters an I-Thou relationship with God, his loss is not meaningful. Since Hersh never enters an I-Thou relationship with God, he cannot draw on this relationship at a time of need and as a result the death of his daughter takes on no greater meaning.

The meaning that faith brings to our lives is important because we will inevitably be confronted by painful events outside of our control. Hoffman's analysis points to a level of resignation to events outside of our control that is necessary for a meaningful relationship with God to occur. Abraham gives himself fully to God, and in doing so, enters a relationship with God. Only by resigning himself to what God brings can Abraham's test become meaningful. Hersh never gives himself to this resignation. In attempting to control fate through his contract with God, Hersh closes himself off to a relationship with the divine while failing to protect himself from loss. We must accept then that by virtue of being human, we will have to confront loss no matter what our relationship to the divine is. Hoffmann argues that this resignation, and relationship, "is necessary in order to protect and ensure a sense of meaning and agency in human life against the throes of fate" (Hoffman, 444) as Hoffman brings us back to the reality that loss cannot be controlled by us. We cannot use God as something that will protect us from loss, but we can lean on our relationship with God as a comfort through those times. What Hersh lost in failing to confront God as thou was the possibility of making sense of an event that was outside of his control. Although a relationship with God may not provide any material or concrete benefit to

our lives, it is still worthwhile because faith gives meaning to inevitable events that would otherwise only be painful.

Conclusion:

A Contract with God tells the story of a man who gives up on his relationship with God in the face of absurd loss while the story of Abraham and Isaac details Abraham's commitment to a relationship with God through the expectation of loss. Both protagonists must reconcile their faith with the absurdities of human existence as Kevin Hoffman argues in his analysis of *Fear and Trembling* therefore what distinguishes these two figures is the way they comfort themselves towards God. Hersh abandons God after the death of his daughter because his relationship with the divine is limited by a conception of God as a being that can be negotiated with. When God reveals himself to be more than our agreements with Him, Hersh abandons his faith. Abraham on the other hand remains faithful because he addresses himself to God and lets himself be addressed by entering in a relationship with the divine that extends beyond a contract which shows that Hersh is calculated with his moves whereas Abraham is more open to trusting the process. These two comportments can be understood using Martin Buber's framework of I-Thou and I-It relationships as we see Hersh confronting God as an It, or a means to an end, while Abraham confronts God as Thou and is drawn into a relationship with Him which is more secure and detached from an outcome. Abraham's relationship with God gives meaning to his suffering while Hersh's suffering remains meaningless which indicates that a relationship with the divine can give purpose and meaning to our lives, even in painful moments.

Bibliography

Buber, Martin. *I And Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, T. & T. Clark, 1937.

Eisner, Will. "A Contract with God." *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. DC Comics, 1978.

Hoffman, Kevin. "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, pp. 439–459.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, 2013.

The New English Bible with the Apocrypha Oxford Study Edition. Oxford University Press, 1976.