VIII. JUDAISM AND "THE GOOD"

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Our Torah begins with goodness. God the Creator speaks the world into existence. Once each day, as being in its infinite variety continues to unfold, God sees that it is good. Six times the narrative of Creation is punctuated with the expression *va yar' elohim ki tov* ("God saw that it was good"), though this phrase is missing from the second day, when God separated the waters above the firmament from those below. Division is not goodness. More notably, the phrase does not appear after the creation of human beings. God "saw that it was good" after He created the animals on the sixth day; but after the emergence of humans we are only given the summary statement: "God looked upon all that He had made, and behold it was very good." That word "very"—*me'od*—added only here, is debated by the rabbis. Some reverse the consonants and read it as *'adam*—"God looked up all that He had made, and behold man was good." But others somewhat shockingly read it as though it were another word similar in sound: *mot* or "death." "God looked upon all that He had made, and behold *death* was good."[1]

The latter is, to put it mildly, hardly a "typically Jewish" or rabbinic idea. I suspect someone had to go that far only to counter the other view: that the human was the best of God's creations. The Bible is not particularly impressed with human goodness. It may not be possible, in biblical terms, to characterize human beings as "good" at all. A bit later in Genesis, in connection with the flood, we are told that God sees that "The inclination of the human's heart is only evil, from his youth." (Gen 8:21; cf. also 6:5). This is the source of the word *yetser*, "inclination" or "tendency." It is only the rabbis who much later soften this biblical judgment on humanity and add a *yetser tov*, a "good inclination" to balance off the will to evil. Both the biblical and rabbinic authors seem to be sufficiently familiar with the endless human capacity to do evil to avoid superficially rosy depictions of human nature.

Perhaps surprisingly, this tendency toward doing evil in no way lessens the Bible's insistence that the human being is created in God's very own image and likeness. I believe this to be the most important moral statement in the Jewish tradition, the basis of our concept of human decency and the single most clear guide to proper behavior that

[1] *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 9:5, 12. See further in that chapter for a series of "surprising" readings of *me'od*.

Judaism offers. We define human decency as treating the other, every other, as the image of God, and therefore as an embodiment of holiness. Our task, as the only ones of God's creatures who are reflections of the divine self in this way, is to increase the image of God in this world. We do so by propagating the species, fulfilling the first commandment, but also by living, acting, and treating one another as images of God's own self.

This belief that the human being is God's own and only image is also the reason for the most basic prohibition or taboo in the Jewish religious consciousness: the forbidding of idolatry. It is not because God has no image that we are not allowed to make depictions of God's likeness. Precisely the opposite! God has but one image and likeness in the world: that of every living human being. We are to fashion an image of God in this world; that is our task. But the medium in which we are to do it is the entirety of our lives. To take anything less than a living person—a canvas, stone sculpture, wooden statue—and to see in it God's image would be to demean our own Godlike humanity, and thus to lessen God.

The same connection to faith in the human as God's image is found also in the two other absolutes of the Jewish moral code. All commandments may be violated, indeed should be violated, for the saving of even a single human life. All except for these: idolatry, murder, and sexual degradation. Idolatry, because you are and therefore cannot "make," the image of God; murder, because the other is also the image of God; sexual degradation, because you are both the image of God, and you are enjoined not to degrade or diminish that image.

But what does the divine image have to do with *goodness*? The Bible can describe sun and moon, trees, plants, and animals as "good" in its account of Creation. Humans are in the image and likeness of their Creator, but they are not described as good. How can we be in God's image if we are not even good? Here we must recall some of the range of meanings attached to the divine likeness. We are creatures who bear moral choice, the only ones of God's creatures who were tempted (or some would say: destined) to eat of the Tree of Good and Evil. With moral choice goes responsibility, hence the possibility of being judged either good or evil, according to our deeds. The divine image also means that we are possessed of imagination and the spark of further creativity, the only creatures with the power to continue and participate

in God's own creative act. Here too the question of moral culpability will loom large: we humans are responsible for that which we create. We should also recall with some trembling that God's own goodness is not beyond question in our tradition. Isaiah's God is the single source of both good and evil, the One who "forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil" (45:7). To be a monotheist is to believe that there is a single source for all that comes to pass in this world. Of course we may question the nature of evil, its relationship to God, how the divine creation comes to be evil—and all the rest. But we may not say that there is a second, independent source. The Kabbalists tell us that God too is engaged in an ongoing struggle for self-purification, an attempt to remove the dross that exists near to the very highest levels of cosmic existence. *Our human struggle for goodness is thus not ours alone, but our way of participating in God's own search for a perfect universe*, one in which *shalom*, peace and wholeness, will reign throughout. We do this by following the way of Torah. That is the best measure of goodness we have as we are to realize it in ordinary day-to-day human life.

"And now, o Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you?" (Dt 10:12) is the root-question posed, and supposedly answered, by religions of revelation. God has spoken: This is the key claim of classical Judaism.[2] Contemporary theologians, among whom I count myself, may offer elaborate theories of what those three words mean. Leaning on the works of Jewish esoteric theologians over a thousand years, we will try to tell you that the *event* of revelation, or revelation as *process*, is what is central, and that the contents of revelation are secondary, are unclear, or emerge from human interpretation of a revelation that is in itself beyond content or beyond language. Such notions have taken deep root in the intellectual life of thinking religious Jews, and they are by no means exclusively modern. Both philosophical

[2] See Franz Rosenzweig's letter to Martin Buber, included in Rosenzweig's *On Jewish Learning*. On the Buber-Rosenzweig debate over revelation and law, cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, in *Jewish Spirituality*, II, ed. by Arthur Green (New York, 1987), pp. 317 ff.

and mystical theologians, medieval as well as modern,[3] are interested in what they can learn and teach from revelation about the nature of the divine self, the relationship of that self to its creatures, and especially the ways in which divinity is manifest in the human soul; and particularly in the soul of the prophet.

But this is not the dominant voice in the Jewish tradition. While philosophers, mystics, and their teachings have come and gone, the Jewish legal tradition, continuing to build and grow with each succeeding generation, has been interested precisely in the *content* of revelation, concerning itself little with exactly what we mean by the terms "reveal," "speak," "hear," or "will of God." It is this tradition, that of *halakhah*, the way or the path, that has shaped the contours of the classical Jewish community, including its ethics ("the commandments between person and person"), its devotional forms ("the commandments between person and God"), the delimiting of its borders, and its ability to confront an ongoing array of new circumstances in every phase of its existence. This has been the tradition of the rabbis and the people, both of whom often show distressingly little interest in the theological implications or deeper meanings of their own actions. They live out their spiritual life by great faithfulness and devotion—occasionally even to the point of martyrdom—to the *halakhah*, which to them is fully identified with faithfulness to Torah as divine word or to the will of God.

As is well known, Torah contains two bodies of teaching: the written law and the oral law. This formulation, probably originating in about the fourth century, embodies a reality that is still older. The written law, given to Moses either on Mount Sinai or over the course of his lifetime (there are differing views on this in the rabbinic sources, though the former view later comes to dominate[4]), consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible; the oral law is the interpretive and later codified tradition. The rest of Scripture occupies a somewhat intermediary position, but since it contains relatively little by way of specific

[3] On the role of mysticism in the revelation-theology of twentieth century Jews, cf. Rivka Horwitz in ibid., p. 346 ff.

[4] This debate is the central subject of Abraham J. Heschel's *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, vol. 2. This important book, currently available only in Hebrew, is now being translated into English.

legislation, determining its place in the system is not a crucial issue. It is quite clear that aspects of the oral tradition, that is, the interpretation of a written code within the community, go back to the biblical period itself, and this process in its early stages is sometimes witnessed in later biblical writings. The written Torah contains, according to a count first found in Talmudic sources,[5] six hundred and thirteen commandments, divided between two hundred forty-eight positive commands and three hundred and sixty-five prohibitions. Despite an explicitly stated stricture within the Torah (Dt 4:2) against adding anything on to the Torah God has given, the earliest rabbis were permitted under very restricted circumstances to add a few actual commandments. They also asserted the much broader authority to legislate as specific needs arose, occasionally even in contradiction to the agreed-upon meaning of a biblical injunction or prohibition. (Such legislation would be rabbinic dictum—termed *taqqanah, gezerah*, etc.—but not "command of God," except insofar as Torah enjoins one to listen to "the judge who will exist in those days" (Dt 17:9).) But by far the greatest portion of their work falls under the category of expansive interpretation, the reading first of sources in the written Torah, but later of authoritative and quasi-canonical rabbinic texts, and their deft manipulation to apply them to an ever-changing and expanding set of circumstances.

As I said above, this has been the Judaism of the people as well as the rabbis. For a very long time the Jews defined themselves as a community of praxis rather than one of particular faith or doctrine. Nowhere is this reality more dramatically indicated than in the Talmudic tale of Rabbi Meir, onetime disciple of Elisha ben Abuya.[6] The latter had become a "heretic" and had left the rabbinic community. The two of them were walking and talking one Sabbath day after Elisha had ceased living in accord with the ways of the rabbis. When they reached the Sabbath-border, that distance outside a town beyond which one is not permitted to walk on the Sabbath, Elisha warned his disciple to go

[5] *b.(=Babylonian Talmud) Makkot 23b. The Talmudic sources do not* list what the six hundred and thirteen actually are, but only fix the number. Listings of the specific commandments are disputed among the various medieval sages.

[6] b. Hagigah 15a.

back, lest he violate the prohibition. Taking the opportunity offered by his former teacher's still obvious awareness of the law, Meir responded: "You too, go back" meaning "recant your heresy." Elisha, however, would not do so, and the one walked on while the other returned, portraying in unusually graphic terms the "border" of life within the classical Jewish community.

The tradition that "membership in good standing" within the community of Israel is defined by religious practice (symbolized particularly by observance of the Sabbath) is still the case within today's observant community. Notice that I use the word "observant" here rather than "orthodox." As I have often explained to students in introductory courses on Judaism, there is no word for "orthodoxy" in pre-modern Hebrew or Yiddish. Jewish courts will accept the word of a witness who is known to be observant of the Sabbath; they will not ask him what he thinks is the nature of God or how he understands revelation. I remember my pious grandmother making discreet inquiries in the community about a certain butcher, trying to find out whether he was a Sabbath-observer before she would trust him to sell her properly prepared kosher meat. Again, the "orthodoxy" of his opinions was not a matter of public interest, but the strictness of his observance surely was. Here is where the line was drawn between a fellow-member of the House of Israel and one who had chosen to become an "outsider."

The careful reader of this paper may note a certain wavering between the past and present tenses in my presentation of this situation. The reason for that is quite simple. The classical Jewish self-definition becomes deeply problematic in the modern world. Today some eighty-five percent of Jewry lives outside the authority of Jewish law, though a significantly higher proportion are selectively observant of certain traditions. This wholesale abandonment of legal boundaries has been the case increasingly since the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the faithful core shrinking at different times and to various degrees in each of the far-flung Jewish communities. The leadership of those remaining communities (now indeed often defined as "Orthodox") has been at great pains both to sharply denounce the unacceptable behavior of the majority and at the same time to find ways to keep them within the Jewish community. One strategy has been to distinguish between leaders and followers in viewing these "outsiders": it is the wicked "rabbis" and teachers of the non-Orthodox who have led the flock astray; the folk

themselves are to be considered like "babes captive amid the heathen,"[7] who can hardly be held responsible for their own deeds. Another has been to refer to "the Jewish soul" which still exists among such people, leaders as well as followers, and to try by means of patience and kindness to develop that soul[8]—including elements of remaining religious conscience—in order to lead those Jews to penitence and return to "authentic" (meaning legally bounded) observance of the tradition.

Therefore we ask: "What does the Lord your God demand of you?" The Scripture here answers quite clearly: "Only this: to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in his paths, to love him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the commandments of the Lord which I command you this day, for your good." The "good" here is the reward Israel is to receive in return for living in accord with the divine commandments.[9]

It would appear, then, that classical Judaism's vision of the good life is at once very clear and almost infinitely complex. "To do good" is to live out all the commandments as the sages have interpreted them over the generations, combined with an attitude of piety and a loving acceptance of this rule of law. This is not an entirely inaccurate description, and it should not be dismissed. It is the most ancient and "native" response to this question implanted by the tradition in those who follow its ways, reflecting life as lived by those considered "religious" within the Jewish community. It especially accords with such a well-known dictum as "Be as careful with a minor commandment as a major one, for you do not know the true weight of the commandments"[10] and others in its spirit.

The problem with such a view is that is entirely dispiriting to discussions such as our own. All it would leave us to do is to wend our way through such a tome as Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*,

[7] Based on b. Shabbat 68b.

[8] On the development of this strategy in later Hasidism, cf. M. Piekarz in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism...Presented to Isaiah Tishby* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 617 ff.

[9] RASHI, ad loc.

[10] m. (=Mishnah) Avot 2:1.

or perhaps Joseph Caro's *Set Table*, and only after mastering these (one a listing of the biblical commandments; the other, the key code of religious law on a practical basis) would we be empowered to speak of Judaism's vision of the good. But much more seriously, of course, such a view also gives insufficient guidance to the religious Jew who has daily to make choices among the commandments, since no one can observe all the laws of God at the same time. What does God want of me?—to study Torah day and night or to work to support my family? What does God want of me when I see my people desecrating the name of God and Israel? Shall I fulfill "Openly reprove your neighbor" (Lev 19:17) or shall I say "all its path are peace" (Prov 3:17) and therefore opt for scholarly quiet and uninvolvement?

Fortunately our position is not quite so severe as that. *Halakhah* in Judaism always lives in tandem (and sometimes tension!) with *aggadah*, those narratives and teachings that constitute the non-legal portion of traditional wisdom. There we have many summary statements, re-formulated in almost every generation, of the "values of Judaism." There are numerous statements, and even compendia of statements, that allow one to go beyond the simple enumeration of commandments. One of the most famous of these from within the very Talmudic passage that first mentions the numbers of six hundred and thirteen commandments, should be quoted here:

> Rabbi Simlai expounded: Six hundred and thirteen commandments were spoken to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five prohibitions, corresponding to the days in the solar year, and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the limbs of man's body.
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> David came and reduced them to eleven, as it is written: "A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall sojourn in Your tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Your holy mountain? (1) He who walks uprightly, (2) works righteousness, (3) speaks truth in his heart; (4) he who has no slander upon his tongue, (5) nor does evil to his fellow, (6) nor takes up reproach against his neighbor, (7) in whose eyes a vile person is despised. But (8) he honors those who fear the Lord, (9) he swears oaths at his own

> expense and does not violate them; (10) he does not lend money at interest (11) or take bribes against the innocent. He that does these shall never be moved" (Ps. 15:1-4).
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> Isaiah came and reduced them to six, as it is written: "(1) He who walks righteously and (2) speaks uprightly, (3) who despises profiting from oppression (4) and shakes his hand loose from holding bribes, (5) who stops his ear from hearing of blood and (6) shuts his eyes from looking upon evil" (Is. 33:15-16).
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> Micah came and reduced them to three, as it is written: "It has been told to you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God" (Mic. 6:8).
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> Again came Isaiah and reduced them to two, as it is written: "Thus says the Lord: Keep justice and do righteousness" (Is. 56:1).
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> Amos came and reduced them to one: "For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek Me and live" (Am. 5:4). But to this Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac raised an objection: [Might this not be taken to mean] Seek me by observing the entire Torah and live? Rather it is Habakkuk who came and [properly] based them all on one, as it is written: "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4).[11]

The biblical language here is quite lofty in tone, using prophetic phrasing to point to what seems to be the "real meaning" of the religious life. But we should not permit the use of biblical language to divert our attention from the rabbinic origins of this passage. The passage in the Talmud that first codifies the number of six hundred thirteen commandments is essential for the later development of *halakhah*. The medieval discussions of the list of commandments, hence of which acts (or non-acts, such as faith in God!) are required by Torah, all depend upon this passage. Yet the Talmud itself responds to this numbering of the commandments by a series of attempts to get at the moral or religious

[11] b. Makkot 23b-24b.

essence of the *mitzvah* system. It is asking not "what are the things commanded?" but "what is the moral essence of the divine command?"

As lawyers, the rabbis were not generally fond of such broad and lofty statements. More typical of rabbinic language is the following formulation of "the highest Jewish values." I juxtapose it to the Makkot passage because it too seems to rise in protest against the quantification of divine command. Here the Mishnah lists those commandments that are without fixed measure ("the more the merrier," in other words). Joined to it is a list of observances so beloved by the human community as well as by God that they are claimed to be double in their form of reward. This passage is quoted in the daily prayer book and thus is familiar to any observant Jew:

> These are things which have no [prescribed] limit: the corner of the field [to be left for the poor], the first fruits [brought to the Temple], appearances [at the Temple on pilgrimage], bestowing kindness, and the study of Torah.
>
> These are things the fruits of which a person enjoys in this world while the principal remains for him in the world to come: honoring father and mother, bestowing kindness, coming early to the study-house morning and evening, hospitality to guest, visiting the sick, dowering [poor] brides, attending to the dead, devotion in prayer, and bringing peace between fellow-persons. But the study of Torah surpasses them all.[12]

The first of these two statements (the Makkot passage) clearly belongs to the realm of *aggadah*. While it refers to an ordering of commandments in various prophetic teachings, it does not seem to have any normative function. The second inhabits an intermediate status between *halakhah* and *aggadah*. While its Mishnaic language sounds like that of law, we would be hard pressed to claim it as a truly legal formulation of the highest values within the rabbinic tradition. But within *halakhah* proper there are also necessarily statements that prefer

[12] m. Peah 1:1.

one normative act over another. The well-known use of Lev 18:5 ("You shall live by them") to indicate that in most circumstances human life takes precedence over other commandments is perhaps the prime example. Halakhic authorities throughout the ages were also well aware that it is possible to be a "knave within the domain of Torah," that is, to technically fulfill all the demands of the law and still be a miserable human being, worthy of condemnation. As detailed as the law seemed to be, in itself it could not fully shape one into being a "good person." Thus the Torah contains certain passages that themselves demand that one go beyond the letter of the law. It is to two of these that I would like to turn our attention.

"Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord (Dt 6:18) is taken as a catch-all to determine behavior that is not specified elsewhere in the law. Here is the comment of Nahmanides, the thirteenth-century Catalonian sage who was certainly one the most respected Jewish personages in his era and who remains a major figure in any discussion of *halakhah:* Nahmanides is expounding on an earlier rabbinic teaching:

> "What is right and good" refers to compromise and [willingness] to go beyond the letter of the law. The intent of this is as follows. First Moses stated that you are to keep God's statutes and testimonies as commanded you; give thought as well to doing what is right and goodly in God's eyes, for God loves the right and the good. This is a basic rule. It was impossible that the Torah specify all aspects of a person's conduct with neighbors and fellows, all of a person's interactions, and all the ordinances of various countries and societies. But since many of them were mentioned, such as, "You shall not going about telling tales" (Lev 19:16); "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge" (ibid.18); "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (ibid.16); "You shall not curse the deaf" (ibid.15); "You shall stand up in the presence of the white-haired" (ibid.32)—and so on, the Torah goes on in a general way to say that in all

> matters we should do what is right and good, including compromise and going beyond the letter of the law.[13]

Compromise in legal cases, especially within the civil code, is not enjoined by the law itself. If the judges find for me, after all, then the full sum is mine and I have a right to demand it. But the rabbis realized (in days long before insurance) that litigation could ruin individuals and families, and thus they urged compromise in such cases as constituting "the right and the good." The same was true with going beyond the letter or, more literally, staying "within the line" of the law. There are situations when the right thing is for one to do other than assert one's full legal rights, and the decent person is to know when those times are.

The *hasid* or lover of God is defined by the Talmud as one who lives well within that line, doing and giving more than the law demands, both to God and to one's fellow. It is the heart's sensibility, trained, to be sure, by a lifetime of living within the law, that tells such a *hasid* when to do more. Just as the doors of inner prayer come to be more readily opened by a life of regular fixed prayer, so do the inner instincts of caring and generosity of spirit come to be more highly attuned by a life of daily concern for demands of the moral law. The constant training of that moral sensitivity is central to what Judaism views as piety or *hasidut*.

The next passage to which we turn is found a bit farther on in Deuteronomy, amid the prohibitions of divination and augury. There (18:13) the text says "You must be *tamim* with your God." The term *tamim*, sometimes translated here as "wholehearted," is the same word translated as "unblemished" in references to both priests and the animal sacrifices they offered. The verse will offer to Samson Raphael Hirsch, the key figure in nineteenth-century German-Jewish Orthodoxy, a chance to say some important things about the Jewish religious "ethos." The call to be *tamim* is a

[13] Commentary on the Torah ad loc. Translation adapted from that of C. Chavel.

> demand for the completeness of our devotion, the devoting of every phase, without exception, of our being to God. This is the most direct result of our consciousness of the "oneness" of God, the realization of the *'am segulah*, mission, the mission of a nation belonging exclusively, in every phase, to God. We are not to cut the slightest particle of any phase of our life away from God; we are to be with God with our complete life, with every fibre of it. Thereby the whole of the heathen attitude toward life depicted in the preceding verses is banned from the Jewish sphere. God, the sole Director of our fate and Guide of our deeds, alone decides our future; His satisfaction is the sole criterion by which we are to decide what to do and what to refrain from doing. Not blind chance, the Moloch "luck," rules over our lives or the lives of our children...the *tamim* is so completely engrossed in God that he lives entirely in the thought of doing his duty all the time; he leaves the rest, including his own entire future, to God.[14]

While Hirsch does get a bit "preachy" (here as frequently), he shows us another occasion where a verse in the Torah carries us far beyond its seeming intent. *Tamim* here really means "whole" or "unblemished" in the life of faith, going far beyond the specific prohibitions of the immediate context. The knowing reader of Scripture in the Hebrew will immediately be carried back to the Bible's first use of *tamim*, that which God says to Abraham in Genesis 17:1: "Walk before me and be *tamim*." The contemporary translators' (JPS, RSV, Jerusalem Bible) "blameless" is inadequate in this case; there is nothing negative about *tamim*. I rather prefer the King James' "perfect." Of course this is the language introducing Abraham to the commandment of circumcision; it is the (paradoxical) perfection of his body that he is about to undertake, as an outward sign of the moral or religious being he is to become. *Tamim* as "perfect" would be rather close to *'shalem-*

[14] The Hirsch Humash, vol. 5, ad loc. Minor changes in style are my own.

shalom as "whole" or complete." This is as close as we come to the possibility of a person's "being" as well as "doing" good in the Bible.[15]

But Abraham is very much to the point in this discussion. He lives before the commandments are given, and therefore would seemingly have to lead a religious life without them.[16] Might his example then be able to tell us what it means to be a good person without going through the entire list of the commandments? A great deal is made in Christian Scripture and tradition, ranging from Paul to Kierkegaard, of Abraham as the ideal figure of faith, living before the law was given. But the rabbis are aware of the Christian claim, and therefore the Talmud insists, based on Genesis 26:5 ("inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings") that "Abraham our Father observed the entire Torah"[17] even before it was given. They go so far as to say that he knew every detail of the law, even the clearly rabbinic device for preparing Sabbath-food on a festival, a matter that admittedly has not a shred of biblical basis. The point is that for the rabbis there is no piety outside the law, and they will not allow our own patriarch to be used to show otherwise.

Despite the rabbis' claim of our ancestor, however, he remains important as a model for the religious life, and not just as a faithful follower of the law. Throughout Jewish history Abraham is the ideal type of piety, much as Moses is of learning or Solomon is of wisdom. The less naive among later writers, while not openly challenging the rabbinic claim, set it aside, to return to the pastoral image of the patriarch who lived as close to moral and devotional perfection as human life seems to permit. Here is Maimonides, in a famous passage from his *Guide for the Perplexed*:

[15] Cf. also Job 1:1, where the hero of that book is described as *tam we-yashar*, "perfect and upright". If we want a biblical description of a "good man," that verse and its parallels in the Psalter and Proverbs are key passages.

[16] Cf. my discussion in *Devotion and Commandment: the Faith of Abraham in the Hasidic Imagination* (Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1989).

[17] b. Yoma 28b.

And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, may He be exalted, while outwardly he is with people, in the sort of way described by the poetical parables that have been invented for these notions: "I sleep but my heart wakes; the voice of my beloved knocks" (Cant 5:2) and so on. I do not say that this is the rank of all the prophets; but I do say that this is the rank of Moses our Teacher...This was also the rank of the patriarchs, the result of whose nearness to Him, may He be exalted, was that His name became known to the world through them: "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob...this is My name forever" (Ex 3:15). Because of the union of their intellects through apprehension of Him, it came about that He made a lasting covenant with each of them. Also the providence of God watching over them and over their posterity was great.

Withal they were occupied with governing people, increasing their fortune, and endeavoring to acquire property. Now this is to my mind a proof that they did these actions with their limbs only, while their intellects were constantly in His presence, may He be exalted. It also seems to me that the fact that these four were in a permanent state of extreme perfection in the eyes of God, and that His providence watched over them continually even while they were engaged in increasing their fortune—I mean while they tended their cattle, did agricultural work, and governed their household—was necessarily brought about by the circumstance that in all these actions their end was to come near to Him, may He be exalted, and how near! For the end of their efforts

during their life was to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God.[18]

This of course is the *vita contemplativa*, descriptions of which are to be found in the devotional classics of all our traditions. What is particularly interesting here is the combination of contemplative and active life, or the way in which the patriarchs go on about their this-worldly work while their minds are wholly with God.

The figure of Abraham and his religious life was especially inspiring to the Hasidic masters, who saw in him a model for their own "spiritual" fulfillment of the commandments. In addition to living in accord with the ways of the law, they wanted to find the inner root of each divine command, which they were quite sure also collectively made up the inner root of the human soul. By devotion to the commandments in a spiritually aware way, they would come to do what they saw Abraham as having done. The would discover the entire Torah as it is inscribed within their own souls and would thus come to know the commandments as a deep inner map of the spiritual journey that God has given to those who truly seek. The word *mitzvah* ("commandment"), they taught, is actually the name of God in half-hidden, half-revealed form. It is by turning in to the *mitzvah* (which they sometimes derived from the Aramaic *tsavta* or "togetherness") that one comes to meet God. This emphasis on the "inner commandments," accompanying and enriching their outward fulfillment, is a highly characteristic path within the Jewish mystical tradition.

What kind of person is it the tradition is trying to create? What is its vision of the good life as it is to be lived by Jews who follow it? We have had a glimpse of Abraham, the ideal type of the *hasid*, loving God and always ready to do even more than the law demands. We should join to him the figure of Moses, teacher and prophet; for the rabbis the idea of the original sage and master. If the Abraham-ideal is one of pastoral simplicity, the image of Moses is one of student-scholar-teacher, the *talmid hakham* or wise disciple as leader of the people. It was such scholar-sages of the law whom traditional Jewish society most came to venerate over the centuries, people about whom countless tales

[18] 3:54, Pines translation, pp. 623f.

were told to show that in every detail of their lives they embodied the way of Torah, especially in its ethical ramifications.[19]

The *hasid* and the sage stand in interesting tension with one another. One is a potentially extreme figure, jumping forward to do more than the law requires. The *hasid* loves God; that love is the single center of his religious life. For the sake of this love he is ever ready for martyrdom; sometimes one has the sense that he even seeks it out. Purity of devotion and boundless giving are his hallmarks. The sage is a figure of significantly greater sobriety. He will not act without consulting the sources, without seeking precedent in the generations that have come before. The sage imitates God in loving both the Torah and the people Israel, carefully balancing these two loves as he tries to show Israel how to live the life of Torah. His own love of God is quiet and understated, realized mostly in this life of *imitatio Dei*, "walking in His ways," as it is said in Hebrew. In a classic moment of confrontation between these two ideals, the Talmudic discussion of Sabbath-law notes that: "One who kills [life-threatening] snakes or scorpions on the Sabbath, the spirit of the *hasidim* is not pleased with him." The Talmud adds, thanks to an editor with just a bit of a sardonic touch: "The spirit of the sage is not pleased with such *hasidim*."[20]

With room for some notable exceptions, I think it fair to say that the spirit of the sages triumphed in Jewish history. Commitment to the rule of law became a chief virtue within this tradition, one strangely upheld by the large number of Jewish attorneys, legal scholars, and judges throughout the Western world who may not practice our own native legal traditions but nevertheless hold fast to the broader ideal. (In the modern world, of course, it was often the power of law that saved Jews from persecution and upheld the protection of minority rights that were so important to them.) Judiciousness and sobriety, the virtues of the judge, are very much those of the pious Jew. Spontaneity and self-expression are to be held in check until one sees whether the expression is appropriate to the dignity of one who proudly upholds an ancient law,

[19] Cf. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, (Jerusalem, Magnes, 1975) and Gershom Scholem, "Three Types of Jewish Piety" in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 38 (1969).

[20] b.Shabbat 121b.

until one knows whether there is any danger of being misunderstood, until one sees whether the expression will help or harm the ever-endangered house of Israel.

There is a stoic influence to be noted in the mores of Judaism, one that comes to penetrate Jewish ethics through both of the two great contacts Judaism had with Greek civilization. In the first two centuries of the Common Era, when the Jewish-Christian sects eventually crystallized into a new religion that was deeply Hellenistic in both mythos and ethos, emerging rabbinic Judaism managed to maintain a relatively more purely Semitic mythic structure; but in ethos it too became a part of the broadly Hellenistic philosophic world. The very figure of the sage himself, and his way of knowing God through an understanding of ancient texts, has been seen as belonging, *mutatis mutandis*, to the intellectual world so extensively developed by Alexandria and all it represented. The moral teachings offered by these sages, recorded in the pages of Mishnah Avot and cognate sources, also reflect a good deal of Hellenistic school-wisdom only slightly dressed up in Jewish garb. The second contact of Judaism with the Greeks, mediated chiefly through the philosophy and ethics of Islam in the early Middle Ages, greatly reinforced an already somewhat developed stoic point of view. This will be clear if one opens almost any page of Bahya Ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Hearts*, perhaps the greatest moral treatise of medieval Jewry, written in Arabic in eleventh-century Spain. Patience, equanimity, and self-control are high on the list of virtues in this and the many works that followed it. There is a passion in the love of God (especially in the later and Kabbalah-inspired treatises), but this passion is to be given proper expression by the love of His creatures, by walking in His ways by following the counsel of the sages.

A part of this enshrining of sobriety as a virtue is a strong sense of the ongoing battle every person fights with *yetser ha-ra'*, the human inclination toward evil. Even for the rabbis, it appears that the two *yetsarim* (moral inclinations) are not quite balanced in the human being, the negative force naturally having something of the upper hand. The fact that human instincts and passions are both real and powerful is not something that Jewish moralists have sought to deny. But the reality of a drive does not make for its goodness or even its permissibility. *The law is there as God's gift to help one achieve the self-control needed in order to become a more perfect and whole vessel for the service of God.*

In this area, I might add, the traditional ethos of rabbinic and later Judaism is sharply at odds with the contemporary popular post-Freudian tendency (very much not that of Freud himself!) to accept and affirm every aspect of our inner selves. The clearest example that occurs to me is in the treatment of anger and aggression. Our aggressive drives, in the rabbinic view, are part of our *yetser ha-ra'*, that libidinal energy reserve which may be called the "evil" inclination, but which they also knew full well to be vital to our survival and to the propagation of the species. Aggression runs deep in all of human existence; the task with which we are faced is that of finding proper channels for expression of this aggressive drive. Anger, the most ordinary and readily available expression of aggression, is universally recognized by Jewish ethicists as a bad outlet. Anyone who "lets off steam" in an aggressive outburst against another human being is committing the ultimate double sin of "lessening the divine image" in both the receiver and the giver of that anger. Traditional moralists will urge us to convert the energy behind that anger into virtue, perhaps using it to defend the faith or to reprove the wicked. But such reproof, they hasten to add, cannot be offered in anger. There is no greater act of love than that of seeking to bring a fellow-human back into relationship with God. One cannot engage in such work until one has "uplifted" rage, or "sweetened it in its root," in the Kabbalistic formulation.

This work, and much of the religious living that goes with it, can only be achieved in humility, a virtue not much spoken of in our contemporary world. Ultimately I believe the prophet Micah was most right: He was the one who reduced the commandments to three: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before your God." This statement of virtue is one that preserves the best of the ancient Hebrew moralistic tradition. Its ancient roots in Judaism are widely seen in the Psalter, whence it also came to have a key role in the teachings of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. I would like to see it take the place it deserves in the encounter among our three sister-faiths and in the activities undertaken in the spirit of such encounter. I therefore close by quoting a few words from a lovely essay on humility by our teacher Martin Buber:

> The humble man lives in each being and knows each being's manner and virtue. Since no one is to him "the other," he knows from

within that none lacks some hidden value; knows that "there is no man who does not have his hour."...

"God does not look on the evil side" said one zaddik. "How should I dare to do so?"

He who lives with others according to the mystery of humility can condemn no one. "He who passes sentence on a man passes it on himself."

He who separates himself from the sinner departs in guilt...Only living with the other is justice...

He who lives with others in this way realizes with his deed the truth that all souls are one; for each is a spark of the original soul, and the whole of the original soul is in each.

THEORIA ⇨ PRAXIS

HOW JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS CAN TOGETHER MOVE FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

LEONARD SWIDLER

PEETERS

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