ZEN JUDAISM

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Abstract

Zen Judaism is a frank reflection on the tensions between reason and faith in today's context of knowledge, and on the need to inject Zen-like meditation into Judaism.

This work also treats some issues in ethics and theodicy.

This book is drawn from the author's larger work ***Logical and Spiritual Reflections***.

Author's note

Wise men think out their thoughts;

fools proclaim them. (H. Heine[1])

I have no desire or intent to weaken or destroy Judaism; if anything, quite the contrary, I wish to strengthen and save it. But I regard that objective facts and rigorous logic must imperatively be taken into consideration; they cannot just be ignored, as some try to do. Some retreat is often necessary; but retreat is not defeat. There is much to be gained by adopting a "Zen attitude" in the face of this necessary adaptation to reality. That is to say, by looking on unpleasant truths in the way a meditator looks upon change and disturbance. Unperturbed, cool, without resistance, with equanimity.

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[1] From *Gendanken und Einfalle* (quotation found in the Internet at Beliefnet.com). I insert this quotation in anticipation of criticism that may justly be leveled against me for writing this piece, which is a mixture of logic, science, Judaism and Buddhism. I should perhaps add these personal confessions: admit my lack of position of authority in some university, yeshiva or Zen monastery; my lack of broad fame and acceptance as an academic or writer; my lack of scholarship, Talmudic knowledge or meditative height. I am just a sincere seeker honestly sharing his thoughts.

Contents

1.	God and Creation	7
2.	Torah and faith	13
3.	Biblical text and commentary	23
4.	Tradition vs. innovation	39
5.	The rabbinical estate	47
6.	Judaic illogic	53
7.	Jewish meditation	67
8.	Enlightenment without idolatry	79
9.	Good people	87
10.	A world of mercy	93
11.	Understanding injustice	97
12.	Forgiveness	105
13.	Actions and reactions	111
Appendixes		
	1. Round numbers in Torah statistics	119
	2. Prayer in uncertainty	151
Addenda (2009)		169
	Logic in Defense of Zionism	183
	The Chanukah lights miracle	197
References		209

1. God and Creation

The idea of God. The existence of God is suggested by the existence of the individual soul each of us intuits within his or her cognitions and volitions, as well as by various intellectual arguments[2]. The idea of God is philosophically reasonable, as *an extrapolation from and explanation of* the intuited fact of soul – for just as the scattered instances of mind and matter logically require some monistic unification, so do the scattered instances of soul; and indeed, these several unifications need in turn to eventually be unified together.

The important insight to have, here, is that the *personal* soul, with powers of consciousness, will and valuation, cannot be explained by reference to an *impersonal* spiritual Ground of

[2] Described and discussed in previous works of mine. See mainly: *Judaic Logic*, chapters 2:4 & 14:1-2, and addenda 10 & 11. *Buddhist Illogic*, chapter 10. *Phenomenology*, chapter 9. *Volition and Allied Causal concepts*, chapters 1:1, 2:1-4 and 15.2-3. *Meditations*, chapters 5, 6, 8 and 33.

Being, devoid of similar and greater powers of consciousness, will and valuation, which is the Buddhist atheistic thesis, and even less to an exclusively materialist postulate.

The idea of a living, personal God, with presumably extreme degrees of these same powers (i.e. omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection), would seem a logical inference from our own finite existences. It is more than a mere extrapolation – it is an explanation, without which the introspectively evident fact of a personal soul remains surprising and unexplained.[3]

The idea of God seems perfectly reasonable and inevitable to whoever clearly reflects on the miracles of existence, of variety and change, of consciousness, and of causation and volition, in this world. Without such fascination, i.e. if one dimwittedly takes all that for granted and is not surprised by all of it, one is intellectually bound to some sort of atheism. Theism (i.e. monotheism, belief in God) is a product of metaphysical amazement.

If one asks enough questions and looks for credible answers, one is likely to believe in God. Disbelief depends on keeping one's mind somewhat closed to the issue, i.e. on a sort of enforced dumbness.

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[3] Note the similarity and difference between this argument for God, and the one Descartes proposed.

The idea of Creation. Justifying the idea of God does not by itself justify the idea of Creation as such, and much less a particular view (like that of Genesis) of the sequence of events involved in creation. Philosophically, Creation is a separate issue, requiring we advance additional evidence and arguments. In this context, we would first of all argue that, just as we humans have cognitive and volitional power over matter, so by analogy or extrapolation does the presumed greater soul that is God have such powers and that to a much higher degree.

This is an argument in favor of the concept of Divine creation, i.e. of the conceivability of God having such power over matter. But it is not of course alone logically sufficient to establish the fact of Divine creation. On the other hand, the insufficiency of this argument to prove creation does not disprove it, either.

Moreover, the analogy is imperfect, because whereas we can only rearrange existing matter in various ways, we presume God to have created matter *ex nihilo* (or at least from non-matter). However, the said imperfection in analogy may be explained away by suggesting that individual souls are too small and weak to produce matter, though they are capable of mental creations (imagination), whereas the universal soul of God is grand and powerful enough to produce matter as well as mind. In causal logic terms: a complete cause may cause effects that a partial cause cannot.

We could also argue that in every little act of human (or animal) volition, some degree of creation is involved. That is, the act of willing may be conceived as the human spirit moving matter by injecting new energy into it. Such energy input may be regarded as equivalent to creation, since ultimately energy and matter are one. In this perspective, the great creation of the material world by God may be conceived by analogy from the little creative acts involved in our everyday will.[4]

A further argument we might propose to buttress the idea of creation would be Monism. This philosophy is based on the logical need for an ultimate unity between the substances or domains constituting the world of our experience, namely matter, mind and soul. Granting such basic unity, the ontological distance between God (as the common ground of all souls) and perceived matter and mind is considerably reduced, making creation more acceptable to reason.

We can furthermore adduce the observed fact of impermanence of material and mental phenomena in support of the hypothesis of creation. How so? Impermanence does not of course logically imply creation, but it suggests it somewhat if we admit that underlying phenomenal impermanence is the permanence of the spiritual realm. This refers to the permanence of the spiritual substance our

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[4] For a detailed analysis of the nature and mechanics of will, see my work *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*.

individual souls are made of, i.e. it refers to God, the great root Soul, rather than to us humans as individuated spirits.

If impermanent things emerge from the Permanent, the latter might be said to be the ground or cause of the former. This causal relation may be postulated as one of creation, if we consider that the eternal universal Soul has (like us and more so) *a personality*, with powers of cognition, volition and valuation, as earlier argued.

Two acts of faith. Howbeit, both the successive ideas of God and Creation still depend on faith. The preceding arguments in their favor, and any other similar reasons we might propose, only constitute inductive building blocks; they are not enough to be declared incontrovertible proof. Such absolute proof seems inconceivable for limited intellects like ours – only God could conceivably know for sure that He exists and He created the rest of the world.

This can and should be freely admitted by all advocates of these monotheistic ideas, to preempt any impression their opponents might give that lack of full proof is disproof. For advocates of atheism often use this fallacy to trick the gullible, suggesting that since monotheism cannot be definitively proved, the opposite thesis must be true. Such argument ignores or discards the fact that atheism is equally impossible to definitively prove!

As for the in-between posture of agnosticism, it is not unrespectable, since both monotheism and atheism are based on some measure of faith. But suspension of judgment is not the only posture reason can recommend, for then almost everything we claim as knowledge would be relegated to a similar intellectual limbo. Human beings are required by their natural condition to make choices and take action; if they truly avoided doing so, they would simply die out. Thus, agnosticism does not actually occur in practice – people who theoretically go for it must still daily go one way or the other (in the way of believers or that of atheists), whether they admit they do or not.

2. Torah and faith

The Torah account. The accounts of God and Creation given in the Torah (Jewish Bible), or other religious documents, are not guaranteed by the previously indicated philosophical arguments and acts of faith. Belief in these religious accounts requires *additional acts of faith*, because they involve additional descriptive details not included in the barebones account proposed by mere theology.

Thus, it is rationally quite possible to believe in God and Creation, without necessarily disbelieving in the Big Bang time line, or in Evolution of Species, and other such more modern scientific theories that go against the literal interpretation of the Biblical story of the world and humanity. Similarly, there is bound to be some divergence between the moral, social and spiritual laws promulgated in holy books, and those that reason might find convincing.

Everything must be considered on a case-by-case basis, without prejudice and with an open mind. This does not mean

that reason will invariably disagree with faith. Our holy books, transmitted to us by our forefathers, are full of wisdom and good, and have it in them to continue to inspire us for all generations. The spiritual poverty of the secular, their profound materialism and the hopeless narrowness of their life perspectives, is evident. But reason must still be allowed to assess the situation and have its say, and even on occasion disagree. It is then up to individual to make his or her choices and take the implied risks, one way or the other.

The traditional argument that Divine revelation is guaranteed by the fact that it was witnessed by Moses and prophets, or by the people of Israel assembled at the foot of Sinai and in other times and locations, or by later Sages – this is of course *a circular argument*. We (common folk today) are still required to take on faith something someone else claims (or is claimed) to have experienced; this is second-hand evidence, not first-hand for each one of us. Of course, too, it remains possible that if we do not believe (on faith), we will be made to pay the dire consequences (either during this life or in the thereafter); hence, each person has to decide what to believe.

Torah is of course in its entirety essential to Judaism. To put the Torah even partially in doubt as here done is understandably regarded by many as heresy. No one likes to be branded a heretic, but to ignore (disregard, discard) evident facts and logical arguments is not an acceptable posture. It is acceptable to have faith in something unproven

(i.e. not proven to be), but faith in things disproven (i.e. proven not to be) by experience and/or reason is difficult to justify. One has to retain objectivity and good judgment at all times; that is our dignity and honor as human beings. God surely respects and does not resent love of truth and intellectual integrity.

Perhaps the solution to the modern problem of a widening gap between the Torah account of nature and that of secular science is to adopt a Platonic Idealist posture, and say that the concrete earthly Torah is an imperfect but still valuable reflection of an ideal "heavenly Torah". This would imply that the prophets, and particularly Moses, perceived the heavenly Torah all right, but when they tried to put it in writing here below, they tended to mix in some of the cultural beliefs of their time and place. No conscious attempt to add to the Torah was involved, but simply a natural disposition of all human beings to discourse in terms of the sensibilities and categories of their milieu and historical period.

This perspective already exists to some extent in Judaism, but it may need to be taken more radically if we are to both frankly and gracefully acknowledge scientific discoveries and advances, and yet retain the moral and spiritual – and even ritual – essentials of Judaism. The same approach can be used to explain and transcend Talmudic errors of fact. Other religions can similarly argue, and likewise adapt to humanity's changing knowledge context.

It is not enough to say, as some do[5], that religion and science are two separate domains, one dealing with moral and spiritual issues and the other with experienced events and natural laws, for this approach does not sufficiently focus on the psychological difficulties involved. A believer in the literal Torah has a hard time separating the claims regarding nature and history in it from its moral and spiritual message. A deeper rationale is required to permit *critical thought with a good conscience*.

Moreover, I very much doubt that we can consistently keep the realms of 'is' and 'ought' so far apart, or that it is wise to try to. The fact of the matter is that our ethical beliefs are strongly dependent on our alethic beliefs. What we think we ought to do depends considerably on how we perceive and conceive ourselves and the world around us. These two domains of human interest are related and the study of their precise relationships exists and is called deontic logic or deontology.

For this reason, seemingly purely moral, spiritual or ritual matters may to a more modern mind seem unconvincing. The practice of animal sacrifices is a case in point. Maimonides rightly expressed doubt as to the value of their resumption in the future. If we examine the history of religions, we find such practices to be commonplace in many different cultures, such as India or South America. This sort of individual or collective worship using animals was probably inherited from

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5 For instance, Gould in *Rocks of Ages*.

our common prehistoric ancestors. Various superstitious beliefs are no doubt at least subconsciously involved in it.

Another practice within Biblical Judaism that seems to have shamanistic roots deep down in history is the set of rites (described in Leviticus, *tazria-metsora*) used to clear the "plague of leprosy" in people or in clothes and homes. Such ancient and obviously outdated practices can surely be questioned in a scientific perspective, even if they are religious in content rather than naturalistic. Were we to encounter such an affliction, we would simply identify it as a fungus (or whatever), and find a material antidote for it. Thus, it is not accurate to depict the problem as a simple is-ought dichotomy.

Poetic transmissions of wisdom. Some parts of the Torah can seemingly be read literally, but not all. In view of the serious discrepancies between stories like those of Creation and of the Flood and corresponding scientific and historic accounts, we must learn to not to read such passages of the Torah literally. The Rabbis insist on such literal interpretation, and build their whole system of conception of the world on this assumption. But we are logically forced to view them henceforth as *poetic inventions*. They were freely composed, at some time(s), by some human being(s), with the intent to give concrete form to some abstract belief and to teach some lesson.

The poets concerned expressed what, to their minds, at the time when they told or wrote down the stories, seemed like a likely scenario, or at least one that (though perhaps partly fictional) served to illustrate the teachings they wished to transmit. There was no doubt an accumulation of beliefs over time, i.e. a handing down from generation to generation of parts of the story, which were then echoed and fleshed out, until the story acquired the shape we know. In fact, the process of elaboration did not end with the writing down of the Torah (whenever that happened) but continued with more developments and embellishments in the Midrash, in the Zohar, and so forth.

This is mythical discourse, found in every culture. It does not have to be taken as literally true, but as indicative of some more abstract truths. Thus, the important point in the story of the Creation is not the precise narrative given in the text, but the claim that God created the universe as a whole and mankind in particular. The scientific discoveries of the Big Bang, of the 13.7 billion years' existence and evolution of the world since then, of the 4.5 billion years age of the Earth, of all the species of life that have arisen on it in the last 4 billion years, of the very recent evolution of man-like species, perhaps some 2 million years ago – none of these scientific discoveries and theories logically displaces the claim to God and Creation.

Similarly, the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood, and many more – all contain *timeless and universal*

moral lessons, about humility (not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge), about murder ('am I my Brother's keeper?'), about sin and its punishment (the generation of the Flood), and so forth. They remain *essentially* true, even if not *literally* true. Compare for instance the Biblical idea of the primordial taboo Tree of Knowledge to the Buddhist doctrine that at the root of Man's plight is a delusional grabbing at a superficial sort of knowledge that is in fact the essence of ignorance.

Concrete narratives are usually more emotionally touching and inspiring than dry abstract exposés. Even after years of reading and rereading some of the stories in the Torah and the Nakh, I still find myself often deeply touched and moved. Tears of sadness and joy come to my eyes as the Shunammite lady who has just lost her young son comes to the prophet Elisha for help (2 Kings 4:8-37). Again and again, every Purim, the story of Esther fires the full range of my emotions. Such stories depict for us what beautiful human beings are and how they behave. How would we know the spiritual possibilities open to us, otherwise? We rarely if ever meet such inspiring people in real life.

So long as we fear to abandon literal readings of the Torah (or Christian Bible, or Koran, etc.) when science makes it logically necessary, we are stuck in a 'fundamentalist' universe that is bound to cause conflict and pain. With a more open mind, we can read our holy book as poetry and learn from it the wisdom it is really meant to transmit.

The practice of faith. The term 'faith' is understood as referring primarily to belief – generally, to a belief that goes *beyond* the recommendations of reason, and in some cases *against* those recommendations.

Faith that merely goes over and above reason, or dares to fill gaps in knowledge that reason leaves behind, is reasonable – i.e. still within the bounds of rationality in a larger sense. For example, to have faith in God and Creation is not antithetical to reason; for though reason does not prove these beliefs, it does not disprove them either.

But faith contrary to reason is in a more feeble epistemological position. Of course, reason can err, and so it is not entirely unthinkable to adopt anti-rational postures. But, though it is empirically true that reason does occasionally err, it does not follow that reason is very likely to be erring in the particular case at hand. For example, disbelieving that our planet has a history of some 4.5 billion year, and that animal species have evolved during that time, is stretching faith a bit too far.

Faith is generally considered a virtue, in religion; it earns one spiritual credit. That is because, like any virtue, like any source of spiritual gain or advance, it draws one (or is believed to draw one) *closer to God* (however conceived by that faith). To have faith is comparable to sacrifice – it is sacrificing one's intellectual carefulness or incredulity to some extent. It is also an act of humility and modesty.

Religious faith signifies a set or system of *beliefs*, i.e. a voluntary posture of the cognitive faculty in various regards. But it implies more than that. It also implies a set of *attitudes and intentions*, i.e. a positioning and orientation of the faculty of volition; and moreover, it implies a complex of *emotional ties*. And of course, *specific thoughts and actions* emerge from these preconditions.

That is to say, to have faith (e.g. in God[6]) is not merely to engage one's cognitive faculty in a certain direction, but also more broadly involves one's volitional and emotional faculties. All three aspects of the human psyche are enlisted – cognition, will and valuation. To take on a faith is to subject oneself to practical demands on all these fronts.

Within Judaism, for instance, this is perhaps implicit in the statement[7]: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5) – if we interpret "your heart" (Heb. *levavcha*) as referring to valuations, "your soul" (Heb. *nafshecha*) as referring to cognitions, and "your might" (Heb. *meodecha*) as referring to volitions. "All" (of your heart, soul and might) is meant to stress the need for consistency in all one's pursuits.

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[6] To give another example: for Buddhists, the basic act of faith would relate to the possibility of liberation from the wheel of karma.

[7] Which is, of course, part of the crucial *Shema Israel* prayer. Other interpretations than those proposed here are also found in the tradition.

Taking this declaration of faith upon himself, the Jew (and similarly for the Jewess, of course) resolves that his heart will throb with Jewish values and concerns; that his soul's attention will turn towards observations and intellectual studies compatible with and relevant to love of God; and that he will use his physical, mental, and spiritual powers in efforts appropriate to those ends.

But this should not be viewed as a call to lie to oneself or to others – or to God. Or to twist the truth, or ignore facts and arguments that are obviously (or just apparently, even) relevant and credible. Honesty surely remains a must. Faith is comparable to a leap into empty space – such a leap can be courageous, but it can also be foolish. One should find the golden mean, in this as in all other things.

Note in any case that it is possible to doggedly practice *mitzvot* (religious prescriptions) even while not really believing in their Divine source. It is not my purpose here to turn Jews away from practice of any of the mitzvot. Every man or woman is responsible for his or her own choices. Don't blame your choices on me.

3. Biblical text and commentary

On Biblical commentaries. Looking at the commentaries of the *Midrash* or of different rabbinical personalities (Talmudic or later) relative to each passage of the Torah (or *Chumash*, i.e. the Five Books of Moses) or other parts of the *Tanakh* (Jewish Bible as a whole), it seems evident that each of them is *imaginatively filling narrative gaps or proposing resolutions of apparent contradictions in the text*.

Often, the language used in the Biblical text is sufficiently ambiguous that many interpretations are possible even of the primary story line, even before any fleshing out with additional details is attempted. This is called *Haggadah*, story-telling.

The different linguistic interpretations, story embellishments or explanations of inconsistencies or difficulties are not necessarily harmonious with each other, although each rabbi tries to form an internally consistent line of reasoning (called a *shitah*). Yet all are equally respected and included as true in

the tradition; this mental gymnastic being justified by saying that "the Torah has seventy facets" (without considering the epistemological and ontological implications of such a proposition).

So long as they seem credible[8] in various ways (e.g. homiletically inspiring or psychologically revealing), they are traditionally accepted as possible truths, and thence as true in some way, i.e. as some facet of the whole truth. They must of course also be compatible with Jewish doctrine and values. Thus, for instance, the heroes must be depicted in a good light; even if they are shown as momentarily failing, there must be a moral to that failing.

However, from a neutral epistemological point of view, all such commentaries are simply *speculations formed around a limited and static database*, viz. the given written text. According to inductive logic, these commentaries, being all reasonably consistent with that given data and internally consistent, are all indeed *equally conceivable hypotheses*. But that does *not* make them necessarily true, however conceivable they seem. And it does *not* imply them to be necessarily mutually compatible.

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[8] Credibility is of course very relative to one's context of knowledge and understanding. There are Midrashic commentaries that I find hilariously fanciful, though I well imagine that to some people they seem or have seemed (especially in earlier times) quite credible.

If we limit our judgment to the written text, and suppose that the different speculations (or conjectures) were well formulated, there is no way for us to choose between them or validate or invalidate any of them. However, if we refer to logic, historical evidence, scientific developments and philosophical considerations, we may be able to challenge or eliminate some or all of them, and even indeed in some cases put in doubt or reject the database itself (i.e. the core claims in the written text).

Logic does not admit of relativity as a realistic principle. If the explanatory formulas proposed by different rabbis are in conflict, they may not be considered all strictly speaking true side by side. They may be considered equally or variously *uncertain*, but not equally *true*. Contradiction (if, of course, contradiction is indeed present in a given case) is logically unacceptable. This principle of the absoluteness of eventual truth is unfortunately not always clearly admitted in rabbinical epistemology.

Moreover, epistemology must ask the rabbis who or where they got their information *from*. Sometimes, the historical sources are evident and known. But in most cases, previously unknown information has suddenly appeared! If this information was never mentioned in writing by previous commentators for hundreds or even thousands of years, how did the later commentators get it? It is hinted that an oral transmission has preserved the information since Sinai. But there is no proof of such claims; they are therefore arbitrary

assertions, just say-so. *An unproven principle cannot be used as an incontrovertible proof of other unproven propositions*.

Additionally, when a commentator interprets a Torah passage, his comments sometimes have little to do with the text itself. The text is in such cases (i.e. often, but not always) used more as a pretext or springboard for a digression. The connection between the text and the commentary is more one of association of ideas than one of causality. Yet, once made – even if this comment is not directly relevant or logically appropriate to the text, even if it is incoherent nonsense – the comment is dogmatically assumed to be essential and irrefutable. In this way, the text loses its original simplicity and clarity and becomes surrounded by an immovable crust of commentary.

Moreover, individual commentators bring their personal mind-set to their interpretations. They all of course have in common: love of God, the Torah, the Jews and Eretz Israel, and contempt for the enemies of these values. But, for instance, whereas Rashi tends to appeal to miracles more often than logically necessary, the Ramban (who admittedly wrote more than a century and a half later) is comparatively far more analytic and rationalistic in his explications of events.

For example, Rashi. Without doubt, the most prolific, influential and loved commentator of the Bible (and the Talmud) has been R. Shlomo Yitzhaki, known as Rashi

(France, 1040-1105). Most of his commentaries are indeed illuminating, but many (if taken literally) must be regarded as fantastical and antiquated. Consider, for instances, some of his assertions in relation to the first chapter of Genesis.

Commenting on the exclusive use of the Divine name 'Elokim' in this chapter (which name is traditionally associated with Justice – in contrast to the four-letter ineffable name 'YKVK', which is considered as standing for the attribute of Mercy, and which only appears as of the second chapter), Rashi says that God first created the world on the basis of strict justice, and then decided it could not endure on that basis alone, and so introduced mercy. This sounds like a neat explanation, until one asks the question: is it conceivable that an omniscient Creator would engage in trial and error? Surely, He would know in advance what was going to work and what wouldn't! So such an explanation is logically untenable[9].

Further on, Rashi claims that the sun and moon were originally created of equal size, but then the moon complained that it was not bigger than the sun, so it was instead made smaller. This could be taken as an object lesson, to teach us humility. But as regards the actual history of these astronomical objects, while it might have been conjectured like that in Rashi's day, it is known for sure to be false today. The moon was from its formation a very much smaller entity

[9] An alternative explanation is offered by Sforno (Italy, c. 1475 – 1550), who associates the Tetragrammaton with eternity.

that the sun. But furthermore, are we to believe that the moon had a preference and a way to express it? Was the moon endowed with consciousness, choice and speech? In antiquity, people believed this and assigned godly status to the orbs; but if Rashi had been omniscient (as some effectively believe) he should have known better.

Next, Rashi claims that the stars were created as satellites to the moon, to console it for its loss of status due to its shrinking. Leaving aside the ascription, here again, of human emotions to inanimate matter – we must point out that the stars are today known to be enormously bigger (and much older) than the moon. Some stars are so enormous that our sun (a star itself) is a mere speck of dust in comparison; all the more so, the moon (which is itself a speck of dust compared to the sun). The reason the stars appear smaller is simply that they are much further away. Rashi evidently based his beliefs on mere naked eye observation of the sky; he had no special knowledge.

And so forth – we could go on and on, showing up the inaccuracies and absurdities in many of Rashi's, and indeed other commentators', comments on this passage of the Bible, and many others. A whole book of comments could be written on this; but I will not here pursue the matter, considering that every educated and honest reader is quite capable of doing the job without my help.

> Note however that, although Judaism teaches us to ask questions, it does not appreciate overly insistent

> questioning. We may dig, but not too deeply. Faith and simplicity of spirit are recommended – that is, naivety is enjoined, so as to avoid embarrassing challenges or criticisms. If one does insist on credible answers, one is effectively suspected of moral failings. This is an *argumentum ad hominem***.** A threat of Divine retribution hangs in the air, frightening the recalcitrant into submission. This is an *argumentum ad baculum* or *ad metum***.**

On the Biblical text. Of course, one can go deeper than that in challenging Biblical narrative, and many dare to do so nowadays. Indeed, so much doubt concerning this document has been sown in the last couple of centuries that it would be dishonest not to examine the issue at all. Some of this doubt has ulterior motives and is clearly open to debate; but some of it seems hard to beat.

Looking at the work of commentators, one can view them as effective novelists, who enrich accepted facts with elaborate fictions. Just as today, writers of historical novels (or even academic historians, to some extent) use their imagination to concretize in narrative form their theories regarding historically more or less certain events, so with Bible commentators.

But moreover, the Bible *itself* may be a novel, a grand saga-type novel. Or perhaps rather, as many contend, a collection of novels, some of which have been merged together to make

them seem more like one. This grand novel includes the story of a certain family (the family of the Patriarchs) and a certain nation (the Children of Israel, the Jews), as well as a collection of their beliefs (including, for instance, Monotheism and Creationism), practices (e.g. the Judaic legal system and sacrificial rites) and values (e.g. worship of God and love of *tzeddaka*).

Some of the stories and claims in this book are no doubt or very likely factual, but some are no doubt or very likely fictional. Some have been partly or fully confirmed by scientific, historical, archeological and other research; but some have been greatly put in doubt if not thoroughly debunked. Many, of course, are uncertain either way.

Of course, not all modern historians and critics are objective; some are motivated by an anti-religious agenda and cannot be considered authoritative. But on the whole, the trend is clear: there are serious experiential and rational grounds for doubt of the religious scenarios. Those who choose to ignore these grounds are not being objective or honest.

A possible scenario for the Torah's production is that there were some core oral traditions in circulation, such as the ancestral origin of the Jewish people or the story of their time of slavery in Egypt. Some of those stories may have been mythical in whole or in part, but some were no doubt factual. Fiction is always based on some fact.

These stories were eventually written down by one or more religious or historical novelists, no doubt well-meaning

people who sought to solidify collective memory. These novelists may have put down in writing the oral traditions verbatim, or from the start fleshed them out somewhat.

Later, the earliest commentators may have integrated their further embellishments directly into the text, expanding it to some extent. However, at some stage such modifications of the core text became unacceptable, because by then the text was already sufficiently widely known that changes would lack credibility.

Commentary thus passed over to another field of tradition – first, orally again, then again in writing (as the Talmud, etc.). This was eventually claimed as authoritative as the original text. A good and quite late example of this stage is the *Zohar*. In this context, the argument of hidden transmission is often typically invoked.

Throughout this process of growing and therefore changing tradition, *the passage of time* plays a leading role. The further back in time events are, the more credible they seem, because the more difficult it becomes to question them. They cannot readily be proved, but they cannot readily be disproved either. Or so it seems, although in some cases ancient beliefs have indeed been convincingly refuted in modern times (e.g. the belief in a less than 6,000 year old world). Just as ageing wine becomes tastier, so religious documents become more firmly rooted and kosher as time passes.

But even a quite new doctrine or document can suddenly appear in history, and be considered binding, provided it is

claimed to be old. In 2 Kings 22:8-13 (and in 2 Chronicles 34:14-21), we are told that during king Josiah's reign the High Priest Hilkiah "found the book of Torah (*sefer haTorah*)" in the Temple. This is traditionally identified as the book of Deuteronomy (*Devarim*).

An obvious question arises, if this story is true: was that the rediscovery of a preexisting but temporarily lost document, or was it the introduction of a newly written document under the guise of rediscovery? For how is it conceivable that such a crucial scroll of Torah would have been destroyed everywhere, and even forgotten by most people, save one copy that Hilkiah had hidden for a while or simply found by chance?

That the scenario was accepted at the time does not prove it. The people concerned might have been sufficiently credulous to believe whatever they were told. They had just gone through difficult times, remember. Many were perhaps ignorant, and could not have thought about such issues. Some, perhaps Josiah among them, knew the truth, but found it politically or otherwise convenient to let the sleight-of-hand pass without objecting.

So, in this story from Judaism's own history books, we may have an example of how new primary material *might* have been be injected into the stream of tradition. (For all that, I respect the fifth book of the Torah as a genuine continuation of the first four, which do not as clearly end the narrative as it

does. My intent here is only to illustrate a process, not make any specific claims.)

This whole process of evolving tradition applies equally well, and in many respects more obviously, to the later offshoots of Judaism, notably the Christian Bible and the Moslem Koran[10]. The same turn of events is found in other religions too, like the Hindu and Buddhist. It is the way religious documents and traditions naturally develop in human history.

Apologetics. It is important for those who wish to defend religion not to get involved in foolish apologetics. This term refers to a last ditch stand to save past literal interpretations of some part of the text from the doubt produced by recent scientific discoveries or arguments. A commonly given example is the insistence on literally six days of Creation some 6,000 years ago, and the order of Creation given in Genesis, contrary to now well-established scientific belief in an at least 13.7 billion year-old material universe with a very different proposed ordering of subsequent events.

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[10] As regards the Koran, it was allegedly compiled from notes left behind by the "prophet" Mohammed, in the twenty or so years after his death. But the editing, by scribes under the direction of the Calif Uthman (Mohammed's son-in-law), was selective. Many notes were reportedly deliberately excluded from the compilation, and erased, burnt or hidden away. Some people, it is said, were repressed for objecting to such slanted editing. (See Bar-Zeev, pp. 24-26.) We see in this example how a document may be shaped by the deliberate intentions (spiritual, political or personal) of one or more individuals.

The apologetic commentator resists change by projecting scenarios that are only superficially credible. If we look at them a bit more deeply, we can easily spot the interpretative error(s) involved. For example: given the empirical confirmations of the theory of evolution (which do not perhaps definitely prove the theory, but which certainly make it *inductively superior to any other hypothesis* advanced so far), it is difficult to see how the Adam and Eve story can be taken at face value.

The apologist might now concede prehistory and admit that there were other human-like beings on Earth before Adam and Eve, and this for tens or hundreds of thousands of years, but he suggests that one family of such humans was Divinely selected some 6'000 years ago and received a special soul which henceforth distinguished it. This may seem at first sight like a harmless and conceivable reconciliation, but upon reflection it cannot be reasonably upheld.

For the empirical truth of the matter is that genetic studies have clearly shown that currently existing humans do *not* all descend from a single couple (viz. Adam and Eve, or whoever) some 6,000 years ago. Their genetic forebears, though evidently genetically related, are far more geographically scattered and variously ancient. It follows that the proposed scenario to 'save' the literal Genesis story is not successful in fact.

A particular type of apologetics consists in anachronistically claiming that the writer(s) and past commentators of the

Torah *knew all along* that this or that historical or scientific claim was only intended metaphorically, allegorically, or mystically, and not literally. This is a convenient *ex post facto* argument used by later rabbis when all other apologetics fail, in order to maintain the credibility of the written and oral Torah.

But it is evident from any honest scrutiny of past rabbinical pronouncements that the earlier authorities, under no external pressure to recant, certainly considered all claims made as literally true. And indeed, many still do today. And indeed, most authorities would if pushed to the wall agree with the principle that the *pshat* (or simple, literal) reading is always true, even if additional figurative or esoteric meanings are proposed.

This insight is important, because if we follow its logic we must admit that if many past authorities were in error with regard to many historical and scientific claims, then their more religious, legal and ritual claims are *also* to some extent open to doubt. The fact that a *more recent* authority has admitted a claim not to be literally true does not change the fact that *the past* authorities believed it literally. The psycho-epistemology of the earlier proponents remains doubtful, *even if* later ones apologetically qualify their statements.

Considering, for instance, that many of the writers of fanciful *midrashim* (stories written in Talmudic times) were at the same time *halakhic* authorities (Jewish law makers), we may well wonder whether such people (who evidently could not

clearly distinguish between their imagination and reality) can be trusted to run our lives (by claiming all their rulings to be of ultimately Divine origin).

Had they said explicitly: "this is of course a metaphor, don't take what I say literally", their credibility would have been intact; but they usually made no such disclaimer. And indeed, most if not all people took their sayings literally for centuries thereafter, and many still do.

Moreover, the later disclaimers are formulated in such a way that the religious consequences are made to seem localized and insignificant. The modern rabbis who admit past factual errors by authorities do not draw any systematic and radical conclusions from their admissions. Seeing the epistemological limitations of their predecessors, they do not reassess the whole range of doctrines and beliefs received from them.

One notable artifice used by the rabbinical commentators in such contexts is the "Nature has changed" (*nishtaneh hateva*) argument. Faced with a serious disagreement between some Torah statement or the assumptions of past deciders of the law concerning some aspect of nature, and present scientific knowledge about it, later deciders occasionally reinterpret the Torah statement or revise the law, claiming it is no longer applicable because "Nature has changed" – i.e. the facts or laws of nature involved have literally become different.

They do not provide some proof that Nature has changed – but to them it seems obvious that "it must have", because in

their minds the Torah or past deciders could not have made a mistake. This posture, that Nature is more subject to change than the *halakhah*, is pretty much inevitable if we start with the assumption that once the law has been decided it is settled once and for all. The deciders are then effectively regarded as infallible and their decisions as irreversible. The only way then to get round them is to regard the terms involved as different or the conditions as changed somehow.

Rabbinical commentators are masters in the art of weaving tortuous arguments that give the impression that all apparent difficulties of this sort are satisfactorily resolved and dealt with. But if we look more closely, and with a wider context in mind, we may at times find their reasoning disappointingly shallow if not dishonest. Religion is, due to its inherent rigidity, unfortunately often based on manipulation of opinion.

In conclusion, one should not base one's faith in God, Creation and Torah values on too literal an interpretation of the Torah text and its subsequent commentaries. One should remain open-minded and flexible; open to reason and experience, and willing to adapt one's belief accordingly. Stick to essentials and act in a mature manner.

We should, in other words, *enlarge* our faith, and make it less rigidly attached to some particular scenario. We may, and I daresay should, remain inspired and guided by the Torah, by all means; but we can no longer credibly insist on literal truth

everywhere in it. Similarly, we may remain grateful to the enlightenment of the text that commentators have brought us, but must at the same time remain critical at some level and be prepared to exercise independent judgment.

The same attitude applies to the Christian Bible, the Moslem Koran and other religious texts and commentaries thereto. Fundamentalists, who refuse to adapt to changing knowledge context, do religion a disservice, making it seem wholly instead of only partly implausible.

4. Tradition vs. innovation

I am not here engaged in the fashionable sport of bashing religions, but merely stating what seems evident, *in view of the many glaring errors of fact and logic* in all such documents and traditions, and in view of surrounding historical considerations. But such insights should not make us abandon our religious traditions altogether. I would opt for a median position, neither fanatically religious nor aggressively secularist.

My attitude to religion, note well, is not that of an opponent out to discredit it and humiliate its proponents. I favor a "Zen attitude" – the outlook of a meditator patiently and confidently watching thoughts flow by. I do not expect immediate and definite answers to all questions. I am not attached to results, pro or con. Rather, I meditate on, and I am duly grateful when new insights happen to come. In this way, my impartiality, objectivity and credibility are always maintained.

None of the criticisms of religion need be taken as excluding the possibility of God from human knowledge. The many imperfections in religion do not even exclude the possibility of (individual or collective) human encounters with God, like those believed to have taken place at Sinai about 3,300 years ago. We can keep an open mind either way. There is no logical justification in refusing all "metaphysical speculation" offhand and forever[11]. Speculation is one of the wondrous powers of the human mind – it is silly to dogmatically block it off. Such a policy can only impoverish human thought and being.

The process of religious development above described must be understood in its essence, as one of *transmission of various crucial values*. We should not throw out the baby with the bath water, and reject the tradition wholesale because of its scientific, historical and other flaws. Such indiscriminate rejection can only result in a moral and spiritual impasse such as we see around us today. Nothing is to be gained but the bankruptcy of human values, if past wisdom is totally abandoned.

> A comment regarding anti-Semitism is worth making in this context. A major reason why Jews are often hated by non-Jews (especially Christian and Moslem, but the disease seems to be spreading further nowadays), and indeed why religious Jews are often

[11] Contrary to what Bertrand Russell and others have insisted.

hated by non-religious ones (the so-called self-hating Jews) is that Judaism has brought the burden of God awareness into the world – the "yoke of the kingdom of heaven".

This is perceived by many as an artificial imposition of undesirable duties and inhibitions, and the people who made this annoyance happen (the Jews) are deeply resented for it. Of course, not everyone has such negative reaction, but some people unfortunately do. In any case, we should keep in mind that many of the criticisms of religion are simply resistance to its ethical impositions. The critic is looking for ways to shake off the burden.

Worse still, those who radically oppose all religion end up *perversely* advocating the very opposite of religious virtues and values. What was virtuous and good becomes vicious and bad, and conversely. This is the spirit of our times, our *Zeitgeis*. For example, nowadays, Israel is projected by many leftist groups and media (some of which involve Jews) as the aggressor towards the Arabs rather than as their victim. Again, homosexuality has become a fashion instead of being viewed as one of the most abominable practices possible to men and women.

We should rather learn to identify the heart of the matter in each area of concern to the religious tradition, its spiritual source. We should find the precious teaching of wisdom in it, and ignore the historical fabrications and accidental

accretions as no longer as important as they once seemed. Mistaken facts and fake reasoning should be recognized and denounced as such, without resort to contorted apologetics and without hostility. We should definitely reject what seems absurd or untenable[12]; but that does not mean reject everything. Separate the silver from the dross. For example, acknowledge the equal dignity of women where it seems to have been traditionally put in doubt.

This is of course no easy task. Should I ignore kosher dietary laws, for instance? If so, on what grounds, besides personal convenience? Perhaps, rather than abandon the laws of *kashrut*, we should opt for the more restrictive and more

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[12] One rabbinical interpretation I find very difficult to swallow concerns Deut. 22:6-7 (the Biblical injunction to chase away the mother bird before taking eggs from her nest). This law on the surface appears as a lesson in humanity – i.e. not to be cruel to animals, to be mindful of their feelings too. Instead of which, the Talmud turns it into an injunction to go out of one's way and take eggs from a nest (even if one does not need eggs today!), so as to do the irrational 'mitzvah' of chasing the mother away first. They insist that this law should not be read as a requirement of humanity to animals, preferring to admit it as inexplicable. Of course, they have to do so because they defend the carnivorous view that animals may be hurt to some extent (to be sure, as much as necessary, but not more) since they are allowed as food for humans. To a naïve reader like me, the law is *conditional*: it means "*If* you seek eggs and find the mother bird sitting on them, *then* chase the mother before taking the eggs". The Rabbis change it into an *unconditional* law: "whenever you are walking in the woods, and you chance to see a mother bird sitting on her eggs, *you must* go out of your way and chase the bird from the nest and take the eggs". Which reading is more credible, do you think?

humane vegetarian diet (which is, incidentally, also kosher). How can we be sure that our insights and underlying motives in picking and choosing are purely spiritual? But this is the crux of the challenge for the human faculty of valuation – how to distinguish intelligence and wisdom from stupidity and folly. Purity, sincerity, lucid intuition and honest logic are needed to avoid straying.

I am clearly not here developing a defense of the conservative, reform or other such modern movements stemming from Judaism – not to mention its Christian and Moslem derivatives, nor for that matter the currently prevalent pseudo-scientific atheistic-secular religion. All of these are also deserving of much criticism, each in its own way. I am not arguing in favor of some revised intellectual construct or some new pseudo-spirituality, or increased permissiveness or novel fanaticism. I am rather looking for the intuitively obvious, the plainly true.

The traditions transmitted to us by our spiritual forefathers offer *pointers*. The image of the finger pointing at the moon comes to mind. Don't get too fixated on the finger, but rather turn your attention to the moon it is pointing at. Don't let the tradition enslave you and oppress you, but use it to liberate you and enlighten you. This can be a very difficult task, because everything in Judaism demands utter conformism. It takes great courage to overcome this powerful force, while remaining within its reach. To let it influence you positively, without letting it forcibly rule you.

So what if the Bible (and any other, similar text) turns out to have fictional aspects, finally? A work of fiction can inspire, too. The important thing is the transmission of spiritual truth the work intends and effects. Also, fiction is often based on facts. Indeed, fiction has to be based on some facts; there is no such thing as pure fiction. Often, fiction is the best way to transmit facts, for if they are only presented systematically in the way of dry data their soul may be lost.

If I believe in God and wish to express that belief through worship, I may find I need some sort of religious décor and scenario to do so cogently. I could "invent my own religion"[13] – but why reinvent the wheel, when I have at my disposal the venerable religious practices of my Jewish forebears or other traditions to draw from (maybe cutting and pasting a bit as seems fit in current circumstances)? Some people do make up their own religion; others prefer to just worship in tried ways.

The most important thing, I think, is to realize that spirituality is "good for you", i.e. to your advantage in a deep and long-term sense of the term. You are the manager of your destiny, and it is silly to mismanage it. Take the responsibility and evolve positively. This is a lesson that Judaism (and similar religions) can learn from Buddhism (or some branches thereof).

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[13] Like Timothy Leary recommended. A recent example is *The Urantia Book*, written in the early 20th Century in the U.S. There are countless more. Indeed, are not all religions ultimately inventions of men and women?

Judaism tends to enjoin dutiful compliance with its laws through disapproval and other heavy-handed forms of social and psychological pressure (though not exclusively). It imposes a lifelong treadmill with little room for objection. Buddhism, on the other hand, gives you a choice; it does not disapprove of you for doing the wrong things or not-doing the right things, but gently reminds you that it is foolish to behave thus and advises you to choose wisdom. The latter friendlier method of moving people seems more appropriate in this day and age.

5. The rabbinical estate

While the vast majority of rabbis are without doubt, virtuous, lovable, above-average human beings and Jews, as a professional class they can be characterized as *bureaucrats of the spirit*[14]. Their task is only to apply existing rules and regulations, not to reason why or question dogmas.

The rabbis are functionaries trained to be conventional, to conform to the Torah and past and current interpretations of it generally accepted by the profession. They are taught to function within that basically fixed framework, to rigidly relate everything they come across exclusively to it. They are taught to either uncritically repeat traditional platitudes or formulate new apologetic fabrications.

They are not allowed to doubt any traditional given – or not for longer than it takes to find the answer to their question in

[14] The same pejorative remark can be made regarding the similar functionaries in other religions.

the traditional sources, which must be taken on faith even if they seem factually or logically inaccurate or just arbitrary or far-fetched. The rabbis have no authorization to deeply investigate or radically innovate. If they ever venture out of the fold, their peers and leaders quickly call them to order (under the eventual threat of expulsion, presumably)[15].

One result of this pedestrian and soporific education is that the rabbis cannot develop full intellectual courage and honesty. Their cognitive position is inherently flawed. They are unable to make sense of or practically handle new facts and arguments, or new historical situations, for which their closed frame of reference has left them quite unprepared.

In such cases, they respond *by ignoring facts and arguments, or by fudging and temporizing*. Unable to give reasonable answers, they simply ignore the questions posed, or promise to later answer but do not, or pretend to give answers, or enjoin "faith". And unable to take corrective actions not foreseen by the law, they pretend the problems non-existent or not as bad as averred.[16]

This is all too evident in many scientific issues, such as modern discoveries concerning the size and age of the

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[15] We saw such a case a few years ago in Israel, when no less a figure than Adin Steinsaltz was made to retract certain things he said by certain other important Rabbis.

[16] To me personally, all this has been brought home clearly by observing the absence of responses from Rabbis to my book *Judaic Logic*.

universe or the biological theory of evolution[17]. It is also manifest with regard to the consequences of modern technological developments, such as the cruelty to animals inherent in industrial farming and slaughtering or the threat to fish species caused by mechanized fishing, or again in the unchecked increase of homosexuality in society at large in recent years. But it is also true in much more banal issues.

Most rabbis I have met refuse to study modern philosophy, science and history books – not out of laziness, but out of fear of discovering errors in traditional beliefs. (Inversely, for my part, I have come to avoid the Torah study hall, for fear I might become an atheist! When I do attend a study hall, and see how little the people there know of current philosophy, science and history, and how absurd and artificial some of their arguments are, I prefer to remain silent so as not to hurt their feelings, although it saddens me.)

Saying all the above about the rabbinical establishment, I do not mean to express any personal antipathy to any individual or to the profession as a whole. I have no doctrinal ax to grind, either. I actually have much respect for my religion and its institutional guardians; I say this sincerely, without

[17] These, I am sure, are never taught in yeshivot, though they might be momentarily considered and dismissed offhand if questions are asked by a student.

fear or diplomatic motives. I am only trying to be an objective observer and honest critic.[18]

I am here of course referring to rabbis generally recognized as orthodox or traditional, not to so-called[19] rabbis of the conservative, reform or other such dissident movements. While the problem on the orthodox side is perhaps excessive rigidity (usually), the problem on the other side is excessive laxity. The latter so dilute Judaism at their will – adapting the law to fit popular desires of the day – that there is soon almost nothing left of it. Such arbitrary permissiveness is an imposture. A middle way is necessary – a more pondered and courageous way, which takes developments in knowledge and society into consideration without going to the opposite extreme.

When the rabbinical deciders, the *poskim*, make a decision that seems overly strict – or in some instances, overly lenient – it is clear that they have done their best to conform to the givens of Judaism and to consider the human needs of Jews. I do not doubt that. They are, we might say, victims of the system. They are, understandably, afraid to sin and to cause others to sin. The narrow scope for change is almost

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[18] Needless to say, too, the problems and fallacies enumerated here are not reserved to rabbis. They can be found in other groups, whether religious, political or allegedly scientific.

[19] I say so-called, because they have usurped a title that existed long before they arrived on the scene. They should have called themselves something else, if they were honest.

inevitable, in view of the historical givens and structure of Judaism.

Judaism claims to have been revealed at Sinai, primarily in the written Torah, and simultaneously in the oral law (which was allegedly also given at Sinai and transmitted intact to the makers of the Talmud). None of these claims can be verified; and even when some of the content is shown to be factually or logically doubtful or absurd we are not allowed to discard it. Even if the main rabbis got together and decided things otherwise, there would always be some holier-than-thou dissenters. It is doubtful that this tragic situation can ever be remedied. Therefore, religious Jews seem condemned to suffer it to the end.[20]

[20] A similar doctrinal imprisonment is apparent in the Moslem religion, for the same reasons. Humans have a history, and it is very difficult for them to shake off the karma of the past.

6. Judaic illogic

I wrote a book called *Judaic Logic* over a decade ago. I named it so because Judaism does naturally involve much formally valid logical thought (like the *a fortiori* argument), and its rabbinical defenders do have a propensity to reason. But I pointed out within that same work that the rabbis also use many forms of argument that are logically invalid, being either non sequiturs or self-contradictory. This was demonstrated formally, i.e. in terms of X's and Y's – ways and means whose results are as incontrovertible as mathematical proofs. There is thus a considerable reliance on illogic in Judaism, as well as on logic.

I also showed that rabbinical logic is very often inductive rather than deductive. The rabbis themselves are not aware of that distinction, although they have actually made important contributions to inductive logic – notably with the 13th principle of R. Ishmael. This is one of the principles of harmonization, and there are other valid ones; but there are

also some invalid ones. This is significant, because a conclusion may be a non sequitur in deductive logic, and yet be a valid inference in inductive logic. Moreover, a contradiction in deductive discourse might well be resolved through inductive methods. The rabbis, to repeat, did exceptionally well in such more advanced logical techniques, though not sufficiently consciously. As a result, they did not develop a fully consistent and sufficiently exhaustive system of logic.

Despite my making both important contributions and important challenges to Judaic logic, I have since the book's publication received little echo. Some academics have responded positively, but usually with some evident dread of outright public endorsement. Typically, no rabbi has either thanked me or reproved me, as the case may be. Although I have called on local and international responses in person and by mail, the response from that quarter has been uniformly evasive. Unable to answer questions or objections, they avoid the issues. That is also illogical, of course.

Informal fallacies. Over the years, I have additionally noticed many informal fallacies practiced by the rabbis. The following are some common instances I have noted in writing worth drawing your attention to.

- The rabbis often give (or accept) explanations that are in truth ***pseudo-explanations***. That is, in experience or in reason they do not explain the phenomenon at hand; but

the mere fact of proposing them as explanatory discourse gives the false impression that a real explanation has been given. For example, commenting on Lev. 2:13, which states "*with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt*", R. Ibn Ezra suggests that to do otherwise would be "a mark of contempt" (*Soncino Chumash*, p. 611). We are not here told why salt should have anything to do with contempt; the connection between these two things is just affirmed, as if obvious once made explicit.[21]

A more important example in today's context is the rabbinical prohibition against women getting called up for Torah reading. Although this is considered by them to be permitted in principle, they forbid it because it is against "the honor of the community" (and not for any reason to do with the dangers of men and women interacting too closely). When asked more specifically in what way that honor might be harmed, i.e. what precise content the word "honor" intends here, they can give no answer. Their argument is thus circular: it is dishonorable just because we say so. The reference to honor is a mere pretext; there is no actual reason.

[21] Note well that I am not advocating contempt, but merely asking why the material called salt should be considered proof of the mental attitude of lack of respect. As far as I can see, there is no evident natural relation between these two things – so the one cannot be regarded as explaining the other.

- Comparable to such fake explanation, with regard to causality in an ontological sense, is the ***pretended proof*** of some foregone conclusion by means of putative premises that do not in fact logically imply it. The latter practice, which constitutes pseudo-explanation in an epistemological sense, is also often found in rabbinical discourse. Sometimes, this is due to the rabbis confusing inductive reasoning with deduction. Sometimes, they justify it by means of a known hermeneutic principle, which may be logically valid or not (e.g. *gezerah shavah* argument, based on verbal analogies in the text). And sometimes they do it with no justification at all, unconsciously or in the way of a discursive sleight of hand.

- Another common fallacy is ***inconsistent explanation or proof***. For example, the rabbis forbid eating and even drinking (with minor exceptions) before the morning prayer, saying it is disrespectful to face God with a full stomach or drunk. They also teach that the evening prayer should be recited before supper. Well and good, the explanation given seems convincing – but if it is true, why apply it only to the morning and evening prayers? Why are the additional prayer on special days and the daily afternoon prayer not so severely restricted? In such cases, the problem is insufficient effort at harmonization.

- Some legal rulings (usually claimed to have been given orally at Sinai) are based on a ***narrow interpretation*** of

the motives involved in the action concerned. This is fallacious, since it disregards some factual information. For example, they forbid sitting or standing straight, on the assumption that such a posture is a sign of conceit or arrogance. Of course, this is *one* possible motive for such a posture, but others are also possible. For instance, one may consider (as meditation teaches) that an upright physical posture promotes healthy bodily functioning, expresses and improves mental alertness, and encourages moral strength and discipline. Inversely, a stooped posture does not prove one has conquered pride – it can be faked.[22]

- Rabbinical commentators tend ***to ignore or to silently bypass questions they cannot answer***. They pride themselves on having answers to almost all questions, but that is because they concentrate only on the easy questions. The difficult questions they either do not notice, or pretend not to have heard, or avoid those who

[22] The rabbinical ideal of (Jewish) man seems to be a bent over, sorry creature – bent over by continuous indoor study of holy books and sorry for all the sins committed. The rabbis apparently resented (felt belittled by?) anyone who held his body straighter than them. Why think that G-d favors an unhealthy physical posture? It would have been enough to insist on *mental* humility and avoidance of pride when facing Him. The rabbis were factually in error to consider the upright posture as *necessarily* caused by reprehensible attitudes. They failed to observe that it can have other psychological sources, which are quite legitimate and even religiously desirable. The physical posture is just the surface effect – what matters is the underlying attitude that gives rise to it.

ask them. They think or say that "there is surely an answer to every such question, even if I do not know it" – by which they mean an answer necessarily in agreement with their fond beliefs, but of course such a convenient assumption is epistemologically unjustifiable.

> Obvious examples of difficult questions are all the disparities known today between, on the one hand science and history, and on the other hand the Biblical text and subsequent commentaries, such as how old the earth is, when the human species arose, and so forth. But there are also embarrassing internal problems, which are not even mentioned, let alone solved[23]. One commentary I read makes this explicit, stating that it is "forbidden" to explicitly acknowledge a textual contradiction for which no resolution is apparent, until if ever a resolution is indeed found for it (the justification given being R. Ishmael's 13th principle)[24].

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[23] See **Appendix 1** for an example of unasked and unanswered questions. In the Book of Numbers, where the Children of Israel are numbered allegedly precisely, all statistics concerning the twelve tribes and the three Levite families end in highly improbable round numbers: usually in hundreds and very rarely in tens. How can this be? Why would Moses approximate numbers, or why would God miraculously favor round numbers?

[24] I found this commentary, attributed to R. Haim Soloveitchik of Brisk, in a book called *Talelei Oroth* (vol. 1/Bereshith, French ed., p. 184). What is interesting here is that this alleged rule does *not* in fact correspond to R. Ishmael's 13th – for in the latter when a contradiction is found, *the second* proposition is adopted, until a

- Conversely, rabbinical commentators – in particular those in the Talmud – tend ***to invent artificial problems***. For example, they rule that two priests (*kohanim*) cannot be called to the Torah reading (*aliyah*) in first and second place, because people might think the second one was called up after the first one, because the latter was found to have some inadequate credentials. Surely this is a fabricated reason, *pilpul* in the pejorative sense – for few people would ever have such a thought, and moreover the rabbis could have simply decreed that such an interpretation of the sequence was incorrect. (Note that this example also fits under the category of 'narrow interpretation' listed above.)

A major underlying cause of most of the above illogical behaviour is the fact that all rabbinical commentary, interpretation or explanation must remain within certain tacitly well defined parameters. It is forbidden to think 'outside the box'. Some thoughts are taboo – beyond the traditional bounds of 'possibility'. It is best not to ask or try to answer certain questions, so as not to risk transgressing those bounds. This is in my view a deficiency of courage, or even faith – for if one has strong confidence and faith, one confronts all challenges unafraid.

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third proposition is discovered that reconciles the first two. We see in the new formulation an explicit acceptance of conscious illogic; denial of something evident is here presented as a virtue, a proof of piety and faith, a source of pride.

It seems to me that our religions, Judaism and all the others, must make the effort to verify and improve their logic. In the old days, most human beings were very gullible – but nowadays many are somewhat less so and this trend may be expected to continue in the future. If religion is to survive, it must adapt to human evolution and become more rigorous logically. Rather than legitimatize and perpetuate foolish notions and habits, it should be an instrument of human development and enlightenment.

I say all this, note well, not out of a desire to devaluate and extinguish religion, but on the contrary our of a desire to help it survive, for I am convinced there is much in it that is good for human beings. Religions are repositories of human spirituality, the highest values of human culture.

Judaism is like a massive engineering project, executed by countless dedicated workers. The resulting structure, let's face it, looks like a disorderly, rickety construction. Both its narrative and legal aspects have very many internal contradictions and factual inaccuracies, much vagueness, ambiguity and doubtful content, and numerous gaps and loose ends, not to mention innumerable inexplicable additives and artifices.

The whole is held together with what can only be characterized as a 'band-aid' sort of logic, manufactured ad hoc over the centuries to keep the wobbly structure from falling apart. Nevertheless, intense spirituality shines out from it, and this is of course the justification of it all.

Torah and science (*Torah umada*). The defenders of strict orthodoxy are not only guilty of logical faults: they also forsake experience when it suits them. They would no doubt prefer to be in full accord with both logic and experience, and we would equally wish them to be, but they are sometimes forced to abandon one and/or the other, so as to keep their Torah and halakhic assumptions intact.

A good example[25] of this is the issue of "rich *matza*", bread traditionally alleged to be unleavened because it is produced with pure fruit juice. According to authorities (namely Tosafot) such bread is unleavened (not *hametz*) provided no water has been added to it, and can therefore be owned and eaten during Passover. However, modern science informs us that fruit juice is just water mixed with fructose, so that it contains about as much leaven (a tiny fungal microorganism) as pure water. This can be demonstrated by experiment and is not open to doubt.[26]

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[25] Recently gleaned from an interesting article by David Kessler, published in *Higayon*, vol. 3 (1995) – "Review Essay: *Torah and Science* by Judah Landa". He gives other examples, too. For a more complicated example, see **Appendix 2** to the present book.

[26] One rabbi suggested to me that even if the quantity of leaven is about the same in pure fruit juice and in water (or likewise, fruit juice mixed with water), perhaps the leaven does not actually raise bread when it is in fruit juice. Well, that is not unthinkable – but it is in any case easy to test experimentally. Prepare two loaves of bread, using equal quantities of flour and the

Thus, scientifically, the exemption from hametz status to rich matza would seem to be based on a factual error – and Jews who own and eat such food during Passover would seem to contravene, with orthodox rabbinical permission, a clear Torah interdiction. However, rather than objectively adapt to evolving empirical knowledge, the halakhah is maintained as is. This is understandable, in that to deny a ruling of the authorities concerned would be put all their many other judgments in doubt.

When I confronted the Chief Rabbi of Geneva, R. Yitzhak Dayan, with this conundrum, he gave me an interesting reply. He said, as I recall, that whatever the halakhah declares kosher or hametz is and was always so. As I understood it, he meant that even if pure fruit juice in fact contains leaven, rich matza remains kosher for Passover – because the original law concerning hametz given in the Torah *must have tacitly intended as an exception* the leaven found in such rich matza.

In other words, though the original law may seem general on a literal reading, it may be interpreted ex post facto as having been more particular than it seemed. That is to say, when the Torah told us not to have or eat leaven during Passover, it did not regard all the microorganisms we ordinarily call 'leaven' found in rich matza as leaven in a legal sense. The term used is the same, but it does not designate exactly the same set of things. For the scientist, all leaven counts as leaven. But for

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two liquids, and see for yourself whether they rise to the same extent or not.

the halakhist, only that which the halakhah has come to designate as leaven is effectively so.

This is *prima facie* not an unreasonable position – indeed, it is consistent with the blanket authority seemingly given by the Torah to future rabbis (Deut. 17:8-13) and with the general rabbinic principle that whatever the deciders decide is the law, even if they seem to call the left right and the right left (see Rashi to Deut. 17:11). It is also consistent with the traditional claim[27] that the whole Oral Torah was given at Sinai together with the Written Torah.

Still, we may wonder whether the deciders concerned (viz. Tosafot, in this case) would have had the same judgment if they had known then the empirical facts about leaven known today. For it is clear, nonetheless, that in their mind's eye there was no leaven in fruit juice so long as not a drop of water was added to it.

To those of us attached to rationality and empiricism, the rich matza exception was historically based on inaccurate assumption concerning a purely physical thing or event. But (seemingly to us) the halakhists are quite satisfied with artificial constructs, based on arbitrary definitions that have relatively little relation to Nature as ordinarily understood.

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[27] This claim was developed, if I rightly recall, by Saadia Gaon, to defend the oral law and traditional interpretations of the Torah from Karaite critics. I personally regard it as a myth: as I argue in *Judaic Logic* it seems historically evident that the tradition has evolved (grown, and to a lesser extent changed somewhat) over the centuries and millennia of Jewish life.

What distinguishes the leavening agent found in water from that found in pure fruit juice? Scientifically, nothing at all, they are composed of the same organisms; the only difference between them is the environment they happen to be in. But for Jewish law, that is enough to distinguish them.

It is hard to prove that this was not the original intent of Torah law, if the literal reading is not given unconditional credence. Moreover, note well that in this instance, the literal reading is abandoned without seeming reason – no contradiction with another Torah passage or other technical difficulty is involved, which makes such reinterpretation necessary. There is only a rabbinic statement that suddenly appears in the history of halakha out of the blue, and is thenceforth defended tooth and nail.

As regards the claim that even if the rabbis call left right and right left they must be followed, this might be justified with reference *personal opinions, speculations or acts of faith*, on the grounds that the subjective judgment of Sages (who are in principle more spiritually pure and less influenced by passions than common men and women) is more reliable. But in the case of *publicly demonstrable facts or scientifically induced laws of nature*, no such superiority of judgment can reasonably be appealed to by or in the name of any rabbi, however elevated his halakhic authority; it is simply an issue of objective truth.

What is perhaps needed here is an understanding that judging matters of fact or of logic is not ultimately something open to

subjective preference; our attitude should be as objective and impartial as possible. We should cultivate the same attitude and sense of responsibility in all issues as we would if we were a judge or member of the jury in a capital case. For ultimately, everything to do with religion, philosophy or science is a matter of life and death.

7. Jewish meditation

Current teachings. I read R. Aryeh Kaplan's book on "Jewish meditation" some time ago, and was rather disappointed. Such writings are in my opinion based on readings, intellect, wishful thinking and fantasies, rather than on actual personal practice of the art. Meditation cannot be guided by ideology, but must remain a free process of exploration and discovery. It does not consist in imposing some idea or belief on the mind, but in becoming convinced by actual personal experiences. The writer on meditation should write in the first person and tell what he himself has observed, rather than base his pronouncements on authorities.[28]

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[28] It is true that, though Jewish (and indeed a practicing Jew), I am more attracted to Eastern meditation practices, because they are more empirical than rational. However, if you read my work, you will see that I always remain lucid and critical of Eastern philosophy too.

It is true that the *heshbon nefesh* (accounting of the soul) is a practice crucial to Judaism. In particular, during the month of Elul leading up to the days of awe (new year and yom kippur), we are enjoined to and do examine our thoughts, words and deeds, and take stock of our many vices and deficiencies of virtue. Kaplan also mentions the practices of *hitbodedut* (self-isolation) and *hitbonenut* (self-understanding), recommended by some Hassidic schools (such as the Brezlav Hassidim). But, though these practices are undoubtedly valuable for self-improvement, can they be counted as meditative?

If meditation is understood in the general sense of increasing one's awareness, then yes such practices are meditative. They increase self-awareness of one's actual situation and behavior, making possible comparison to Jewish norms, and thence self-perfection. But though such psychological and ethical work on oneself is of great importance, what makes it seem not quite meditative in my view is the fact that in Judaism it is *very verbal and judgmental*. Of course, beneath words and ethical judgments are wordless intentions and frank observations – but the level of consciousness involved in these processes seems very ordinary.

More broadly, set prayer and Torah study (including learning the Talmud and subsequent rabbinical commentary and law, of course) could be considered as forms of meditation, insofar as they involve sustained mental concentration. However, here too the centrality of words and rational

judgment implies a structural limit of sorts. Also to be noted is the aspect of indoctrination, forcing one's mind into a given groove, these activities involve. Even so, undeniably, these activities do have a very powerful spiritual effect. For instance, on yom kippur one truly feels the opening of the Heavens to prayer.

To my mind, meditation in the loftier sense refers to a process or exercise that raises one's level of consciousness in a significant manner. That is, rather than having to artificially reprove and fight oneself to change one's behavior, one quietly acquires a higher way of seeing things which makes one's behavior naturally change for the better. This is due to the new vantage point that the neutral meditation practice (like *zazen*) gives us, which makes one see for oneself without ideological prejudices that one's old desires and values were worthless and one's past behavior was foolish and vicious.

Meditation makes possible a quantum leap up of consciousness, which allows us to transcend our passions. Meditation produces personal insight that removes the desires that make one act foolishly, and thus greatly facilitates self-mastery. True meditation, then, treats *the root* of misbehavior, and not merely *the superficial fact* of misbehavior. It does not consist in self-reproof and self-forcing, but effects lasting deep down solutions of the underlying problems, dissolving them.

On this basis, I would like to debunk the myth that meditation in this sense exists in Judaism today. I have not seen it, not even in Hassidic circles I have visited occasionally. If any religious Jews practice silent meditation, they are very rare indeed. And if any do, one may wonder how many of them were actually directly or indirectly influenced in this regard by Oriental philosophies/religions. They would likely refuse to admit it, because foreign influence is severely frowned upon in Judaism.

I do however believe Jews in the past have practiced silent meditation. Reading the books of the Bible known collectively as the *Nakh* (the Prophets and Writings), it seems evident that 'prophecy' was not merely practiced by the famous, great prophets. There were schools of prophecy and groups or communities of prophets. If prophecy was taught and consciously pursued, it is reasonable to suppose some sort of meditation practice was involved if only to purify the mind of extraneous mundane thoughts and consciously direct it heavenward. Kaplan, as I recall, mentions meditation as a preparation to prophecy.

Looking at more recent times, there are also indices that meditation has been practiced. Once, in Sfat, while on a guided tour of the home of R. Joseph Caro, I was told by the guide that mystical Jews like Caro[29] used to sit silently for an

[29] J. Caro (b. Spain, 1488 - d. Israel, 1575) is best known as a major Talmudist and the author of the code of Jewish law called the *Shulchan Aruch*. But he was also, together with most of his

hour before beginning their prayers, to develop their *kavanah* and awareness of God's holy presence. Now, that would be true meditation in my view! If this practice has indeed existed, it should certainly be revived. It is sorely needed in today's Judaism, which (it seems to me) is excessively verbose and stressed-out.

What it is. Silent meditation is not a waste of time, as some seem to think. It increases the power of consciousness, in breadth, in depth and in intensity. This means: in prayer, more honesty, sincerity and intensity; and in study, more concentration and insight. Likewise, one becomes more honest with oneself, with other people and with God, meaning what one says more, doing one's best more, stronger in resolve and in discipline, and so on. By getting into a more profound and pronounced intuitive contact with oneself, one develops greater self-knowledge (in a non-narcissistic sense of that term, of course), and thence one's intentions and actions become more real, pinpointed and powerful.

Silent meditation may be viewed as an act of *imitatio Dei*. Just as God is silent, or talks rarely and little, so should we strive to do. There is surely something neurotic in excessive verbal discourse, inside us, between people and in relation to God. More often than not, words hide rather than reveal the truth. Even in prayer, they can often act as a smokescreen

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contemporaries, especially in Safed, a kabbalist, who reported having many mystical experiences.

concealing our true thoughts, motives and intentions – from ourselves, if not from God. They often express wishful or dutiful thinking rather than actual insight or belief. By silently meditating on the here and now for a good while, we 'tune in' to God's silent presence.

But, note well, meditation is not a religious ritual; it is simply "to be with what is" – it is "nothing special"[30]. On this basis, I advocate what could be called "Zen Judaism". Let us add Zen (i.e. meditation[31]) to Judaism, and it will greatly improve[32].

Such addition would not be a threat to normative Judaism, but enhance it. We should not reject silent meditation as a foreign influence, and therefore something necessarily tainted and flawed. That would be really foolish, like rejecting some modern medical technique simply because it was not developed by a (religious) Jew. Let us not commit the fallacy of *ad hominem*. A person presumed deluded often has misleading ideas – but not always. Although some people who may be accused of idolatry engage in meditation, it does not logically follow that meditation is idolatry; it has in fact nothing to do with it.

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[30] I am here quoting two meditation teachers: respectively, Paramananda, p. 175, and Shunryu Suzuki, p. 46.

[31] *Zen* is a Japanese word meaning meditation. It comes from the Chinese *ch'an*, which comes from the Sanskrit *dhyana*.

[32] I would similarly advocate Zen Christianity and Zen Islam, to improve the tone of these daughter or sister religions. Note also, the converse expression to Zen Judaism, viz. "Judaic Buddhism", would have a different sense; it would mean adding Jewish monotheism to Buddhism.

Judaism already has many ideas that are in fact also found in other philosophies or religions. This is natural – just as we all breathe the same air. In some cases, the ideas may have migrated from Judaism; in others, they may have migrated to it; in others again, it is hard to say who influenced whom; and in others still, similar ideas may have been independently developed by both sides. I am not an expert on history, but over the years I have read about such apparent movements of ideas or myself noticed them in passing[33].

Because these events are lost in the hazy past, and we can no longer determine which came first, the ideas concerned today seem kosher to orthodox Jews. They can claim them to be of Jewish origin, without fear of being easily proved wrong. But they refuse to accept new ideas of evident foreign origin. That is silly, because the truth or worth of an idea certainly does not depend on its originator, but on its own merit – its intrinsic qualities. The wise man is always willing and eager to learn, from whoever has something of value to teach him.

The bottom line for any proposed import is the effect it can have on the faithful. At the synagogue, I look at my fellow Jews, and I reflect how each one would greatly benefit from meditation. This one to be less conceited; that one to be less often angry; that other one, to find more energy and

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[33] Offhand, I can mention for example the "emanation" theory that Judaism is considered to have inherited from Neo-Platonism. Also, recently, in an article on Gnosticism, I saw mention of "trapped particles of spirit" which reminded me of "broken vessels" theory by the Arizal.

confidence; another, to slow down a bit; and so forth. Judaism teaches us many virtues, but does not give us the practical tools for implementing those teachings. Meditation provides the means for self-improvement.

Meditation on others. An aspect of meditation I rarely mention, perhaps because I am an individualist at this time of my life more than any previous time, is consciousness of other people. In truth, we all think a lot about other people, even if only in the background of our mental life. Our mental life is very social even in solitude, even if we are not lonely. We may think of people by way of reminiscing past encounters, or by projecting new encounters. In the latter case, we may imagine different situations and rehearse what we will say or do in relation to the person(s) involved. Often, we behave as if we believe in telepathy, speaking to people at a distance in one's head or out loud (even though they cannot physically hear us).

Whenever we think of other people in any way, we are (if only by implication) aware of them as other entities with consciousness, and with a will and values of their own. This object of everyday awareness can and ought to be made one of meditation. That is, in addition to awareness of one's immediate surroundings, one's body, one's mental life, one's consciousness and one's self – one should also become aware of the many people that lie beyond one's field of perception. Solipsism is a philosophical possibility, but a very unlikely

one. We are not alone, and cannot possibly understand our personal existence without considering its manifold relations to the existence of others.

We are not speaking here of inanimate matter or even of vegetation, note well, but of other subjects with the power of consciousness. This means mainly other people. But by extension it can also mean other animals, though to a far lesser degree of course. And by further extension it can also mean (for those of us who have faith in this) – God.

The relation of our consciousness to that of other people (or other animals) may be conceived as structured like a network (at least at ordinary levels of consciousness). But the relation of our individual consciousness to the universal consciousness of God should rather be conceived as one of (very tiny) part to the (very great) whole. We may suppose that the consciousness of God underlies and embraces the mutual consciousness of us lesser beings. So to become conscious of God is doubtless a lot more difficult, for a tiny and superficial thing is trying to reach out to something far greater and deeper. Moreover, it is doubtful we can be truly conscious of God (within conceivable limits) if He does not specifically permit us to.

Thus, consciousness of God can be viewed as one aspect of the meditation on consciousnesses other than one's own. Still, our main concern here, at least at an early stage of meditation, is with meditation on other people. Becoming and being aware that we live in a world of people. This is not

merely a biological and sociological fact – it is a psychological fact. Other people are constantly impinging on our consciousness in many ways – and it is important to notice this constant impact and examine its variegated outcomes. It is amazing, for instance, how thickly populated our dreams can be at times – much more so than our life while awake!

The effect of people on our internal as well as external lives is sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful, and of course also sometimes indifferent. We owe a great deal to others (our parents, our teachers, our community leaders, our social services, and so forth) – no man is an island unto himself – and we should modestly be aware of our debt and feel appropriate gratitude. The opposite attitude is conceit and arrogance – very undesirable attributes. To be thankful is to realize one is loved (in some sense, to some degree) and to love (ditto) in turn. And that means to show others as much friendliness as one can, and to support them in accord with one's abilities and as much as one can (though without self-destructive extremism).

With regard to negative factors, one has to of course try to understand them before one can neutralize them. Often, the fault is one's own – i.e. other people have a negative effect on one because there is some sort of flaw in one's 'way of being' – and one has to find out how to correct one's attitudinal and behavioral errors. No doubt, too, the fault is often in the other person(s) concerned – other people are

fallible too – so our job is to find a way to deflect their negative impact on one, if only by avoiding them (if possible). In any case, the meditator stays aware and cool, and seeks solutions to problems (at an appropriate pace).

The Buddhist meditations in relation to other people (and more generally, other sentient beings) are of course admirable – and no doubt very effective over time at healing many personal and social wounds. I refer here to the cultivation of loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upeksha*).

I think they are not so easy to put in practice if taken to extremes, but some people seem to adapt to their demands pretty well. I personally find they do increase my sensitivity, but also my vulnerability. My intentions may be beautiful, but my neighbor may continue to behave in his usual uncouth manner. I may change, but others seem to remain the same and to be now more able to hurt me. Not so pleasant. Of course, all such difficulties are part of the process of spiritual growth, till the right posture is found and one becomes immune.

The important lesson to learn from these four meditations is that one's attitude towards other people can be improved by training, and that such change for the better in one's internal dispositions and behavior patterns 'changes everything' in one's actual relations with others. At the least, it will improve our relations. Ideally, it can 'save the world' from hatred, fear and conflict and institute instead a régime of love and mutual

help. “Love thy neighbour as thyself” saith the Torah (Lev. 19:18) and many other wisdom books.

Meditation on God – on His presence, His attributes, His beneficence towards us – is of course a higher stage than that and more difficult to achieve. But if instead of seeking God only outside and beyond oneself, one looks upon Him as the root of one’s spiritual core – i.e. if we think of ourselves as being “in His image and likeness”, as essentially one with Him – we may perhaps find it a little easier to approach Him.

8. Enlightenment without idolatry

The phenomenal self. When Buddhists speak of one's 'consciousness' or 'mind' they are often referring to what could be described as one's sphere of experience at any moment. Moment after moment, all around the central point where cognition actually takes place, there is a cloud of phenomena: bodily sensations and sentiments, appearances of surrounding sights and sounds, and mental images and sounds, verbal and non-verbal thoughts, and moods. It is important during meditation (and eventually, beyond it) to get to be and to remain aware of this totality of variegated experience, and to realize the great weight of this experience in one's life.

According to Buddhists, this phenomenal mass is all there really is to one's life – and thence they conclude that there is no self. This phenomenal cloud, they claim, is what we call the self, it is the whole of the self. Moreover, according to the Yogacara school, this cloud is *only* mind (since, they argue,

all experience is necessarily mediated by consciousness). But I beg to differ on such views – and claim that we must pay attention to *the center* of that sphere of experience too.

At the center is the self, the one who is experiencing. This Subject experiencing the changing phenomenal objects is the real meaning of the word self. It is a non-phenomenal entity, who is not experienced outside itself, but is known to itself by intuition. That is the soul or spirit. Buddhists philosophers deny it, but I am not convinced by their reasoning. Even so, I am convinced that Enlightenment is (as they claim) the central goal of human existence – the meaning of it all.

The Jewish core value is, of course, service of God, i.e. fulfilling the commandments given in the written and oral Torah. But, it seems to me, the higher one tends spiritually, the better one can fulfill such a mission. Enlightenment means the perfection of wisdom. So there's no contradiction between these values. The more perfect the tool, the better it does the job.

The value of Enlightenment. The Buddhist idea of Enlightenment (*boddhi*) is one of its great contributions to human aspiration and inspiration. I would like Judaism to more consciously value and pursue this goal, through meditation. Of course, Judaism would never accept the idea that Enlightenment makes one a 'god'. I agree with this crucial caveat.

There are some significant points of similitude between the Judaic-Christian-Islamic group of religions and the Hindu-Buddhist group. One point all (or at least some schools in all) might agree with, is the notion that we are all rooted in an infinite God or Original Ground and that we will all one day return to this Source. Indeed, these grand religions may be viewed as teachings on how to prepare for or accelerate such a return.

Now, both groups would consider that when an individual human manages somehow to merge back into God (or whatever the Source is called), God remains unaffected, i.e. nothing has been added to Him. From the latter's viewpoint there was never separation, no breach of unity. Where the two groups would differ, however, is in the status acquired by an individual who fuses with the Deity. The religions of Indian origin would regard such a person as having become a 'god', or even identified with the one and only God; whereas the Middle Eastern religions would consider the individual as ceasing to exist as a distinct entity.

I would refer to the tacit image of a drop of water flowing back into the ocean: certainly, that drop loses all 'personality', and moreover it becomes a mere part of and does not become equated with the ocean as a whole.

The Jewish religious way often seems like a constant hectic rush to perform countless rituals. It seems intended to keep you busy and stressed, as if agitation is proof of devotion. Set prayer sessions, some of them hours long, obligations to

study without time limit, and many other demanding duties fill the days, evenings and weekends of those who faithfully follow this way.[34]

Although that way gives one some satisfaction, if only the feeling of having a good conscience, if one has done all that needed doing fully and correctly (which is not always easy), it cannot be said bring peace of mind in the sense of cessation of "running after" things. Indeed, some commentators boast of this:

> *The Jewish approach to life considers the man… who has a feeling of completion, of peace, of a great light from above that has brought him to rest—to be someone who has lost his way.* (Adin Steinsaltz, p. 99)

Such an attitude is, in my view, an unfortunate devaluation of Enlightenment. In fact, it is a sort of cop-out: the rabbis, admitting that the way they have developed is unable to deliver the inner contentment and illumination all human beings yearn for, present this restlessness as a virtue above peace.

The missing ingredient here, it seems to me – what is needed to slow things down and give us time to breathe is – still and

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[34] I should also mention, here, how we are sometimes (e.g. late at night at Pessach) required by the law to eat and sleep at unhealthy hours, not to mention the consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks (meat and alcohol). Moreover, little allowance is made for fresh air and regular exercise. The natural cycles and needs of the human body are too often overlooked.

silent meditation. I here quote the 6th century CE Indian mystic and founder of Chinese Zen, Bodhidharma (p. 49):

> *Not thinking about anything is zen. Once you know this, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, everything you do is zen...Using the mind to look for reality is delusion. Not using the mind to look for reality is awareness. Freeing oneself from words is liberation.*

Traditional Jewish observances do on the whole perform their function, which is to bring us closer to God. I believe that sincerely, which is why I personally continue to practice Judaism and recommend it to fellow Jews. However, sometimes I get the impression that Judaism obstructs or blocks one's natural personal relation to God.

The main problem in my view is the 'commandment' format of Jewish law, which results in its excessive ritualism and legalism and almost non-stop verbosity. Jews are constantly in the position of slaves receiving peremptory orders under threat, rather than of free men and women kindly advised to voluntarily act in wise, objectively good and naturally virtuous ways. The commandments seem too often of uncertain value, if not contrary to reason; and those who object to them are viewed with much disapproval. It is argued that since these are God's orders, they must be wise imperatives; but their lack of evident wisdom in some cases makes their alleged source doubtful to some people.

At such times, it is actually meditation that keeps me going in Judaism. Thanks to it, I do not attach much importance to the imperfections I perceive in it, and remain focused on what seems to me the essential: getting personally closer to God.

Against Idolatry. Idolatry is clearly forbidden by God to Jews in the Ten Commandments[35]. God is to be the one and only object of worship – there is no other "god" by His side or in opposition to Him to worship.

Moreover, God does not "incarnate" in human form, or other material body or ghostly form of limited size; the very idea of incarnation is idolatrous. We are therefore forbidden to mentally worship any putative god or incarnation through belief, fear or love. All the more so, we must not physically worship any representations of alleged gods or incarnations, by bowing before statues or flat images or movies and similar acts. This interdiction obviously suggests that the worship of images of any alleged divinity or even of the true God is spiritually extremely damaging, in this world and/or the next.

According to the Rabbis, the interdiction of idolatry applies not only to Jews but also to Gentiles. It is one of seven Biblical commandments intended for the "Children of Noah"

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[35] The issue of idolatry in Judaism is a complex one, and I do not pretend to know all its ramifications. The present remarks may well go beyond the letter, into the spirit, of Jewish law. They are intended as an independent, philosophical analysis, not a religious legal opinion.

(i.e. the non-Jews, or Gentiles). This is stated in the "oral law" and subsequent rabbinical commentaries. In that case, Judaism may be regarded as categorically rejecting all religions that involve idolatrous beliefs and practices to any degree. Similar teachings are in principle found in Islam, no doubt thanks to Jewish influence.

With regard to Christianity, the issue is more complex, however. Some Jewish commentators (Maimonides comes to mind) appear to class it as a monotheistic religion. They argue that Christians *intend* to worship the formless one and only God, even as they worship alleged incarnations of God (the Son, the Holy Ghost) by prostrating themselves before images and similar acts. Most Christians would agree with this assessment, and class themselves as monotheistic. In my view, certain aspects of Hinduism and even Buddhism may be similarly classed as ultimately 'monotheistic' in intent or in effect.

It would clearly be preferable, however, from a purely rational viewpoint, if all religions eschewed all thoughts or acts that could be regarded as idolatrous from their curriculum.

9. Good people

Discriminating between good and bad. “May all people be happy!” say the Buddhists. In my Jewish view, this Buddhist wish should be understood in proper sequence. Not as an indiscriminate, unjust wish that all people *as they are* be happy now – for then evil people would get away with their evil! Rather as a wish that such people change for the better, and when they thus earn happiness it will come upon them. This is similar to the Talmudic story of a Talmudic rabbi who was told by his wife (if I remember rightly) not to curse evil people out of this world but to wish evil to depart.

And really, I think that is what the Buddhist expression is intended to mean. For Buddhism does not consider that happiness will befall anyone *contrary to their karma*, but rather that anyone *who attains enlightenment* will find ‘happiness’ therein. For they will then have lost their ignorance, and the intrigue and violence it generates, and their problems would disappear. Thus, the pious wish should

more accurately be stated as "May all people attain enlightenment!" – and in this non-provocative form, who would oppose the idea?

Of course, the issue remains: can all people indeed become good? Supposedly, if we all proceed from the One, we can all return to the One – so Buddhism would apparently say.

On the other hand, would we want a Hitler to ever redeem himself – should there not for him and the likes of him be no redemption ever?

The good man. The good man[36] is of course a strong man, in the sense of someone with a power of will sufficiently developed to overcome morally negative influences and temptations, and forge ahead towards morally positive ends. He has character; he is not at the mercy of chance impulses within himself.

However, such strength of character is not his deepest secret. His true power is his moral intelligence – viz. his understanding that the good is valuable and the evil is valueless and counterproductive. He is not fooled by illusory attractions or repulsions. It is for this reason especially that he does not find it so difficult to avoid evil and pursue good.

[36] Or good woman – here the term 'man' is intended as meaning 'human being'.

That is, through lucid insight, the good man neutralizes the power of negative influences to slow him down or arrest him, and enhances the power of positive influences to facilitate his way towards spiritual success. He is consistently wise: he is not moved by the mirages that the evil impulse presents him, but on the contrary empowers his better side. He never dithers between good and bad.

By way of contrast, the spiritually low or evil man is basically stupid. He convinces himself (sometimes through superficially clever intricate arguments) that evil is attractive and good is unattractive – and for this reason he is overwhelmed by evil and uninterested in good. Alternatively, he mentally places good and evil on the same plane. It is he, by his own twisted imaginations, who has given evil power over himself and weakened his native goodness.

Thus, the virtuous man is not victorious so much due to exceptionally strong will, but because of his perceptiveness and wisdom, which render his ordinary strength of will more easily effective. The wicked man, on the other hand, has woven for himself such a *delusion* about the value of evil or non-value of good, or through doubt, that he weakens and incapacitates himself in any attempt to avoid evil and do good.

I thus, in the last analysis, agree with the Buddhist idea that the root of evil is essentially a *cognitive* failure – a self-inflicted fiction, illusion, foolishness and stupidity. The volitional problem behind moral failure is relatively

secondary; it is subsidiary to the weakening of self and strengthening of obstacles due to erroneous convictions. For this reason, meditation and sound reasoning are both essential antidotes.

This explains why the perfect man (the *tzadik* in Judaism or the enlightened man in Buddhism) is said to be free of good or evil. This does not mean that he is morally permitted to do evil, but that he has no desire to do evil. And this does not mean that he is forced deterministically to do good, but that he clearly sees that evil is without interest and stupid. Thus, he never falls into vice or fails to be virtuous, *not because he lacks free will*, but because of active moral intelligence.

This conception of morality can be clarified further by considering the extreme case – that of God. We conceive of Him as having Omnipotent free will, and yet as never committing evil or even abstaining from good. These characteristics are seen as mutually consistent, if we understand that God is obviously not forced by anything (any deterministic force or influence on His volition) to be Perfect, but being Omniscient and All-wise He is simply never fooled by evil and is anyway always more than strong enough to overcome its superficial attractions. For this reason, it is safe to say that utter goodness is the 'nature' of God, without thereby implying that He is at all determined or influenced to so act. Even though he always opts for the good, it is always a free choice of His.

We must try to tend in that direction, following the principle of *imitatio Dei*. The tzadik is someone who has found the spark of Godliness within him to such a degree that he naturally acts in perfect accord with that principle.

The danger of religiosity. Though religions are in principle intended to improve people, religion can sometimes be an obstacle to self-improvement, because it may give us a false sense of perfection. One seems in accord with its essential demands, and so comes to ignore 'little imperfections'. Our shortcoming may be improper social behavior, i.e. lack of respect, consideration, politeness, and the like (what is called *derekh eretz* in Judaism); or perhaps a holier-than-thou attitude or a more pronounced form of fanaticism.

This observation is nothing new. Many people steer clear of religion precisely to avoid such ugly side-effects of it. We see around us, and history has often shown us, many cases of this disease – in Judaism, in Christianity and in Islam, and no doubt likewise in the other religions. To be fair, such unpleasant aspects of religiosity sometimes emerge from secular philosophies or from science. Conceit and arrogance are not the monopoly of any single doctrine.

The truth is, all religions and all philosophies (including science) *are part of 'samsara'*. They can help us approach 'nirvana', but they cannot take us all the way there. They are intrinsically flawed by their format as rational and volitional pursuits – whereas true transcendence requires a sort of

fundamental ‘letting go’ of this world and one’s place in it. So, whatever doctrine one adheres to, one should not allow oneself to be blinded by it. It is always a means, not the end.

10. A world of mercy

There is a Jewish doctrine according to which this is a world of mercy (tempering justice), whereas after death we go to a world of (strict) justice. One's first reaction to that claim might be: 'what, you call this a world of mercy?' Yes, the idea here intended is that the sufferings we go through in this world are very light compared to what we justly deserve. Thus, we are better off paying off our debts by suffering in this world, rather than having them exacted off us in the next world. For there, the full payment will be required, without mercy.

The teaching here taught is that we should take advantage of the opportunities for redemption offered to us by this world, because here we have freewill and can repent and do good deeds. Whereas, in the world after death, we can no longer fix our errors or perform positive *mitzvoth* (duties), but must passively receive whatever we have coming. Thus, this is a

teaching designed to push us to act while we still have the chance to do so.

This idea is comparable to the Buddhist doctrine that to be born as a human being is a very exceptional opportunity to attain enlightenment/liberation (*nirvana*). Such a chance should not be wasted on vanities or in negative activities, but one should strive positively for removal of bad karma and for spiritual growth. Otherwise, next time one may be reborn in a less favorable estate, and become stuck in the cycle of *samsara* (birth and death, implying suffering) for eons.

Needless to say, one can see in this context the stupidity of suicide[37]. According to this teaching, such an act is not an effective way to escape from one's difficult situation, but only a way to make matters worse (in the hereafter or the next life). Trying to avoid challenges is useless and counterproductive. One should always bravely face the difficulties of life and cheerfully try to improve one's situation as well as one can. Life is certainly a great gift. And time passes so quickly.

Lately, the media fashionmongers have started pushing relentlessly in favor of voluntary euthanasia or 'assisted suicide'. Most Western countries have already made passive euthanasia (i.e. withholding life support) legal, and now some

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[37] I mention this, due to reading often lately about youths – in Japan, in Britain – committing suicide. No doubt they feel afraid of life, and presumably have been given no spiritual education that would give them the strength and courage to face it.

have legalized active euthanasia (i.e. killing) and the issue has become hot in most others. The advocates of this social innovation make it seem like an act of mercy – parading some people with terribly painful incurable diseases to excite our pity. These advocates are of course materialists, who do not believe in any sort of afterlife or rebirth.

They do not consider that it may be more merciful to allow the sufferer's bad karma to play itself out on this earth in this lifetime than to artificially cut it short. They do not consider that things might be worse thereafter, precisely because the karma was not allowed to play itself out. How do I know? I don't! But do they? Certainly not! They have no sure knowledge either, only mere speculations.

Moreover, the advocates of euthanasia do not really consider that helping someone commit suicide for whatever motive might still be murder. They are usually the same people or type of people who legalized abortion on demand, indifferent to the suffering and privation of life of the babies killed. They are close to those who support homosexuality, and in particular the adoption of children by homosexuals. They are people who consider their pursuit of any pleasure or avoidance of all pain as unquestionable absolutes. They do not acknowledge that we may earn certain pains or have no right to certain pleasures. They have little or no regard for spirituality or ethics.

And they have nothing to offer the suffering souls other than a quick and supposedly painless death. At least religion offers

hope of cure or redemption. In situations of great suffering, why not try prayer and repentance? It might help, psychologically if not existentially. Also, when possible, try meditation.

11. Understanding injustice

Justice occurs when you do some good or bad – through intention or some other mental act, through speech or some other physical act – and you get back what you deserve in relation and in proportion to that deed. Injustice means that some good is not followed by commensurate good or is followed by undeserved bad; or that some bad is not followed by commensurate bad or is followed by undeserved good.

Thus, justice and injustice are concepts depending on our notions of what deeds are good or bad, and of what is deserved or undeserved in relation and in proportion to them. Our 'perception' of justice or injustice has an emotional effect of its own on us. Note first that since justice and injustice are essentially rational judgments, the word 'perception' here may be misleading. We indeed perceive the situation, but its evaluation as just or unjust of course depends on a conceptual process.

When we rightly or wrongly perceive justice to have occurred, we feel comforted and pleased. Inversely, when we rightly or wrongly perceive injustice to have occurred, we feel threatened and angered. (Note the acknowledgment that such judgments may occasionally be in error; there is no guarantee of correctness.)

Because perceptions of justice or injustice strongly affect us, it is important to understand these concepts. Such understanding has a calming effect on the mind, and even on the soul. Religious doctrines such as that of Divine justice (under the religions based on Abraham's monotheism) or that of karma (under Hinduism and Buddhism) were certainly designed to pacify us in this regard. But before we consider[38] these doctrines, a number of philosophical reflections are worth making.

Justice and injustice are not concepts relating to a wholly mechanistic world. Under a universal system of determinism and/or spontaneity, nothing is either just or unjust, everything just 'is'. Moreover, there being no conscious living being to feel effects or evaluate them, these concepts are irrelevant and inapplicable. In a world with only God – i.e. Someone omniscient, omnipotent and perfect through and through – there is automatic universal justice and no injustice at all.

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[38] Or reconsider them – for I have commented on this topic in many of my past works. Here, I seek to bring additional clarifications.

The concepts of justice and injustice logically both come into play only in a world containing any number of living entities endowed with limited consciousness, volition and powers of valuation. That number could be only one, provided that single entity is not God, i.e. is a mere creature with limited powers (this could be assumed under a solipsist philosophy). But actually, our world seems to have many such entities, with some powers of cognition, freewill and valuation (there are apparently at least 6 billion humans who would fit this definition, not to mention other animals).

This insight – that *the concepts of justice and injustice depend on there being some non-mechanistic and less than Divine entities in the world* – is valid whether considered in the framework of atheism (as in modern materialism or in early Buddhism) or monotheism (as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam). It is all the more valid under polytheism (as in Hinduism, in some forms of Buddhism, and in other religions), since such religious form by definition involves numerous competing wills.

If for the sake of brevity we refer to the entities under consideration as entities with freewill (since this power presupposes consciousness and implies valuation), what we want to stress here is that **some injustice is inevitable in a world with competing wills**[39]. In a world without will at all,

[39] The word freewill involves a redundancy. An action that is not free would not be referred to as 'will' – but as a mechanistic

there is neither injustice nor justice. In a world with only God having will, there is only justice and no injustice. It is only in a world like ours that injustice occurs – and indeed, injustice is bound to occasionally occur in it.

Once this principle is comprehended, it is much easier to emotionally accept the existence of injustice. The existence of injustice in the world is not because the world is badly constructed or mismanaged – but is a *logical inevitability* given the existence of a multitude of competing entities with limited powers of awareness and will.

Granting God created the world and us in it, He could not have made it otherwise. To give us some powers of will, He has to abstain from exercising His full power of will (omnipotence). To have freewill is to be able to do good or bad – i.e. not to do the good one ought to do, on occasion; and even to do the bad one ought not do, on occasion. Even if some people were to always do only good, there is every likelihood that some people will occasionally do bad or not do good, or simply make mistakes.

This is equally true in a belief system devoid of God (which many people favor nowadays). In a mostly mechanistic world containing some entities with some powers of freewill, such entities are not likely to act always in a fully beneficial manner. Some people will sometimes inevitably, through wrong judgment or bad will, cause harm to themselves or to

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'event'. Will is called free only to stress this obvious fact. Thus, will and freewill are synonyms.

others, in a way that bears no rational relation and/or proportion to preceding deeds.

This "inevitability", note well, is a *statistical* fact, not implying determinism (otherwise, we could not logically refer to such events as acts of will). However, the intent here is not to reduce all events in human life to luck. It is only to deny that there can be automatic *universal* justice in our world, and to acknowledge that some injustice must occur, by virtue of the complexity of that world. It is not a statement that all is unjust, but only a statement that justice and injustice both occur.

And indeed, that is how we see the world in common sense, as a mixture of both. It is precisely for this reason that we have notions of both justice and injustice. Given this as an empirical fact, two questions arise.

The first question is: even if injustice *appears* to occur in the short run – might not justice be *restored later on in life or in an afterlife*? Such an assumption is a premise of many religions. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there is belief in a natural system of "karma" – through which every good or bad deed is *automatically* eventually (in this life or some later one(s)) compensated. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is a similar faith in future reward or punishment, except that it is made *dependent on* the will of God, who may choose to mercifully withhold retribution.

In the latter case, God's behavior towards us is conceived as *dependent on our later behavior (regret, repentance, etc.),*

and on our prayers. There is also, to a lesser extent, in all these religions, a doctrine that one person may sometimes take on the suffering of others and so lighten their load somewhat. In this context, it is considered useful in some religions to direct prayers to saints[40].

On a more secular plane, the awareness that justice is not automatic and some injustice is inevitable gives rise to private and public efforts at redress. Individuals sometimes reward a good deed or avenge a wrong by someone else. Societies usually establish elaborate justice systems, to ensure some of the injustices that do occur are compensated in some way.

Note well: if we believed that natural justice and/or Divine justice ensures appropriate retribution for all good and bad deeds, there would be no point in human acts of justice or a societal system of justice. On the contrary, such interference on our part could create confusion. It is precisely because we understand that justice is, at least in part, a human moral responsibility that we elect parliamentarians to enact laws, and appoint judges and a police force to implement these laws.

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[40] No one in Judaism prays to living or dead *people* (e.g. Moses or some Rebbe). Likewise (to my knowledge) in Islam (they do not pray to Mohammed). But prayers to saintly people and to people presumed to be gods incarnate are common in other religions: Christians pray to Jesus or Mary, Buddhists pray to Buddhas or bodhisattvas, and Hindus even pray to their flesh and blood gurus.

This leads us to the second question: *what to do about injustice?* From a spiritual development point of view, it is of course essential to demand a maximum of justice *from oneself* (towards self and others). One should also help others obtain justice, whenever and to the extent possible. But to expect constant and full justice, or worse still to demand it, *from others* (towards self) is not very wise; it is to condemn oneself to unnecessary conflict and suffering.

One should as much as possible disregard the misdeeds of others towards oneself, and move on. To get entangled in concerns like revenge is a waste of valuable time, a distraction from more important spiritual pursuits. One should realize the "samsaric" nature of this world we are in: it is so made that one cannot hope for 100% justice within it. So, it is best to accept things as they are, and take things in stride, as far as possible. One can train oneself to be "above it all" – and become relatively immune.

Of course, in some cases it would be wrong and even suicidal to accept injustice. For instance, it would not be wise (for others' sakes, if not one's own) to allow a murderous dictatorship to pursue its course. On the other hand, often our vexations are due to envy or excessive desire. For instance, one may get upset at not getting as much salary as one's colleagues at work. Follow the golden mean.

A word about the concept of "social justice" is appropriate here. This concept is based on the naturalist idea that all humans are born "equal", and the context they are born into

(genes, family, social milieu, wealth, etc.) is a matter of good or bad *luck*. This could be construed as a relatively materialist notion, which is less emphasized by people who believe in karma or in Divine management. But that does not belie it.

Often, it is true, people who demand social justice (meaning mainly economic equality) are simply envious and wish to obtain unearned benefits. On the other hand, it is true that "we are all in it (this world) together" and we can by judicious effort make it a world with maximum opportunity and minimum suffering for all. This is the real premise for social justice: it is ultimately good for everyone. Helping others does not impoverish the haves, but enriches them by improving the world surrounding them and inside themselves.

12. Forgiveness

It is not always easy to forgive those who have caused us some tangible or assumed harm. Yet, forgiveness of some sort seems in ordinary circumstances wise, if one wants to avoid wasteful entanglements. So, it is worthwhile reflecting on this topic. Forgiving means abstaining from demanding reparation for damage sustained; or again, refraining from seeking revenge.

Forgiveness varies in kind, with regard to the victim's attitude towards the offender:

- One does not punish someone one believes culpable.
- Or one 'understands' the culprit, considering him or her at some level or to some degree less guilty than he or she strictly appears to be.
- Or one is willing to relinquish judgment, going so far as to let the matter drop and forget it altogether.

Forgiveness may take different forms:

- *Conditional pardon*: this is not forgiving without first receiving at least a sincere apology, an acknowledgment of guilt and promise not to repeat the offense, so that one is not taken for a 'sucker' and 'screwed' again.
- *Unconditional pardon*: this is graceful forgiving, not dependent on a prior sign of repentance from the offender, considering that such grace may eventually cause his or her conscience to realize the harm done and the debt owed.
- *Pragmatic pardon*: disregarding the offense, moving on to other things. This may mean avoiding the offender thenceforth, or resuming interactions with him or her as if nothing happened. One may take such an attitude out of practical necessity; or so as not to remain blocked by hate, dropping the matter to be emotionally freed of it.

These are some aspects of forgiveness and common motives concerning it. Note that to forgive is not necessarily to forget. Even when one forgives, one may nevertheless vow not to forget, so as not to be victimized again. In such cases, one remains on guard against a proven danger, ready henceforth to defend oneself.

In this context, a reflection on the Christian statement "forgive them, for they know not what they do"[41] is in order.

[41] As I recall, this was uttered by Jesus against the Jews or the Romans involved in his crucifixion, somewhere in the Christian

Such a motive for forgiveness may be considered self-contradictory, insofar as forgiveness presupposes some responsibility, which presupposes actions that were to some degree voluntary and conscious – if they were totally unconscious and involuntary, there is nothing to forgive, i.e. the concept of forgiveness is *not applicable*. One can still consistently say "don't be angry, for they know not what they do"; for one might well be angry at a natural phenomenon, and seek to calm one's anger, although one has no one to resent or forgive. Of course, it is also consistent to say: "forgive them, for they *hardly* know what they are doing", implying a bit of self-awareness – but one must consider to what extent "they" have chosen to be so unconscious. But in any case, one should not forgive by fooling oneself into doing so.

Forgiveness is usually the wisest course, because anger and hatred are attachments, i.e. weaknesses. One should not let one's enemy have this hold on one – i.e. weaken one and make one swerve away from serenity and nobility. It is bad enough that one has been wronged; it is preferable not to make matters worse for oneself by getting overly hung up on the episode. Let it pass, so far as possible. However, some crimes are unforgivable and it would be a crime to forgive them. Sometimes, one refuses to get involved in punishing

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Bible. This dramatic event was sadly used for centuries as a pretext to bash "the" Jews in general. That is to say, the "forgive them" statement was paradoxically interpreted as a call *not to* forgive!

guilt, out of laziness or selfishness. One then descends into advocacy of moral relativism or amorality, to justify one's inaction. No, one must conscientiously fulfill one's responsibilities, where applicable. Thus, be neither hotheaded nor indifferent, but find the right balance between mercy and justice.

Meditation both requires and produces forgiveness. One cannot advance far in meditation, if one is not willing to "let go" of unpleasant experiences. Also, the more one advances in meditation, the less are unpleasant experiences of any interest or importance. The mental influence of negative events diminishes, so that they appear less negative and so, when applicable, more easily forgiven.

General forgiveness. The Buddhists have a concept of "*metta*", which emphasizes universal love and compassion – even towards one's enemies, even towards people who have committed great crimes. This is of course a concept of total, immediate and unconditional forgiveness. The idea is that, through such magnanimous non-attachment to hatred and revenge, one becomes able to change people for the better and forge peace. It is argued that if one hangs on to resentment one only keeps the spiral of violence going.

I find it hard to subscribe to such a view, which in today's morally confused world is serving more and more as a justification for passivity to injustice. It is the sort of upside-down view that places Nazis and Nazi-hunters – or

Palestinian terrorism and Israeli self-defense– on the same moral plane. The net result of this Buddhist idea is that victims are reproved for complaining or defending themselves, and their aggressors are tolerated and appeased no matter how heinous their crimes.

Permit me to doubt that such an attitude can lead to world peace, or social peace, or inner peace. It is, instead, a formula for suicide and utter anarchy; justice has to be enforced at some level, or injustice is bound to reign. By failing to resist crime, we weaken the innocent victims and make them more and more vulnerable, and we strengthen and encourage thugs. Justice must be swift and firm, to make clear to all potential criminals that there is no profit in their antisocial behavior, and thus to protect the innocent as much as possible.

As for the universal compassion enjoined by Buddhism, I wonder whether it is fair to describe it as a high-minded virtue. If we examine the motivation involved within the individual practitioner, who in meditation trains himself to forgive and love his enemy, or anyone he perceives as evil, we see that: in the hope of gaining personal spiritual elevation or liberation, he is willing to be indifferent to the suffering of the victims of criminals, or even to reach-out in a friendly manner to criminals. This is best described as a selfish cop-out or sell-out.

However, if we avoid extremes, ‘metta’ is certainly commendable. An almost general loving-kindness can be cultivated by reflecting on the fact that we are all in this

difficult world (samsara) together. We are all poor sods who landed here all of a sudden, not knowing from where and not knowing till where and when. This is our common lot. Some of us may seemingly have a luckier fate, but all of us experience some difficulty. One should not be too judging. Perhaps if I was born and raised in the place of this other person, I would have come out worse than him or her.

13. Actions and reactions

The consequences of actions. All human actions have some sort of consequence; that is evident and not open to debate. However, discussions arise as to whether our actions always, necessarily have just consequences (for good or bad, as the case may be), or whether they may have unjust or non-just consequences (i.e. more or less than exactly what is deserved).

According to the "karma" theory of Buddhism (and indeed Hinduism), justice is ensured quite naturally. Actions automatically cause eventual symmetrical reactions, although the agent of the action (i.e. the doer of the deed) may have to reincarnate after death to receive the whiplash (i.e. for the "law of karma" to hold). But Buddhism has not clearly described this reincarnation process, nor provided convincing empirical evidence for it (some sort of demonstration of continuity between purported incarnations). Note that ultimately there is no mercy built into this conception, except

perhaps for the mercy that individual humans[42] might choose to exercise.

In Judaism (and similar religions), justice is conditionally ensured by Divine intervention. God sees the misdeed and reacts to it as He wills, in strict justice or with mercy. This conception could either mean that God always takes complete charge of the connection (so that without Him human actions would have no necessary consequences), or more probably that He has instituted a natural action-reaction justice process that He may on occasion override with mercy. Here, then, the reactions to our actions are not (or not entirely) preprogrammed, but depend on ad hoc decision by God case by case. Obviously, such decisions involve some degree of willful choice by Him, else they would never mercifully derogate from justice.

In Judaism, as in Buddhism, the ethical account may be settled within the present life – or it may have to be dealt with in an afterlife. For it seems evident empirically that not all accounts are settled in the present life, else we would not have the impression that some evil people sometimes get away with evil and even enjoy more than they deserve and that some good people suffer unjustly or remain unrewarded for their good deeds. Both lines of thought, therefore, tend to agree on the existence of a 'heaven' and a 'hell' of some sort after the current life. These might be distinct places, or they

[42] Or their more enlightened counterparts, i.e. Buddhas, bodhisattvas or *devas* ("gods").

might merely characterize specific conditions of rebirth within this same world.

Thirdly, of course, there is the philosophy of Naturalism, based on realistic assessment of empirically evident phenomena without assuming anything beyond them (i.e. a vague and unproved reincarnation, let alone Divine intervention). This hypothesis considers that good or bad deeds do sometimes impact on the universe and are absorbed by it, without respectively benefiting or harming their doer. This view is also logically credible, although least satisfying to our native sense of right and wrong. It is (I presume) the view held by most people in the West today.

I cannot pretend to logically prescribe one of these views to the exclusion of the others. They are all theories, all to some extent based on facts and all involving proposals that inductively go beyond these facts. Who can say for sure which one is objectively correct? I can however, echoing Pascal's Wager, say that people who ignore the Judaic or Buddhist warning of eventual retribution if we do not do right and avoid wrong *may* conceivably eventually find themselves in dire straits. Comparatively, nothing much is risked by not opting for the Naturalistic thesis – the only 'loss' is not being able to do whatever one likes or not-do whatever one dislikes, i.e. a more limited range of possible action.

Based on this reasoning, it would seem wise to act *as if* justice exists (i.e. even though one cannot definitely prove it), and do good and avoid doing evil. Moreover, it would seem

wise to hope and pray for God's mercy (again, even if there are no guarantees one will get it). One might otherwise, to repeat, eventually have some unpleasant surprises.

The concept of karma. The Buddhist (and likewise Hindu) concept of karma is inconsistent and imperfect in various respects.

For a start, it presupposes a world that has existed eternally, so that every event in one's life has a karmic precedent in previous lives in infinite regression. But this is contrary to modern ideas in astronomy and biology, according to which the material world has an undifferentiated beginning (quarks or earlier) and life has a start (on earth at least, some four billion years ago). The Buddhists may of course reply that such apparent beginning is a mere continuation of existences in previous material worlds or of previous purely spiritual existence(s).

Actions *do* indeed have consequences, but these are perhaps *not* always very 'just' (in all appearance). The hypothesis that actions always *ultimately* have just consequences involves an act of faith. It is an attempt to make the world more 'reasonable', an attempt that sometimes only produces painful disappointments and disillusions. We have to be honest and ready to accept that Nature is apparently sometimes just but *not* always so. This unpleasant observation might be mitigated through a karmic (or

monotheistic) theory, but at the empirical level it is indubitable and best kept in mind.

Next, consider that logically there has to be a *first* crime (an aggression, or whatever), and an *innocent victim* of that first crime. For if we believe in *free will*, the crime is a gratuitous, *ex nihilo,* choice, and its victim is innocent. If we claim that the victim is on the receiving end because he (or she) did the same or a similar crime before (in this or in a previous lifetime) – we are effectively saying that he is *not* innocent, but *deserves* the victimization this time round. We should then congratulate the criminal, for committing an act of justice, punishing an evil person, closing the karmic circle (inevitably, according to the karmic premise). Thus, the karmic theory turns a victim into a criminal and the real criminal into an enforcer of justice!

Moreover, the real criminal cannot then be deserving of bad karma later on for his action (since it was de facto a 'just' act), whether he chose his action freely or was deterministically pushed to do it (by the force of universal karmic law). He is largely exculpated. At most, he could be faulted for his inappropriate motive. In that case, the infinite cycle of karma is interrupted; i.e. there is no reason to expect him to be in turn a victim later on. This is the *inherent inconsistency* in the eternal karma viewpoint – it logically eliminates itself. The concepts of victim/criminal are *only* relevant in a freewill-doctrine context. The concepts are stolen in other contexts.

In my view, there *are* truly innocent victims of crime, first-time events of crime, and criminals truly guilty of crime. To *explain away* crime by karmic/deterministic views is to effectively accuse without any evidence (i.e. 'on principle') the victim of being an ex-criminal (and so deprive him of his dignity as a victim) and to praise the criminal for effectively doing justice. The proposed explanation produces confusion: it reverses the roles of the protagonists. It is an ideological viewpoint and a patently unfair one.

We may suppose that the karma theory was introduced as an explanation, to console people shocked by the injustice of physical aggressions, and other such events in the world. It obviously has some 'grain of truth' in it: there is indeed *some* 'karma', in the sense that some human actions apparently have *consequences that are satisfyingly just (*for good or bad) in our eyes. The problem is that *not all* human acts manifestly have such appropriate consequences; some seemingly have inappropriate consequences, either neutral or contrary to ethical expectations/demands. Thus, the theory cannot be inductively proved by generalization, only at best by adduction.

We may also object to the universality of karmic explanation by pointing out that not all suffering is due to victimization *by someone else*. This means that we cannot lay the blame on a *similar* crime by the sufferer, as it suggests. I am referring here to accidents and natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, epidemics, famine and the like). Since in such cases there is

(usually) no human action at *root* and indeed (again, usually) no human action could have prevented them, we cannot establish a *causal* connection and claim the untoward event happened *because* the victim deserved it (and even less that the victim can be inferred to have deserved it because the event happened!)

Karmic theory would have to claim equivalencies, i.e. work out some sort of conversion or exchange rates, between certain human acts and various accidents and natural disasters. Such intractable theoretical complications mean that karmic theory lacks technical precision (that is, it is not sufficiently fleshed-out, as required by epistemology) and is very hard to substantiate. Furthermore, we should not only look at *bad* natural events, but also at *good* ones – and how would we establish that someone Nature has well taken care of deserved it?

Appendix 1 Round numbers in Torah statistics

List of numbers. The following concerns the near ubiquity of round numbers in Torah population statistics, not to mention other contexts. This is a possibly non-exhaustive listing, drawn from Exodus and Numbers.

The point of the present listing is to show that round numbers are the rule (with one exception) in enumerations of people in the Torah. That is to say, the numbers here listed (49 cases, including totals given in the text) usually end in hundreds of thousands (2 cases), thousands (5 cases), or hundreds (31 cases), or fifties (6 cases), or other tens (4 cases), and only one case in units.

This near ubiquity of round numbers is very surprising, not to say suspicious. It suggests the numbers are not empirical, but guesses or rough estimates or deliberately rounded figures or sheer fabrications. I have not to date found the question asked

or an explanation offered in the commentaries. Such failure to notice or to comment is itself problematic.[43]

Rabbinical commentaries are also often in round numbers, but these are usually openly intended as approximations. However, in most the statistics here listed exact enumeration is apparently intended. Traditional commentaries so interpret them, and insist that this shows God is interested in each and every individual[44]. It is therefore difficult to suppose that Moses wrote down approximate numbers for some reason (unless we abandon such commentaries).

In Ex. 12:37 – parashah Bo:

"Men on foot, besides children".

about 600'000.

This is explicitly stated as a rough number: "about" (*ke-*). It is not stated how this number was arrived at.

A methodology is given in Ex. 30:11-15 for the subsequent, more precise censuses. Each individual to be numbered would donate half a shekel (or '*beka*'), then the total receipt

[43] As we shall see further on (as I found out after writing most of this article and publishing it on the Web), the question has in fact been asked before, both by rabbis and academics, and various answers have been proposed, which I shall present and evaluate.

[44] See Rashi comment to Num. 1:1, further on. Also, e.g. *Hiddushei Harim*.

would be multiplied by two.[45] This methodology is confirmed by actual practice in Ex. 38:25-26, where the total receipt in silver is specified.

It is not stated how long it took to carry out such a census. It could *conceivably* be done in a day or less, if well organized. Every man to be counted could hand his coin to the head of his small group (say, of one hundred men), then each of these heads could hand his collected coins to the head of a larger group (say, of one thousand men), who in turn would take the coins to the central collection point. There they would declare the total coins collected under their responsibility, and a grand total would be calculated. If this is indeed how the coins were collected, this total could be expected to be precisely correct.

In Ex. 32:28 – parashah Ki tissa:

"… fell of the people that day" at the hands of the Levites (after the golden calf episode):

about 3'000 Men.

This is explicitly stated as a rough number: "about" (*ki*-). Further on, it is written "and the L-rd smote the people, because they made the calf…" (Ex. 32:35), but no number is

[45] Note that this method was applicable only to tribes other than Levi, since the latter was not subject to such monetary contributions and moreover even children in it were counted. See more on this further down.

specified, and the commentators (e.g. Nachmanides) are not sure this meant more people were killed. Rashi on Ex. 31:18 implies that these events occurred on the 17th of Tammuz or soon thereafter.

In Ex. 38:26 – parashah Pekudei:

Men "from 20 years old and upward".

total 603'550.

The Torah gives us this total number without breakdown into tribes as in the book of Numbers, note; perhaps this suggests no tribal distinctions were made, only the total being sought out. Anyway, the total is confirmed within the text in the previous verse (v. 25), where it says "the silver of them that were numbered of the congregation" was 100 talents (*kikar*) and 1775 shekels (of the sanctuary).[46]

[46] A question that comes to mind here is: where did all these half-shekel silver coins come from? Were they minted in Sinai before these censuses, or were they brought over from Egypt – and in the latter case, who minted them there and in what context? This question affects the credibility of the narrative somewhat. We could further ask whether coins at all existed at the time of the Exodus (traditionally, 2448 BCE). According to the findings of historians so far, Sumerians and Egyptians used silver and gold bars of set weight as money already in the fourth millennium BCE, and the shekel as a measure of weight existed in Mesopotamia already in about 3000 BCE – but the first stamped coins in the Mediterranean region date from about 650 BCE in Lydia, though there may have been earlier coinage in India or China.

The commentator Rashi tells us contextually that 1 talent is equal to 3000 such shekels; thus, the amount of silver corresponded to 603'550 half-shekel contributors. This calculation, note well, strongly confirms the idea that the total number of men given here is intended as exact, since it is unthinkable that the amount of silver was not accurately reported. It is thus understandable that Rashi offered no comment on the roundness of the number: he evidently regarded it as exact. This is the significance of his comment to Num. 1:1 (shown next), that this census was a demonstration of God's love for Israel – God wanted to show his interest in each and every Jew.

It is worth here quoting Rashi's comment to Num 1:1 in full:

> *Because they* [the Jews] *are precious before Him* [Hashem]*, He counts them all the time. When they went out of Egypt He counted them* [Ex. 12:37]*; and when they fell because of the golden calf He counted them to know the number of those who remained* [Ex. 32:28]*; when He came to cause His Presence to rest upon them He counted them* [Ex. 38:26]*;. On the first day of Nissan the Mishkan was set up, and* [a month later] *on the first day of Iyar He counted them* [Num. 1:1].

Brackets mine. Note however that the actual number of survivors immediately after the sin of the golden calf is not given in Ex. 32. A *Sifte Hakhamim* comment explains this by

pointing out Rashi's wording to have been "the number of those who remained", implying the number to be calculable (by subtracting about 3'000 at least from about 600'000) rather than known by enumeration.

In Num. 1:20-47 (confirmed 2:1-33) – parashah Bemidbar:

"Every male from 20 years old and upward, all that were able to go to war", "but the Levites… were not numbered among" them.

	46'500	Children of Reuven	
	59'300	Children of Simeon	
	45'650	Children of Gad	151'450 South
	74'600	Children of Judah	
	54'400	Children of Issachar	
	57'400	Children of Zebulun	186'400 East
	40'500	Children of Ephraim	
	32'200	Children of Manasseh	
	35'400	Children of Benjamin	108'100 West
	62'700	Children of Dan	
	41'500	Children of Asher	
	53'400	Children of Naphtali	157'600 North
total	603'550	Children of Israel except Levites.	

Note the exceptional ending in 50 for the Gadites, all other tribes ending in multiples of 100. This census occurred, on "the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt" (Num. 1:1). According to Ibn Ezra and Sforno, the purpose of the census was "to make arrangements for the encampments and the marching of the people"; they also specify that "these arrangements had to be completed by the twentieth of the same month, the day on which they left…" (*Soncino Chumash*, p. 793).

Notice the equality between the 603'550 total here, and that given in Ex. 38:26. This is surprising in that some time (over a month) seemingly elapsed between them. Rashi and other commentators noticed this, and claimed it meant that (miraculously) no one died in between.

However, as one perspicacious reader, Eddie Kerem-Sadeh, has pointed out to me, this explanation of the equality does not account for men who were under 20 years during the Ex. 38:26 census and then entered the 20+ age group in time for the first Numbers census. Moreover, he pointed out, the census surely did not happen instantaneously, but must have taken some time to carry out – and during such time more changes may have occurred in the statistics.

I wonder if Rashi and other commentators thought of this important objection, which makes the miracle claim logically inadequate, for though people might miraculously be kept alive, they cannot be prevented from getting older (i.e. time

keeps passing). The best that could be said is that the number of those who died in the interim was equal to that of those who came of age during that time.[47]

Another and simpler explanation might be to regard these two censuses as one and the same. It could be argued that the Torah merely mentions the total number in Ex. 38, because it is there mainly concerned with detailing what was eventually done with the silver collected in the census; whereas in Num. 1, the Torah returns to this same census and so as to give us more statistical details. But this theory is not easy to defend.[48].

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[47] If the age group counted was not literally 20+ but 20-59, as seems intended by the "able to go to war" specification, then we must take into consideration people who were under 60 (and so counted) in the first of these censuses and over 60 (and so not counted) in the second. The equation then is that the net sum of entries due to coming of age and of exits due to aging or death is zero. In that case, Rashi's scenario is conceivable – i.e. there may have been no deaths, provided the number who reached maturity (20) equaled to the number who became too old (60).

[48] To uphold this speculation, the two enumerations must somehow be conflated. Ex. 38 concerns the preparations for erection of the sanctuary (*mishkan*), which presumably required the silver collected in the census; while Num. 1 concerns the preparations for departure from the wilderness, after the sanctuary was completed. Could it be that the actual erection of the sanctuary occurred after the census that started on or after the 1st of Iyar? If they indeed left that place within 20 days, as already mentioned, would they have had time take the census and then to erect and take down the sanctuary (and do all they did in between)? It seems difficult to uphold…

In Num. 3:14-39 – parashah Bemidbar:

Levites "from a month old and upward".

	7'500	Gershonites	
	8'600	Kohathites	
	6'200	Merarites	
total	22'300	Levites	by addition (not in text).

This total includes, according to commentaries:

	22'000	Levites	mentioned in text
plus	300	first-born Levites	inferred by commentators.

The motive for numbering the Levites was to replace the first-born of Israel (traditionally in charge of religious duties) with the Levites (Num. 3:11-13). The 300 first-born Levites couldn't replace first-born Israelites, being themselves already subject to the duties of first-born. How the Levites were counted is not clarified in the text. According to Rashi (v. 16), the Levites (or at least their underage children) were not actually counted, but their numbers were revealed to Moses by God. These numbers are obviously intended as exact, since the total of 22'000 is thereafter used in a precise calculation (see next).

In Num. 3:40-43 – parashah Bemidbar:

"First-born males of the Children of Israel from one month old and upward" (excluding Levites).

22'273	first-born Israelites	to be redeemed by 22'000 Levites.

Note this is *the only non-round number* so far listed.[49] Thus, 273 first-born Israelites could not be redeemed by Levites, but had to pay 5 shekels each (total Sh. 1'365), according to Num. 3:44-51.

The mismatch between the numbers of first-born Israelites and Levites to redeem them is significant, in that it makes improbable the hypothesis that God willed the round numbers for some purpose. Unless we assume He wanted some first-born not to be redeemable by Levites for some reason (perhaps just to make them pay 5 shekels each).

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[49] Eliahu Beller, of Bar Ilan U., Math. Dept., has argued (in "The Problem of the First Born", *Higayon* No. 2 [1992]) that the numbers of first-born Israelites and Levites given in the Torah "seems astonishingly low" and on the basis of a mathematical model suggests that "the Torah counted only those first-born who were born in the year between the Exodus and the census", concluding that "the total number of first-born was many times higher". The questions to ask here are: (a) why does the Torah not specify this, but instead give the impression it is referring to complete enumerations of first-born, with precision; and (b) how come the Rabbis never raised this issue?

In Num. 4:1-49 – parashah Naso:

Levites 30-50 years old "that entered upon the service".

	2'750	Kohathites
	2'630	Gershonites
	3'200	Merarites
total	8'580	Levites.

It is not stated how these numbers were arrived at or whether they are meant as exact. This census of Levites was apparently (in view of the age group it concerns) motivated by the assignment of religious duties to the three family groups.

In Num. 11:21 – parashah Behaalotekha:

"Men on foot".

(about) 600'000.

It is reasonable to assume this is intended by Moses as a rough number, based on the last census.

In Num. 16:2 – parashah Korach:

"Certain of the Children of Israel" who joined the rebellion.

250.

It is not stated how this number was arrived at or whether it is meant as exact.

In Num. 17:14 – parashah Korach:

"They that died by the plague" in this episode of rebellion.

14'700.

It is not stated how this number was arrived at or whether it is meant as exact.

In Num. 25:9 – parashah Balak:

"Those that died by the plague" in this lustful and idolatrous episode.

24'000.

It is not stated how this number was arrived at or whether it is meant as exact.

Note additionally that in a commentary on this episode by Rashi (specifically to Num. 25:5, quoting Sanhedrin 18a), it is stated that there were 78'000 judges each of whom killed 2 of his subjects, a total of 156'000 people.[50]

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[50] If we accept these figures as credible (personally, I hesitate to, considering that such a massive 20% population cull would have merited explicit mention in the Torah text) – we can infer the total adult male population at the time to have been 780'000 (if the judges of tens were included in their *minyans*) or perhaps 858'000 (if the judges were not included, which I am told is the case). This total, I guess (but do not know), would include all Israelite males aged over 13, since youths under 20 were also legally responsible.

In Num. 26:1-53 – parashah Pinchas:

All "the Children of Israel, from 20 years old and upward… all that are able to go forth to war" except Levites.

	43'730	Children of Reuven
	22'200	Children of Simeon
	40'500	Children of Gad
	76'500	Children of Judah
	64'300	Children of Issachar
	60'500	Children of Zebulun
	52'700	Children of Manasseh
	32'500	Children of Ephraim
	45'600	Children of Benjamin
	64'400	Children of Dan
	53'400	Children of Asher
	45'400	Children of Naphtali
total	601'730	Children of Israel except Levites.

Note the exceptional ending in 30 for the Reuvenites, all other tribes ending in multiples of 100. The text makes clear this is the new generation, about to enter the Promised Land, so it is not much use comparing this census to the earlier one. However, it is significant that the numbers are just as round here as there.

Note too that a comment by the Ramban (Nachmanides, mentioned in the *Soncino Chumash*, p. 940) states that the

men numbered were between 20 and 60 years old. Although this is not (to my knowledge) specifically stated in this and the previous census(es), it is presumably applicable to them all, being apparently inferred from the specification that the men numbered were "able to go to war". We could similarly suggest that the "able to go to war" specification would exclude men 20-59 years old with permanent physical or mental disabilities.

In Num. 26:62 – parashah Pinchas:

Levites, "every male a month old and upward".

23'000.

Same comment as the preceding: not to compare past and present populations.

In Num. 31:40 – parashah Mattoth:

"Persons" (virgin women) taken captive in the war against Midian.

32'000.

This may be intended as an exact number, since the priestly "tribute" from half this number was exactly 32 persons. However, this 1/500th tribute (as well as the 1/50th levitical tribute from the other half) might be deemed only applicable

to the nearest round numbers, up or down. Note in passing that the animals captured are also listed in round numbers.

Discussion. Now, the extremely low mathematical probabilities of the numerical coincidences noted here should be elucidated. The chances that a number end in 00 rather than in 01, 02, 03… or any other pair of last digits is simply 1 in 100; this is nothing special, since each ending has an equal chance. However, the chances that the 00 ending occurs in two separate statistics simultaneously are 1 in 100 times 100, i.e. 1/10'000. For three statistics, the chances are 1 in $100\times100\times100$ or 100^3 (100 cubed or 10^6). And so forth. Thus, for a conjunction of eleven numbers ending in 00, as above, the chances are 1 in 100^{11} (100 to the 11^{th} power or 10^{22}), clearly extremely slim. For this conjunction to be repeated in another set of eleven numbers, the chances are 100^{22} (10^{44}).

When I put this problem to a local rabbi, he argued that this was simply "a miracle, like the splitting of the sea" during the Exodus from Egypt. I replied that this was not a convincing argument to my mind, because whereas the splitting of the sea had an obvious purpose, viz. to allow the Children of Israel to pass through, the conjunction of so many round numbers is inexplicable. Why would God bother making sure the numbers of Jews was round at the time of counting? Was it a love of symmetry, perhaps? To claim a miracle, one has to conceive of a reasonable purpose for it.

However, I later (during my next meditation) realized a purpose can indeed be proposed for these round numbers. Perhaps God performed this miracle *simply to signal His presence*, i.e. to tell us the numbers involved were *not fortuitous* but of His own making! That would constitute a worthwhile purpose. In this manner, the low probability of a peculiar conjunction of statistics can be turned from a source of skepticism to a source of added faith.

An objection might be raised to such proposed interpretation by pointing out that the number of Gadites ends in 50 in Num. 1:24 and that of Reuvenites ends in 30 in Num. 26:7. Similarly, the number of Kohathites ends in 50 in Num. 4:36 and that of Gershonites ends in 30 in Num. 4:40. Why such endings instead of 00 as in all other cases?

Skeptics would argue that these irregularities are a feeble attempt by the inventor of all the numbers to make them seem a bit more realistic. The attempt is feeble, because while more variation would have been credible, such rare exceptions are not too convincing.

Those who favor the theory that Moses wrote down numbers to the nearest hundred could explain the occurrence of a 50 ending, by saying such an exact number cannot reasonably be increased or decreased to the nearest 00, since it is precisely

halfway between. But they could not similarly explain the occurrence of a 30 ending; besides, why precisely 30 twice?[51]

However, the proponents of the thesis that God is signaling His presence can reply that God inserted these slight irregularities in order to make room for skepticism. For, they would say, He desires us to believe in Him and His Torah through some measure of faith, rather than exclusively through proofs.

What is the logical upshot of all the above considerations?

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[51] Some interesting *possible* explanations of the round numbers have been suggested to me by the already mentioned reader, Eddie Kerem-Sadeh. One is that supposing the half-shekel coins were not counted but summed up by weighing large quantities of them together, and (as seems likely) the coins in use at the time were not all exactly equal in weight, the resulting total could only be approximate. Another is that the collecting and counting (or weighing) of coins must have taken considerable time, during which time there were age changes, as well as deaths; in that case, the numbers at the end of the process had perforce to be rounded, so as not to give a wrong impression that they were exact. Finally, he adds, if the results were audited, and found to vary somewhat, it would have been natural to record round number estimates, to express the margin of error involved. These seem to me excellent proposals on the whole. One objection I can think of is that, though from a secular point of view the coins might be deemed probably of unequal weight in view of technology then available, such coinage would be morally unacceptable according to Deut. 25:13. Moreover, if we look at Ex. 38:25-26, we see that the weight of silver and number of people inferred are precisely related.

- Looking at the highly improbable conjunction of numbers in certain passages of the Torah, one is inclined to a negative conclusion concerning them – i.e. to view the censuses they report as of very doubtful authenticity, if these are intended as exact. *If they are taken as approximations or rough estimates, their negative impact is of course thoroughly dissolved, note well.*
- Moreover, if the stated passages of the Torah are put in doubt, then to some extent so is the Torah as a whole; at least in the sense that it cannot readily be claimed *entirely* true. And to the extent that we base our faith in God's existence on the Torah, as many people do, such faith is in turn somewhat shaken – even if logically belief in God is quite possible without belief in the Torah.
- However, these skeptical conclusions remain *inductive*, because the opposing view is able to muster an alternative hypothesis in its defense. That is to say, the improbable set of exact numbers may *conceivably* be explained as an intentional creation of God to indicate His presence to the faithful. The mere fact that a counter-argument is possible suffices to ensure that a skeptical conclusion is *not deductively necessary*.
- But of course the skeptical conclusion remains inductively very strong. That an alternative hypothesis is remotely possible does not make belief in it necessary. It just provides a logical escape route, however farfetched. It leaves a little room for continued faith in the Torah, and

thence God, even if mathematics suggests improbability. Such belief is very improbable, but not quite impossible.

This overall conclusion is in accord with our general thesis that belief in God can neither be proved nor disproved. In this instance, it is not directly belief in God that is at stake, anyway, but the Torah or just a part thereof. We have above shown that the latter, although weakened considerably by certain numerical improbabilities in it, cannot be decisively discredited by them.

Now, let us examine certain implications of the above figures of 600'000 plus males in more detail. We know that the first set of 603'550 males 20 or more years old all (except for Joshua and Caleb) died in the 40 or so years until the second count of 601'730. Thus, the latter set consists of males who were 0-19 years old at the time of the earlier census, plus males born in the first 20 years of the intervening period. Males born in the second tranche of 20 years or so of the intervening period being under 20 years old are not included in the latter number.

At the time of the earlier census, there was no doubt some males over 60 years old who not being fit for war were not included in the figure of 603'550. But at the time of the later census, there were no males over 60 years old (with the said two exceptions), since all the earlier generation over 20 years old died off. (Presumably, the female Israelites over 20 years old of the earlier generation died off too.) Therefore, the

count of 601’730 is actually the number of all adult males, and we do not have to consider how many might be over 60 years old.

If we wish to estimate the total population that was poised to inherit the Promised Land, we must thus consider only three tranches of males: 0-19, 20-39 and 40-59. We know the latter two age groups add up to 601’730. If we assume (as a first guess, in view of the equality between the latter total and the earlier) these three tranches to be about equal, we can estimate the total male Israelite population at that time at 900’000. If we assume there were an equal number of females, the total Israelite population would have been 1’800’000.

These figures all exclude Levites. We know there were 23’000 males of all age groups (over one month old). This figure may include many over 60 years old, since the older generations of Levites did not all die off (as implied by Rashi’s comment to Num. 1:49). If we assume here again an equal number of females, the total Levite population would be 46’000. This presumably includes the priests (*kohanim*). Add this to the Israelite total, and we get **a grand total of 1’850’000 or so** (in round numbers).

This calculation explains the traditional figure of 2-3 million. The two million figure is a reasonable minimum – given the Torah numbers – and the higher three million figure is based on somewhat larger reproductive assumptions. Some people have suggested even larger figures, in the 4-5 million range,

but this seems wildly exaggerated to me. I am not a demographer, but it seems to me the above assumptions are more reasonable.

As already mentioned, the figures given in the Torah can be doubted on simple grounds of mathematical improbability that so many round numbers would occur together. But[52] modern *historians* have come up with much more serious cause for doubt – namely the fact that a population of the magnitude proposed (two million or more) was far too large for the time and place concerned. They estimate Egyptian population at that time was of the same order of magnitude[53], and Canaanite population (including all ethnic groups) was probably far less[54] (though the Hittites and Amorites, it is now known, were spread out well beyond Canaan).

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[52] The following reflections on population were stimulated in me by the feedback of another reader, who asked not to be named.

[53] This in itself proves nothing, since in a slave economy the slaves may eventually outnumber the freemen. I recently read, for example, that at one point in time the black and white populations of the U.S. South were about equal.

[54] At most 100'000, according to one article (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus and the references given there). The Egyptian army is there estimated as 20'000 at the most. These figures are significant, since the Torah claims the Hebrews could muster some 600'000 men of fighting age (though it does not say where their weapons would come from). The implications being that though it is conceivable that these men (just escaped from slavery) could be afraid of the Egyptian host, it is

I personally tend to believe them. I would if necessary accept arbitrarily dividing all the figures in Numbers by ten, say, on the ground that accounts given in ancient times were often hyperbolic[55]. The reason I am so willing to compromise on the numbers is that *logically this makes little difference to the essence of the story of the Exodus*. I still believe there was a mass exodus of slaves from Egypt, who then proceeded to conquer and settle Canaan[56]. The reason I believe this is that I ask the question: why would a people invent the story that it had been enslaved abroad and that it escaped and conquered its land from other peoples? There would be no sense in inventing such a disadvantageous story.

That such a people existed there and then is phenomenologically indubitable. They are mentioned throughout subsequent history by many people and have left many archeological and existential traces. This people still

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less credible that they would fear a Canaanite population of far inferior size.

[55] However, the division by 100 proposed by Prof. Avraham Malamat of Hebrew U. (according to the aforementioned Wikipedia article) seems an exaggeration in the opposite direction. Considering my comment in the previous footnote, the figure of 60'000 fighting men would be more credible – in proportion to the Egyptian and Canaanite forces they faced.

[56] Or more precisely, *re*conquer and *re*settle the land, since their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had already lived there until some 400 years earlier, according to the Torah (less, according to commentators). There is no reason to think this people might have originated in Egypt, or elsewhere than (as they claimed) in Canaan. They were ethnically clearly Semites and not Hamites.

exists today (and I know for a fact my family has been part of it from way back). Some of the historians who bring up the said numerical doubts have a hidden religious or political agenda. Their goal is either to debunk religion or to de-legitimatize the presence of Jews in the Holy Land today. They do not speak as historians, but as anti-Judaic, anti-Jewish, anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist or 'post-Zionist' advocates.

But the point I wish to make here is that arguing that the numbers given in the Torah are incredibly high does not prove their point. It does not imply that there was no exodus and no ancient Jewish presence on the land. They cannot logically infer from the doubtfulness of some historical or scientific claims in the Torah that all such claims in the Torah are false. That would be an invalid generalization, since certainly many of the claims made in the Torah have turned out to be true. It is important to remain lucid and impartial in this matter as in all others.

Postscript. After writing most of the above article, I received from Israel a copy of an article written (in Hebrew) by Prof. Ely Merzbach of Bar Ilan University years ago on the same topic: "The Census of Israeli Tribes in the Torah" (*Higayon*, vol. 5 [2000]). It is clear from that article that Prof. Merzbach noticed the issues here raised long before me, and moreover

that *so did some notable rabbinical commentators* which he mentions. I shall first consider the latter.[57]

- The first mentioned is R. Moshe Sofer (1762-1839), known as the Chatam Sofer. In his work *Torat Moshe*, he notes that the census numbers end in 10, 50, 100 or 1000, and explains the fact somewhat by pointing out that these multiples correspond to groupings of people under the responsibility of the judges. He also points out that the Rosh (another important commentator) considers approximation common in the Torah (as for example 49 days of the counting of the omer are called 50 days).

  Thus, though this commentator seems to imply and accept that the census figures are approximate, he does not apparently go more deeply into the issues such admission raise.

- Next mentioned is R. Meir Simha HaCohen (1843-1926). He explicitly admits that numbers were rounded ("*assu mispar hakolel*") and suggests such approximations were made downwards, towards the lesser round number. He explains all this with reference to military musters (as indeed is justified in view of the repeated mention of "men able to go to war"). This reason was not applicable

[57] Please note that in view of the poverty of my knowledge of Hebrew, my interpretation of this article (albeit with the help of a more knowledgeable friend) may not be fully accurate. However, I did send Prof. Merzbach copy of my comments by e-mail, asking him to correct me if I misread him, and he replied to me that my reading was "*grosso modo*" accurate.

to Levites (who were not actually counted[58]) or to the first-born (who were counted precisely).

However, it appears this commentator too did not take stock of the difficulty posed by a couple of numbers ending exceptionally in 50 or 30 instead of 00.

- Thirdly mentioned is R. Aharon David Goldberg (presumably a more recent commentator), who (in his *Shirat David*) rightly expresses amazement ("*ze davar pele*") that units are not included in the censuses. He tells us of a book called *Shaarei Aharon* that mentions another book called *Imrei Noam*, in which census numbers are said to be rounded upwards, to the next greater 100 (note disagreement with preceding view). But he apparently favors the theory that the numbers were rounded to the nearest 100, whether up or down. In the case of the tribe of Gad, whose total ends in 50, the number must have ended exactly in 50, so could not be rounded either way. The numbers of Levites were rounded to the nearest 10, because Levite figures were relatively low (in the thousands, rather than tens of thousands).

  However, this commentator does not seemingly notice or explain the fact that the number of Reuvenites ends in 30. Moreover, he does not realize that the number of Levites (given in Num. 3) must be taken as exact, to justify the calculations made with it regarding the first-born.

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58 As mentioned earlier, in the name of Rashi.

- A fourth commentator, R. Yaakov Kamenetsky (1891-1986), does attempt to address the problem posed by the number of Reuvenites. He considers that in all matters military numbers end in 100 or in 50, thus explaining all other Israelite census numbers. He suggests that if after all such groupings say 45 men were left – they would be counted as another "50", by putting 49 men in five groups of (almost) "50". This could explain the number of Gadites ending in 50. For the number of Reuvenites ending in 30, however, he offers *a very unsatisfactory solution*. According to him, the number was deliberately not rounded to the nearest 50, so as to signal that the rebels Dathan and Abiram came from this tribe.

  This solution seems patently absurd to me, considering that the Korach rebellion episode referred to occurred *after* the census concerned. This would imply that the Torah was first written with a number ending in 100 or 50 for the Reuvenites, and then was modified ex post facto to stigmatize this tribe. Moreover, why *only* this tribe? There were 250 rebels (not to mention 14'700 sympathizers), and even if most came from the tribe of Reuven, many came from other tribes. How does this commentator know how many came from each tribe and their respective degrees of responsibility? It is not specified anywhere. Clearly, the proposed explanation is not at all convincing.

Thus, to conclude this overview, contrary to what I initially assumed (and was told by some Torah scholars I queried), some relatively recent rabbis did notice and comment upon the fact of the round numbers. However, some of these commentators did not realize the full extent of the problems it raises, and moreover the solutions they did propose were not sufficient to solve all these problems.

It is worth mentioning, additionally, that these commentators, who all admit of approximation, are de facto at loggerheads with Rashi and other earlier commentators, who effectively take the figures in question as exact, as the Torah (as we have shown in some instances above) seems to imply them to be. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that these commentators considerably disagree with each other as to how approximation occurred.[59]

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[59] One reflection that comes to my mind after reading these commentaries is that the groupings of men, whether in 10s, 50s, 100s or 1000s, for whatever purpose, could not have been as easy in practice as it looks on paper. Such groups *must have been in constant flux*, as men died or became ineligible due to aging or other disabilities, or became newly eligible for inclusion. When a place became vacant in a group, it could not necessarily be instantly refilled; and conversely, when a youth became old enough for inclusion, he might not immediately find a spare place. Moreover, the people in a group would have to live in the same vicinity of the camp, for practical reasons; so groups would not interchange populations at will across the whole nation or even the tribe. All this suggests that groups would not at any given time necessarily have their defining number of members.

Prof. Merzbach seems to reach the same general conclusion, viz. that these four commentators did not succeed in actually solving the enigma(s) at hand, and goes on to propose some possible solutions of his own.

To my mind, his most important and relevant insight is that ***the tribal totals might be approximations that cancel each other out, so that the national total may be taken as an exact number***. This idea is brilliant, because it allows for a reconciliation between the apparent exactitude of the 603'550 figure in Ex. 38:26 (since it corresponds to the silver collected) and thence of the same figure in Num. 1:46 (granting Rashi's claim), and the need to admit that the improbable round numbers for the various tribes were approximate.

Prof. Merzbach points out that, assuming each number was rounded to the nearest hundred up or down, the most that each tribal total would differ from reality would be 49, and the most that the national total would differ from reality would be twelve times that, i.e. only 588. But, he adds, it would be very unlikely that the deviation would be uniformly so large – and not inconceivable that it would happen to be nil due to rounding up and down of numbers of various magnitudes.

In the first census in Numbers, the total for the tribe of Gad ends in 50. This, as already explained, would be explicable as an exact number, which being midway could not be rounded up or down. Thus, here, only eleven rounding of numbers

would have to cancel each other out, to yield an exact grand total.

However, what of the total for the tribe of Reuven in the second census in Numbers, which ends in 30? He suggests that this too may have been an exact number, arguing that in a list of ten (or even, in our case, twelve) numbers it would not be improbable for one of the numbers to end in 0. He then supposes that this number (ending in 30) was not rounded to the nearest hundred below, because it seemed round enough as it was. He points out that the practice of rounding is historically a relatively recent mathematical artifice, dating perhaps from the Middle Ages.

While it is conceivable that the people who made that census reasoned as here suggested, it is not of course very logical. They should either have rounded all tribal totals to the nearest 10 or to the nearest 100. If, as the commentators earlier mentioned suggested, they chose to round numbers to the nearest 100 for military purposes, there would have been no reason for them to make an exception in the one case ending in 30. Of course, people sometimes do weird things, but this argument is not very convincing.

Unless! Unless we suppose that they consciously ended that tribal total in such exceptional manner, to make sure that the national total of 601’730, which they knew to be an exact number, could be calculated from the tribal totals. All the other numbers were rounded, and their approximations canceled each other out, but this number could not be

rounded in the same way (i.e. to the nearest 100) without distorting the grand total, so it was kept with a 30 ending. It was thus quite intentional and not illogical.

Upon further reflection, it would be acceptable to suppose that the number ending in 30 was itself rounded to the nearest ten, provided what was added or subtracted from it was balanced by some other number(s) in the list (we could in that case accept R. Kamenetsky's explanation of the choice of the Reuvenite number rather than another tribe's for that purpose). Also, similar reasoning can be applied to the previous census, if necessary; i.e. we can imagine the number ending in 50 (for the Gadites) to have likewise been rounded so as to arrive at the required exact grand total, if the need ever arise.[60]

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[60] Note lastly that Prof. Merzbach suggests additionally that the subtotals given for the four "standards" (*degalim*) under which the tribes were grouped in threes (under Reuven, Judah, Ephraim and Dan – see Num. 2:1-33) can, with the same hypothesis, be explained as exact numbers that sum up approximations. For, he argues, why else would the Torah spell out subtotals that any reader could easily calculate? He thus reinforces his thesis by making it more useful still. However, in my view this additional hypothesis has disadvantages that far outweigh its advantage. First, because it considerably limits the scope for approximation in the individual tribal numbers, since now every three grouped under the same banner have to add up to an exact number. And second, because it restores the issue of exponential improbability, since it claims the subtotals (like the grand total) to be exact numbers, albeit round (one ending in 50 and three in 00). Since this subsidiary thesis is inessential to the main thesis, I would eschew it.

Thus, Prof. Merzbach's analysis together with past commentaries provide us with some conceivable and reasonably credible solutions to the problems involved for the Israelite numbers[61]. His thesis restores the consistency of the Torah passages concerned with mathematical principles of probability, and so makes the Torah claim to literal truth in this matter more credible. This of course does not prove the factuality (i.e. historicity) of its numerical claims, but it at least removes some of the possible sources of doubt.

[61] Note however that some difficulties remain with regard to the numbers of Levites. Namely how come the numbers for their three families given in Num. 3:14-39 all end in 00, even though no military motive can be adduced (the total must also be considered exact, since as earlier stated, it is used in calculations relating to the first-born); and similarly why the numbers given in Num. 4:1-49 all end in 0 (and coincidentally one ends in 50 and one in 30 – those same numbers again!), though in the latter case, groupings by tens would be explicable with reference to work teams.

Appendix 2 Prayer in uncertainty

The Rabbis have decreed that we should not utter a prayer for or against an event (or the negation of an event), if the latter is already a settled matter. This principle is logical enough – there is no point praying for something, if that thing has already happened or failed to happen. It is, as it were, a waste of God's time– a mark of disrespect. For God does not undo facts that have occurred; he does not change the past ex post facto. What's done is done and cannot be undone. Facts are facts. Prayer can only be concerned with facts that are not yet ontologically determined.

> Most people are, of course, aware of this, and would not bother praying for something that cannot conceivably be changed. We often wish things were not as they already are, but we do not (if we are sane of mind) expect their reality to be overturned after the fact. We can still (quite rationally) pray that the bad future consequences of some past or present event be mitigated or annulled – assuming that this is within

the realm of the possible, i.e. that the anticipated bad consequences are not tied to the unfortunate event by necessity.

Moreover, the Rabbis argue that in cases of uncertainty, where the fact may be in reality settled, but we cannot be sure of it one way or the other, we should not formulate prayers for or against it. An example given is: suppose you see smoke rising in the distance, in the direction of your home, you may not pray "May this fire not be in my house" – for if your house happens to be the one burning, it would be a prayer in vain (*levatala*). In my view, this second principle is not entirely reasonable.

It refers to an event that is epistemologically undetermined or undeterminable, note well[62]. Just because the event *might be* ontologically settled, we are required to behave as if it *is indeed* settled. This sounds like an impractical principle to me, because:

(a) In most circumstances, we do not really know whether the event in question is materially settled or

[62] We might here distinguish between four conditions of uncertainty: natural spontaneity (as in quantum mechanics); indeterminism due to volitional intervention (e.g. unpredictable human choices); uncertainty as to the applicable law of nature, though natural law is assumable; chance coincidence within natural determinism (e.g. lottery events). The first two cases imply real indeterminism, whereas the last two are issues of ignorance (the third relates to not knowing a generality, while the fourth relates to not knowing how known generalities are expressed in a particular case).

not; human knowledge is inductive and open to error, so we can rarely if ever be absolutely sure of anything, as this principle demands. This implies most prayer to be vain, by the said rabbinical standards. So, most prayers would be forbidden.

(b) In urgent situations (like in the example given above), we do not have time to ponder and decide whether we are uncertain enough to be allowed to pray or not. We just pray, and hope and wish. This spontaneous and heartfelt prayer is surely welcome and not faulted by God. He well knows the limits of our cognitive faculties.

(c) Many people are not sufficiently developed philosophically to be able to make the fine distinctions required by the proposed rabbinical principle. It is too intellectual and complicated, and so effectively blocks ordinary prayer.

But not wishing to be accused of often opposing the judgment of the Rabbis, I would propose the following simple solution to the problem they pose. Uncertainties inhibit prayer insofar as the latter is expressed categorically. Therefore, when praying for or against some event, just make your prayer implicitly if not explicitly **conditional** – saying or thinking: *if the matter is not yet settled, dear God, please make it so and so*. It would surely not offend God to thus formulate a prayer conditionally.

The following correspondence (dating back to mid-2007) provides an illustration of the issue here treated, and deals incidentally with a few other interesting issues.

To: irp@medethics.org.il – Shalom:

Recently, during a lecture I attended at the Geneva *Chabad* center, the main rabbi mentioned a Talmudic ruling that it is permitted to pray for a son during the first 40 days of pregnancy but not thereafter.

I objected that the Talmudic Rabbis were mistaken, according to modern science, because it is now known that **the sex of a child is genetically determined at conception**. If the sex chromosomes in the first cell are XX the baby will be female, and if they are XY the baby will be male. This is the genetics of the first cell, which is reproduced thereafter in all cells.

The Rabbis could not know this, since genes were not discovered till the 19th Century, and fully understood till the 20th Century. There is no shame in ignorance or error, but of course to suppose that the Rabbis are not omniscient or infallible is contrary to Jewish dogma and very subversive.

Note that there is no "40 days" involved – nor less than 40 days, nor more than 40 days. If the Rabbis mentioned 40 days, it is possibly due to their observations of voluntary or involuntary abortions; they must have noticed that prior to about 40 days, the embryo is not morphologically sexually differentiated, whereas after that period (actually, many days

later) sexual characters visible to the naked eye begin to appear.

A young rabbi wrote this objection to you, and asked you for a rebuttal. You replied that the Rabbis had in mind the problem of "testicular feminization". According to your reply, this allows for the possibility of a male fetus that *would have* abnormally taken on female characteristics to return to a normal male development in the first 40 days, thanks to ardent prayer.

However, this answer is logically absurd on several counts.

First, it is *scientifically* unsound, in that the underlying problem here is not merely hormonal, but due to **a genetic disorder**, and this is **inevitably operative since the first day** (here again there is no justification for mention of 40 days, note). More on the scientific issues further down.

But secondly, it is *dialectically* inadequate, for if the Rabbis did not know about genetics, **they could not know** about a discrepancy between an embryo's or fetus' genotype (XY genetic makeup) and its phenotype (a female sex organ). To them, the fetus' gender was simply identical with the physically visible character. **They had no way to identify** the genetic sexuality of a fetus or born child by medical tests.

If now you try to tell me that the Rabbis did know, by some sort of prophetic vision, about testicular feminization and about the genetic sexual status of actual individuals, I ask you to tell me where they mention it explicitly (do not confuse

this issue with that of hermaphrodites, though – they knew about this disorder because it is visible to the naked eye).

Clearly, if they had known about testicular feminization, they would have discussed this **halakhically extremely important question** in detail. By the way, the incidence of this disease is estimated at about 1 in 20,000 (according to some; others say much less); it is rare, but enough to be significant.

Is the child with such a disease (effectively, a malformation) to be regarded as a boy or a girl? If we go by the genetic makeup, it is a boy, and therefore he should be forbidden to have sex with or marry other boys (to avoid homosexuality) and he should do his bar mitzvah, etc. If we go by the physical appearance (sex organ), it is a girl, even though she cannot reproduce, and she is exempt from male mitzvas.

In view of the **dangerous ambiguities** involved, they would doubtless have dealt with these important issues directly (not just with reference to hermaphrodites, to repeat). To my knowledge, *they never did*, which proves that they did not know about testicular feminization.

Your reply was thus **not a valid answer to the question posed**. I suspect your reply was only intended as a smoke screen or manipulation; i.e. you pretended to reply, hoping your word would naively not be questioned further.

So much for the dialectics. Now to return to the scientific, factual issues. If you type “testicular feminization” in your

Google search bar, you will find many sites that tell you about it. I recommend you to study at least the following page:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Androgen_insensitivity_syndrome#4._Infertile_male_syndrome

This page contains an instructive diagram of the genetic disorder. As you can see, a mutant gene (hereditary from the mother's side) causes normal androgen hormone reception to be blocked. As a result, male sexual characteristics are inhibited from developing normally. This mutant gene is found supposedly in all cells of the organism, since all cells contain the X chromosome where this gene is imbedded.

Much more is involved. But my conclusion is simply that no amount of prayer in the first 40 days (or less, or more) can change that condition, since it is genetic and therefore pervasive from conception onwards. One can suppose that genetic medicine will one day prevent this disease perhaps by some genetic manipulation *in vitro* on the first cell – but once the embryo/fetus/baby is allowed to develop, there is nothing to be done about it.

Do correct me if you think me wrong; I have an open mind.

Moreover, note, I wonder why you only mentioned testicular feminization. There are other "intersex" syndromes. Notably, a female genotype may develop as a male phenotype. So if people pray that their genetically male child does not turn out looking like a female, they should also pray that their

genetically female child does not turn out looking like a male. For in either case, serious halakhic complications ensue.

Nowadays, *it seems to me*, genetic males who develop abnormally as apparent females ought to undergo masculinization therapy or sex change towards male features. Similarly, female genotypes with male phenotype might legitimately be treated or operated on (femininization). This would be a practical solution to the halakhic difficulties. But I am no expert or authority, of course.

With regard to the issue of 40 days, if you type "fetal development" in your Google search bar, you can learn a lot about that subject. See for instance:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetal_development

According to my reading of these sources, sexual characteristics begin to be visible well after 40 days – some seem to suggest after the 8th, 9th or even 10th week of prenatal development. In that case, where did the Rabbis get the 40 days (6 weeks) figure, I wonder? Do tell me if you know.

Note in passing that I have nothing against prayer. The issue about prayer only arises because of the Rabbinic principle that you should not pray in the case of a known *fait accompli*. But the truth is, we could always pray in the way of a *conditional* statement rather than a categorical one. Instead of saying "please give me a boy" just say "*if the matter is not*

settled, please give me a boy". In that case there is no danger of a prayer in vain.

The truth is, people always pray when they *do not personally know* whether the facts of the matter are settled or not. If they know the case is closed, they won't bother praying anyway. Prayer surely cannot be characterized as "in vain" when one does not know it is in vain; otherwise, one would almost never pray, fearing to pray in vain. So this aspect of the discussion seems to me much ado about nothing – just *pilpul*.

I await your pertinent and credible replies to all the above objections.

With best regards, A. S.

The **reply received** from medethics.org.il (without a signature identifying the particular writer) was:

> "It seems to me that some of translation difficulties are at the root of our misunderstanding (as my original Responsa on the subject were in Hebrew). I shall therefore start with some clarifications:
>
> 1. I have no qualms to withdraw when I make a mistake. As a human being that is not so rare.
>
> 2. In my responsum, I never stated that the rabbis knew modern genetics, fifteen hundred years ago. I only wrote that the Babylonian Talmudic rule may be in accordance with some genetic phenomena known

today, such as Testicular Feminization or Swyer syndrome.

3. In my last responsum to your young Rabbi I asked for a reference to show that the defect discussed exhibits a full or at least very high penetrance. 'Penetrance is a term used in genetics that describes the extent to which the properties controlled by a gene, its phenotype, will be expressed.' This is the definition given in wikipedia – not the fully reliable source needed, but enough for this correspondence. Later on the article asserts that:

'However, relatively few of the genes in the genome show high penetrance. Most genes make their little contribution to a very complex milieu of biological interactions, to which many other genes are also contributing. As a result, most genes and their effects and mechanisms of action are very difficult to fully understand, because the required observations and experiments are complex and difficult to devise. Even if such observations and experiments were conducted, however, some theorists would still hold that because all traits are influenced by non-genetic factors as well as by genetic factors, no trait can be determined strictly by genes.'

4. Therefore, if you can supply a confirmed evidence that both syndromes (Testicular Feminization or Swyer syndrome) are determined solely genetically

with no environmental component, I shall have to withdraw my suggested statement, and I shall do it without any hesitation. Otherwise, there is merit for prayer before some unknown environmental component may cause a significant effect, and my early reply is a valid one, as a different conclusion has no scientific backup.

5. According to Halachah, the sex of a newborn is determined by its phenotype. So with both syndromes, the baby is considered fully female in Halachic terms.

6. If you are interested in the Halachic considerations employed in dealing with severe ambiguous genitalia, please see Prof. Steinberg's Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics (English version- Feldheim Publishers, 2003), Vol I, pp. 50-54.

I would be glad to hear from you again on this and other subjects."

To which **I in turn replied** the following:

Concerning your point 1.

> *"1. I have no qualms to withdraw when I make a mistake. As a human being that is not so rare."*

When I mentioned unwillingness to admit mistakes – I was thinking of the Rabbis in general, not you personally.

Once a decision is handed down, it is never admitted in error, even if the assumed knowledge of nature on which it was based turns out to be incorrect. Our discussion here is a case in point. I know it is useless to argue, because they never change their minds. They simply cannot dare do so, because that would be a loss of authority. I guess you are probably in the same situation – to admit rabbinical error would in your view (I disagree) constitute a denial of Judaism.

Concerning your point 2.

> *"2. In my responsum I never stated that the rabbis knew modern genetics, fifteen hundred years ago. I only wrote that the Babylonian Talmudic rule may be in accordance with some genetic phenomena known today, such as Testicular Feminization or Swyer syndrome."*

This statement shows me that *you missed the main point in my previous letter*.

My point was that you commit **the logical fallacy of anachronism** when you try to justify *past* rabbinical statements by referring to *present* scientific knowledge which they lacked. The Talmud Rabbis did not know *about* genetic differences between males and females, and moreover had no physical means *to test* for such differences, even if they had guessed such differences might exist.

It follows logically that, just as they could not tell boys from girls by reference to anything other than phenotype, they

could not know about or diagnose the diseases you mention, which depend for their identification on detecting a discrepancy between genotype and phenotype. It follows from this remark that it is irrelevant what the prognosis might be for such a disease (curable or incurable, and at what stage if curable), this is a discussion completely outside their purview.

Therefore, you logically cannot justify their statement ex post facto with reference to such genetic diseases. *You* might yourself today or tomorrow be justified to make a similar statement (about praying for a boy, etc) on the basis of modern medical knowledge – but it remains true and inescapable that the statement *they* made was in fact unjustified, i.e. based on (retrospectively viewed) wrong scientific assumptions.

This was the main point of my argument, which you evidently missed.

With regard to your point 3.

> *"3. In my last responsum to your young Rabbi I asked for a reference to show that the defect discussed exhibits a full or at least very high penetrance."*

Here, your thinking is fallacious in that **you confuse two modes (or types) of modality**.

You argue in effect that a cure might exist and eventually be found – and on that basis you feel justified in maintaining that prayer for a boy is justified. Moreover, you challenge me

to prove that the disease in question is forever *in*curable. You are in effect saying, as far as we know, this disease *might* turn out to be curable, therefore I can readily assume it *can* be cured.

But a "might be" does not logically imply a "can be" – these are different modes of modality (one relates to context of knowledge, the other the established natural possibilities). You confuse that which is in principle *conceivable or imaginable* before the fact, and that which is already known and established to be *a potential within the nature* of the specific entities concerned.

Moreover, it is contrary to scientific method, i.e. inductive logic, to say: if I can imagine a hypothesis, the onus of proof is on you to prove me the opposite. NO – the responsibility is on the one conceiving *an empirically not-yet confirmed hypothesis* (viz. that this disease is curable) to provide empirical proof of his idea.

For example, no one can say "there's life beyond the planet earth" simply on the basis of rational speculation; scientists have to bring concrete proof to this hypothesis before it is accepted as science.

Your fourth remark is therefore a wrong posture.

> *"4. Therefore, if you can supply a confirmed evidence that both syndromes (Testicular Feminization or Swyer syndrome) are determined solely genetically with no environmental component, I shall have to*

> *withdraw my suggested statement, and I shall do it without any hesitation."*

You could justifiably say that you reasonably expect or have faith that one day soon we will in fact discover a cure to the disease (i.e. inject an environmental component, a medicine, e.g. some hormones or other substance that would override the inhibition of normal development caused by the faulty gene), provided you admit this as scientifically speculative at this stage.

In my view (stated in my previous letter), you could indeed on this speculative basis (a "might be") pray to G-d for a boy. Any personal uncertainty allows for prayer, whatever the facts of the case.

But, I hasten to add, you **cannot consistently** do so *in the rabbinical view*! Why, you ask? For the simple reason, that as far as *present* (though perhaps not *future*) scientific theoretical knowledge and practical skill are concerned, there's absolutely no way (no "can be") to cure that disease.

This being the case, to pray for a cure would be a prayer in vain (*levatala*), and you are thus contradicting another rabbinical principle in your attempt to thus buttress the one about baby's sex. Do you understand this reasoning? It leaves you without a logical out – check mate.

Finally, concerning your point 5.

> *"5. According to Halachah, the sex of a newborn is determined by its phenotype."*

This I knew already, though to tell you the truth I had not known of these shocking genetic diseases till you mentioned them to us (so I learned something valuable from it all). But the whole point of my above critique is that this posture of the halakha is wrong – i.e. it is based on an erroneous knowledge context.

The Rabbis' position in favor of phenotype was reasonable in their day and age, when there was no knowledge of genotype and of genetic diseases like those you mention. Today, the scientific/factual context is very different – and to ignore that difference is logically untenable. It is blind dogma, divorced from reality.

My point is that the Rabbis today *must* reconsider the issue in the light of new knowledge. Why must? Because if they do not, they allow ambiguities to subsist with regard to homosexual relations – i.e. **they allow another, more important Torah law to be ignored**.

Viewed objectively, testicular feminization is an abnormal development. The baby is in fact (genetically) a male but because of some genetic mutation it fails to develop as such (phenotype). It is as if a baby grows with an arm missing: it is not regarded as an armless new type of human being, but as an ordinary human being who developed abnormally due to some defect.

Considering that there is a incidence of 1 in 20'000 with this disease in the population at large, and considering that masculinization is nowadays medically possible, this is

certainly an issue that should be dealt with urgently by the Rabbis of today, no matter what the Rabbis of yesteryear thought about it.

If a man marries a female phenotype with male genotype – is this homosexuality or not? Should not people with the wrong phenotype immediately "change sex", i.e. correct their phenotype? Such people are certainly in a sad situation. It seems to me that this is a burning issue for modern medical ethics to consider.

As for your point 6:

> *"6. If you are interested in the Halachic considerations employed in dealing with severe ambiguous genitalia, please see Prof. Steinberg's Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics (English version – Feldheim Publishers, 2003), Vol I, pp. 50-54*."

I do not here have access to this book. But if you send me an article on the subject I might look at it to inform myself. Please note that I cannot devote more time to this discussion, unless you have some radically new thing to say.

You don't have to write back, in other words. But if you do, please inform me as to your name and qualifications. You speak of "Responsa" – are you a Rabbi? Also, do you have any medical education and training?

With thanks and best regards, A. S.

Addenda (2009)

1. Concerning chapter 2. To my mind, whenever I read the Bible, the greatest **obstacles** to easy belief are the obscurity and confusion in many parts of the text. This puts the Divine origin of the text as a whole in doubt, although parts of it may well still have Divine origin. Even if the latter supposition is true, it is difficult to ascertain which parts are indeed to be trusted. Nevertheless, as already argued by me in some specific cases, it is often obvious enough which parts are *not* of such exalted origin, though their human source may well be exceptionally wise and spiritually high.

Such reflections are not new. One of the oldest Bible critics is Chiwi al-Balkhi (9th Cent., Bactria)[63]. Some of his assumed criticisms are described by Solomon Schechter, as follows[64]:

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[63] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chivi_al_Blakhi.

[64] *"The oldest collection of bible difficulties, by a Jew"* (1901), The Jewish Quarterly Review **XIII**: 345–374.

> *...to give some summary of the nature of our author's arguments. As it would seem his Scripture difficulties were suggested by the following considerations: (1) That the style of the Scriptures is lacking in clearness, being constantly in need of explanation, which is not always forthcoming. (2) That they are wanting in consistency of phraseology and diction. (3) That they contain needless details and repetitions. These are of course more or less mere linguistic or philological difficulties; but the medieval Jews apparently considered such obscurities and inconsistencies in the diction and in the spelling as incompatible with the divine nature of a book, which is expected to be clear, concise, and free from ambiguities. Of a more serious nature are the considerations: (4) That they are full of chronological difficulties. (5) That the various books constituting the Scriptures are either directly contradictory to each other or ignore laws and ceremonies in the one portion which are considered as of the greatest import in the other. (6) That their ethics are inferior and in no way compatible with the moral nature of God.*

While I would not necessarily endorse all of the man's criticisms (he is said to have written some two hundred), and I am aware that the Rabbis (notably Saadia Gaon) have proposed credible answers to some of them, I think it is fair to say that many of them are very pertinent even today. He was a modern reader, centuries early.

Of course, people may ask me, and I ask myself: why be so negative? Why seek to find fault with every little thing? What is the utility and purpose of so much criticality? The only answer I can give is: love of truth. Truth is capable of withstanding all tests. If a belief can't take the prodding, it may not be true. One has to have the courage to face reality, and not let oneself be deflected from it by hopes and fears. The important thing is to ask the questions with respect and love, and to make the effort not to be more destructive than the answers allow.

2. Concerning chapter 3. I mention the frequent appeal to *miracles* for the purposes of explanation as characteristic of **Rashi**. Another or subsidiary characteristic of his is appeal to *prophecy* and frequent indulgence in *anachronism*. The latter two are related to each other as well as to the former. Note that I am not denying miracle or prophecy (they are explicitly mentioned in many stories of the Tanakh), but merely marking Rashi's tendency to appeal to them even when it is not necessary (i.e. when a more naturalistic explanation is conceivable). I am, of course, aware that Rashi draws heavily on Talmudic and Midrashic accounts, but the fact remains that he draws on explanations with such miraculous tendencies *more than* other commentators (like the Ramban, say) do[65].

[65] For him it is *lehatchila* (opening assumption), for them it is *bedieved* (the last resort).

Samples of Rashi's commentary. To buttress his idea that the fathers and mothers of the Jewish people knew and practiced the whole Torah, and so were anachronistically already Jews before the Gift of Torah at Sinai, he must attribute to them knowledge of the laws by prophetic powers (e.g. Rashi to Gen 26:5). Similarly, Rachel's burial at Bethlehem, instead of Hebron, is explained as necessary in anticipation of the Babylonian exile (a millennium later), so that the matriarch could pray for the captives en route (Rashi to Gen. 48:7). Or again, to explain whence the Israelites had the wood necessary for the desert Sanctuary, Rashi claims that Yaacov had cedar trees planted in Egypt over two hundred years earlier for just this purpose, which the Israelites cut them down and prepared for transportation prior to the exodus (Rashi to Ex. 26:15).

Philosophically, Rashi's implied worldview –the ubiquity of miracles, the routine interference of Providence in human affairs – is conceivable; religiously, it is commendable, showing great faith and consciousness of God's presence. But in a more rationalist perspective, it is too easy, an explanatory shortcut and copout; it is not as demanding and credible as a detailed naturalistic analysis.

Concerning **apologetics**, I would like to add that part of their motive is no doubt the belief that one pleases God by arguing, however tenuously, in His apparent favor or in favor of the religion. But surely, from a rational point of view, a 100% respect for truth is more appreciated by God. We

should frankly admit areas of doubt or difficulty; we may deal with them as well as we can, but always with honesty, never in a manipulating manner.

3. Concerning chapter 4. I there mention **vegetarianism** as a possible alternative to the traditional kosher diet. I should have said that I am personally a vegetarian, though I have in the past not been one. I abstained from saying it so as not to seem to be peddling a particular opinion. But upon reflection, I should have argued the point. I gave up meat many years ago, essentially out of pity for the animals subjected to industrial methods of production, transportation and slaughter[66]. A couple of years ago I also stopped eating fish, having read that mankind is truly destroying the world's fish stocks, both directly and indirectly[67]. I still, however, eat dairy products.

I do not buy the traditional argument that "we should not try to be more merciful than God asks us to be in the Torah". Even if the Torah permits eating of meat and fish, we must take into consideration that this refers to small populations using small-scale farming and slaughter. The animal then had some dignity. This is no longer true today, when it is treated

[66] Check out various texts and videos starting at http://www.peta.org/

[67] See for instance http://www.fao.org/newsroom/common/ecg/1000505/en/stocks.pdf and http://www.greenfacts.org/en/fisheries/#3

as a mere thing, when meat and fish are by most people purchased off the supermarket stall without any awareness or respect for its living source. Even eggs and cheese are tainted in this regard, though a little less so. Therefore, yes, I do recommend vegetarianism.

Speaking of slaughter, let us also mention **animal sacrifices** in the Temple. I agree with the Rambam's (Maimonides') assessment that these were vestiges of the past. This is partly suggested in the Torah itself (Lev. 17:7). It is all the more obvious today, when we know the history of mankind so much more fully and can well see how widespread the practice of sacrifice has been. I cannot imagine why God would have any interest in such practices; I cannot either see how it could possibly be of any benefit to the human beings engaged in them. Even if they believe the sacrificed animal's suffering and death replaces their own, there is no conceivable way this might objectively occur. The conceivable (illusory) psychological relief hardly justifies such violent behavior. The objective "karmic" effect is likely to be more guilt rather than less.

But let us suppose, as the Ramban (Nachmanides) for his part assumes, that God has chosen to create a mystical (invisible, underlying) connection between man and God justifying animal sacrifice. This is a conceivable hypothesis if we imagine a few sacrifices a year performed in the name of the whole nation. But when we start computing all the obligatory and voluntary sacrifices that according to the Torah would

have to be performed per annum for all the individuals in the nation, as well as for the nation as a whole, not to mention for foreigners, we have to admit perplexity. This means hundreds of thousands or even millions of animals killed every year, year after year[68]. Blood would flow constantly, *ad nauseam*. So much suffering – for what?

I do hope and pray for the restoration of the Temple on its ancient site, soon in our days. But I personally do not look forward to such daily massacres of poor, innocent beasts. Considered in abstraction, in small quantities, the practice seems innocuous, almost natural. But when actual numbers are brought to mind, it is clearly inhumane and unacceptable. I cannot see any spirituality in it – quite the contrary, it is bound to reduce our sensitivity, kindness and goodness. Animals do not deserve such harsh treatment, and human beings are better off without this outdated 'mitzva'. It is difficult to believe God would actually have ever demanded this of us. More likely, an existing priestly caste justified it ex post facto as Divinely commanded.

4. I mention in chapter 6 and in appendix 1 that there are 'difficult questions' concerning the Torah narrative that the Rabbis have not sufficiently asked and not successfully

[68] Just think: 100 a day equals 36,500 a year; 1000 a day equals 365,000 a year. How many sacrifices would a nation of several million bring per annum? Once numbers are considered the whole proposition becomes much more doubtful.

answered. One such question or set of questions is the following.

What did the Israelites **eat and drink** during their desert wanderings (and indeed what did their animals eat and drink)? This eating question is partially answered by assuming that during the month that elapsed until they got the gift of manna, they may have carried food (and fodder), and that after the manna ceased they supposedly bought what they need from the people(s) living in their vicinity. There is no mention of what the animals (required for sacrificial purposes) ate during the years of manna. As for drink, while at times the narrative mentions specific natural and miraculous water sources (presumably used for animals as well as humans), at other times the issue is not clarified. Consequently, the oral tradition refers to 'Myriam's well' – a sort of miraculously mobile well – having accompanied them for most of their journey.

At first glance, the given explanations seem convincing even if incomplete, but upon reflection, when *the quantities involved* are considered they seem rather incredible. For, granting Torah population figures, we are here talking about some two million people (i.e. Israelite men, women and children, not to mention the 'mixed multitude' accompanying them), and a large herd of animals (presumably hundreds of thousands of them). This means over *four times* the current Jewish population of Jerusalem. Imagine the quantities of food and drink such a large number of people need daily!

Then add on the needs of the animals for good measure. Then multiply this figure by 365 per year and again by 40 for the years of wandering.

If we assume just half a liter of water per human per day, that would be 1'000'000 liters or 1'000 tonnes of water per day. Over 365 days, this means 365'000 tonnes of water. And over 40 years, the quantity would be 14.6 million tonnes. Similarly, for periods when the manna was not yet or no longer granted, if we assume (for the sake of argument) a food ration of only a quarter kilo per person on average, they would have needed 500 tonnes per day, and so on. Similarly for animals, only more so – though their types and numbers are unknown, so it is no use making any calculations.[69][70]

Now, *consider the logistics* needed to supply a population of that size. Not only are the quantities enormous, but the

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[69] Rashi suggests the matza they carried with them on the day they left Egypt was miraculously replenished. He does not clarify just how this occurred – did a matza grow back when a piece of it was broken off, or did a matza reappear in the pile after it was eaten? The thing is to try to visualize the alleged miracle more clearly, rather than to deny it outright. If such miracle did occur for a month, why did the manna seem so miraculous? And why was manna necessary instead of the matza? (To the latter question, one Rabbi answered me credibly by saying that perhaps the manna was the food spiritually needed to receive Torah.)

[70] The Torah text does mention *some* grazing to have occurred, since it warns against allowing cattle to graze at the foot of Mount Sinai during the giving of the Torah. But there is no indication that the desert was capable of sustaining a large animal population for 40 years entirely by grazing, and it does not seem reasonable to suppose it.

question is how were these quantities distributed? Did two million people daily come to a central spot (like Myriam's well) with their recipients and collect their portions, or were these brought to them on animals or on carts? How was the water drawn out from eventual wells, considering the quantities involved? They had no pumps or canals; someone had to do the work using tools of some sort. Compare life in a modern city, to get an idea of the magnitude of the task.

In some commentaries, the people are presented as carrying with them the food and drink needed for an extended period of time (e.g. from the departure from Egypt till the manna started appearing). But when we thus calculate the quantities involved, it seems absurd to propose this. Each adult would have to be a superman to carry so much. Animals might transport a large part of the human burden, but then what of the burden of the animals' fodder and water?

Similarly, some commentaries refer to purchase of food, fodder and drink from surrounding populations. This explanation seems relevant if we imagine a small group of nomads – but when we take into consideration a market of two million people, it becomes very difficult to conceive. The surrounding populations would have to be assumed themselves very large to have cultivated or drawn, and brought for sale, such massive quantities of food, fodder and water.

Even if the region was more fertile than it is today, large areas would have had to be cultivated, and a one year

advance notice of the need for such large scale agriculture would have been called for or the peasants would have had to be prescient. Large water sources (a lake, a flowing river, gushing wells or intense rains) would have been required to produce the food and fodder, as well as to quench the thirst of the producers, the consumers and their animals. So this relatively naturalistic explanation is not very credible.

Even the collection of manna raises questions of logistics. Assuming that it was not deposited at their doorstep, but they had to range out beyond the camp to collect it, imagine hundreds of thousands of manna collectors going out every day of the week to pick up their families' portions. How long did the trip there and back take? Traffic would have had to be organized, to avoid jams. Add to this work the drawing and transportation of water, and you can see that many people were kept busy.

All this means that there is ample room for doubt in both the Torah narrative and Rabbinic attempts to make it more credible. We must assume that the Exodus population was much smaller than the written text claims – or we must suppose that there were many more miracles than those explicitly mentioned in it. For instance, perhaps Myriam's moving well was a gushing jet that poured water to every family's tent. Maybe people miraculously needed very little water (for drink and other purposes), and maybe animals none at all. And so on.

A more skeptical commentator would suggest that the written story is largely exaggerated, and its very human writer(s) did not take the time to make it quite consistent and convincing. If one reads it inattentively it may sound feasible – but if one asks some difficult questions it seems less conceivable.

5. Concerning the import of **meditation** to Judaism (chapter 7). The psychological value of meditation is that it increases one's control over one's thoughts, words and actions. By clarifying one's mental field enormously, one is able to pinpoint problems precisely and resolve with them in a micro-surgical manner.

How meditation works can be understood through the following metaphor. Imagine you are standing in waters in which you have dropped a precious stone. If the water is too troubled, you cannot see through it to the seabed and so cannot retrieve your jewel. You cannot calm and clear the waters by mechanical interference. You must just be patient and let them settle naturally. Then, when they do, you can easily see and pick up the jewel. Similarly, meditation allows your mental activity to calm down, after which you can more readily intuit your soul and perhaps better make contact with God.

Moreover, when you see your soul more clearly, you can better control it, because you do not confuse it with the mental phenomena that surround it. Regular meditation facilitates resolving past problems and avoiding future

problems. It permits one to deal with problems in the present tense, in a more precise manner. When one is less mentally confused and in the dark, one is more logical in one's attitudes and less hesitant in one's actions. It is better not to sin at all than to sin and have to regret and repent thereafter. Prevention is better than cure. This is simple logic or economy.

On a more 'metaphysical' level, meditation consists in preparing oneself to return to one's spiritual Source. Our soul is a tiny spark of the grand Soul which is God. Sent in this material world to help redeem it, our soul is momentarily cut-off from its Source and weighed down by materiality. Through meditation, we can recover our original spiritual purity, calm and emptiness – we can thus ready our soul to merge seamlessly again with God. Just as He is free of the burdens of substantiality and entanglement, so do we try to become. Just as He is peaceful and transparent, so do we strive to be. When death comes, we can thus hope our soul to more easily recover its natural place in Him.

6. **Logic in defense of Zionism**.

7. **The Chanukah lights miracle: a new, more logical solution to the problem.**

See following pages for these two new essays…

Logic in defense of Zionism

The media nowadays are overwhelmingly biased against Zionism and Israel. This posture has lately become more than a mere fashion – it is now the "spirit of the times", a popular "axiom" that it is forbidden to even question. As an acquaintance remarked to me during the recent Gaza war – it is really an emotional burden for us Jews to have to bear this massive negative vibration emanating from so many of our fellow human beings at once. Indeed, never before in history have so few been blindly hated by so many. In the past, such hatred was concentrated on some communities more than others – but nowadays, due to media hype, the orchestration of anti-Semitism has taken literally world-wide proportions.

There are many aspects to this issue, of course. My purpose here is to remark on some of the *logical* aspects of it. I wish to bring to your attention some of the *inconsistencies and empirical failures* in the argumentum of the opponents of Zionism.

Zionism is neither imperialism nor colonialism. A standard argument of anti-Israelis is that the Jews *stole* the land now called Israel. It is important to debunk this claim because it is alleged by leftist opponents of Israel to be *the cause* of their opposition to it. It is on this basis that they pose as indignant defenders of justice and morality. They claim the Arabs, or "Palestinians", were there before the Jews, natives living peacefully, minding their own business, when they were invaded by foreign imperialists (i.e. the Jews) who displaced them and colonized their land. This argument is not only historically false, but logically absurd.

If the Jews had gone to Uganda (as was proposed to them at the beginning of the 20th Century), they could have been labeled invaders and settlers, for they had no historical connection to that land. But when the Jews came to the land then called Palestine, they were returning home, to the land of their direct ancestors. Their situation at the time was analogous to that of exiled Tibetans today. If these Tibetans wish to reclaim their country, now or hundreds of years from now, who would dare deny them their moral right and legal title to the whole land or assert that people who took their place in the meantime have a valid claim to any part of it?

Historically, it is well known since antiquity that the Jews (or Israelites or Hebrews) have inhabited the land of Israel since 1300 BCE (counting as of the Exodus from Egypt) or since 1700 BCE (counting from the Patriarch Abraham's immigration from Mesopotamia). These are traditional Biblical dates (some anti-Zionist historians dispute them, but even if some 500 years

are subtracted, our arguments will hold, so this issue does not matter here).

When the Jews arrived, there were other peoples there, who have all since disappeared from history – either killed in wars or exiled abroad (as many Jews were) by Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, etc. The peoples who were present were in any case not "home grown", but themselves immigrants or parts of peoples spread further afield. Thus, the Philistines (a non-Semitic people) probably came from the Greek islands, the Hittites (also non-Semites) came from Anatolia, the Amorites (Semites, like Abraham) came from Mesopotamia, the Canaanites were Hamites according to the Bible or Semites from Arabia according to some historians[71], and so forth. All these disappeared by the time of the First Exile, i.e. the 6th Century BCE.

This country being at the crossroads of three continents has always been a melting pot of different peoples. Humanity, remember, has always been in motion, ever since the first men emigrated from East Africa. None of the peoples who antedated the Jewish presence, note well, were the progenitors of present-day "Palestinian" Arabs. The latter arrived much later: some conceivably came in the wake of the 7th Century CE invasion of the land of Israel by Arab hordes recently converted to Islam; but many came much more recently, in the 19th and 20th

[71] Note that the Hamitic and Semitic languages are very close, and linguistic indices play an important role in the historians' theories of origins of peoples.

Centuries (at the same time as Jews were returning from Europe and surrounding Arab countries).

Reading current 'Palestinian' narratives, one might suppose that these Arabs were created *in situ*. But this is of course a story lately concocted for propaganda purposes by pseudo-historians. European and Jewish travelers to the Holy Land in the 19th Century all testified to the depopulation and desolation of the land.

So to the question: who was here first and who came after? – the answer is indisputably: the Jews came before the Arabs, a couple of thousand years before. Moreover, it is significant that the Jews have inhabited that land much longer than the Arabs have. If any people is indigenous to that land, then, it is undoubtedly the Jewish people. Furthermore, the fact on the ground that the Jews are now in control of the land is significant. These three factors – who came first, who was there the longest and who is now sovereign – determine the superiority of the claim to the land (the whole land) by the Jews in any rational and fair assessment.

Prior to the Arab arrival, the Jewish nation lost its sovereignty to the Greeks, then the Romans (who renamed the country as Palestine in an effort to conceal its Jewish ownership). Many Jews were exiled after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, but many stayed on (as attested, for instance, by the redaction of the Jerusalem Talmud in the 4th Century). Dominion passed on to the Byzantine successors of Rome and (briefly) to Persian conquerors, until the Moslem Arabs came as conquerors and settlers in the 7th Century, as already indicated.

If any group in the region can be accused of imperialism and colonialism it is demonstrably the Arabs, who left their native peninsula to spread by the force of arms from India to Spain in a matter of decades. They still today occupy most of these stolen lands – from Iraq to Morocco. It is therefore ironic that these very people accuse Jews of those particular crimes. They claim that Israel (or more moderately, parts of it) is "occupied Arab land" and complain of "settlements" in it – but forget or conceal that not just Israel but *all* the land outside of Arabia proper that they stand on today is land the Arabs stole from other peoples!

This is, of course, a *logical* mistake in their argumentum. There is however another, more subtle, inconsistency that I wish to bring to your attention. Anti-Israelis answer the above historical arguments by saying: "well, but this is all ancient history – the fact is that in the mid-20th Century, the Jews displaced the Palestinians [i.e. Arabs] and took over their lands." Why is this inconsistent? I will now explain.

If we accept that ancient Jewish history is irrelevant and what counts is who was in fact inhabiting most of the land some decades before the Israeli War of Independence – then we could equally well argue that recent Arab history is irrelevant and what counts is who is in fact inhabiting most of the land *today*. If the fait accompli of the Arab takeover of the land of Israel in the 7th Century (and later by other conquerors, most recently the Moslem Ottoman Turks[72]) is morally acceptable, why is the fait

[72] Less than 500 years ago. These Ottoman Turks, note, were not native to the region, but descendents of invaders of the

accompli of the Jewish takeover in the 20th Century morally unacceptable? Who decides how many years of de facto possession constitutes legal ownership? By what universal standards?

Clearly, those who deny Israel its right to exist use *an arbitrary double standard*, which cuts history up in ways convenient to Arab claims. If might is effectively right in the case of the Arabs, then it is logically also right in the case of the Jews. If we are going to be Machiavellian about it, we must be so all the way. So long as the Jews are able to maintain their independence from Arab hegemonic ambitions by the force of arms, they have full right to the land. If they are fool enough to let themselves be weakened by the psychological war their enemies wage against them, and they give up their possessions, no one will defend their rights.

But in any case, I do not advocate that might is right. Jews have a much better and more lasting claim to the land of Israel. This is *the land of their ancestors*, which they have in part at least inhabited *for about three and a half thousand years*. The fact that other peoples (including the Arabs) invaded that land since their arrival, and often killed or chased many of them off does not diminish the Jewish claim, because there were demonstrably (through plentiful documentary and archeological evidence) some Jews in the land throughout this historical period, and because Jews have survived history and continued to claim that

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Middle East originating from the central Asian steppes, related to the Mongols.

land. This argument has force irrespective of one's religious convictions (or lack of them), note well.

As for the "Palestinians" – i.e. the Moslem Arabs living in "Palestine" – it should be added that they were never a distinct people, with a distinct history and culture, until some smart propagandists invented them a few decades ago. They always existed as undifferentiated Arabs, scattered throughout the Middle East since the Arab invasion of it. The land they lived on was always part of or possessed by a larger political entity. There was never an Arab nation or sovereignty specifically on Palestinian soil. The last effective sovereign before Israel was the British Mandate, and before that was the Ottoman Empire. So the Arabs have no national claim to the land.

There would be no Arab-Israeli conflict if the Arabs had done the right thing from the start and left the land to its rightful owners, the Jews. The surrounding Arab countries ought to invite their brethren back home – if necessary, all the way back to their original Arabian homeland (now oil-rich and quite able to sustain them). Nearly a million Jews were expelled or escaped from the Arab countries in the years surrounding the creation of the State of Israel[73]; and most of these refugees (and millions more from other countries) were lovingly absorbed by that country. There is no reason why the Arabs should not likewise show hospitality to their kin, for the sake of lasting peace.

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[73] See http://www.justiceforjews.com/narrative.html.

No good can emerge from perpetuating the problem of conflicting claims to the same land. The "two state solution" currently proposed is a road map to hell. Only tension, hatred, war and suffering can come from it. It is designed to so narrow and weaken the Jewish State as to ensure its eventual destruction. Everyone knows this is the secretly desired outcome of that "peace plan" – it promises the peace of the (Jewish) grave. Israel cannot rationally be expected to commit suicide. Those who sincerely want peace should advocate, facilitate and help finance the obvious solution of an international program encouraging voluntary emigration of Arabs.

Anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism. Because, for the moment, anti-Zionists vehemently deny that they are anti-Semites, it is important to demonstrate their equivalence. The simplest way to do so is to examine whether the passions aroused in anti-Israelis by events in Israel are proportional or disproportional, in comparison with the passions aroused in them by events elsewhere. This is an appeal to the logic of causation, the branch of formal logic that tells us how to identify causes and effects. If a person reacts differently to similar circumstances, we naturally ask why; if we discern a pattern of behavior such that when Jews are involved the reaction is one way and when they are not involved it is another way, we may fairly infer that the observed difference in behavior is *due to* this differentiating factor.

The question is: are the current opponents of Israel simply 'pro-Palestinian' or 'humanitarian' (as they claim) – or are they

prejudicially anti-Israeli? If Israel was not Jewish (but the creation of some other ethnic group) would reactions to it be the same? The empirical facts are the following. When Palestinians are subject to similar or worse sufferings due to the actions of other Arabs or Moslems (for example, when thousands of them were killed in Jordan in September 1970[74]), the public outcry is much smaller or non-existent. When similar or worse sufferings happen to Jews by the hand of Palestinians (women and children deliberately killed by terrorists) or to other peoples elsewhere (for example, the Darfur minority in the Sudan), again the public outcry is noticeably less or almost nil. The reactions to Israel are evidently out of all proportion, compared to usual reactions.

Such observable discrepancies clearly and irrefutably prove that anti-Israeli sentiments are rooted in anti-Semitism and nothing else, for a majority Jewish population is the distinguishing mark of the Jewish State. The importance of this argument cannot be exaggerated: the evidence at hand proves the true cause. However much anti-Israelis protest their objectivity and even-handedness, their actions speak louder than their words: their basic motive is manifestly anti-Jewish racism and their reactions are manifestly based on double-standards.

They protest that "it is surely possible to criticize the Israeli government's behavior without being an anti-Semite" – but the question they do not answer, note well, is: how come that

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[74] Or more recently (in 2007), during the bombardment of a 'Palestinian' refugee camp by Lebanese forces trying to destroy a terrorist group there.

criticism is so much more virulent than the criticism towards other countries or peoples for comparable behavior? Criticism is legitimate – but unfair criticism, criticism using double standards, is not legitimate. If all humans are equal in their hearts, then their indignation, anger and hatred should be commensurate with actual events. For instance, if a couple of thousand Palestinians die in anti-terrorist operations, while 400,000 Darfur people die in ethnic cleansing operations – the emotions aroused by the latter events should objectively be at least 200 times more intense than in the former. Yet the opposite occurs. This proves double standards are involved.

Some anti-Semites moronically claim they are not anti-Semitic, since they are Jewish or Arab and therefore themselves Semitic! This is just word-play. The word 'anti-Semite' originally (19th Cent.) meant anti-Jewish – if now some sophists wish to change its meaning to include hatred of all Semites (so as to dilute its significance), then we could simply have to start using the word 'anti-Jewish' instead. And of course, there is no denying that some Jews are anti-Jewish (we call these 'self-hating' Jews).

In conclusion, it is very important for people to get acquainted with the full and real history of the land of Israel, which clearly and unequivocally declares the Jews' just and full entitlement to it. The media succeed in their misrepresentation of the Jews' rights first of all by falsifying history. When, to give one example, the Moslem authorities (the *Waqf*) currently in charge of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem shamelessly claim that there was never a Jewish Temple on the mount, or even a Jewish kingdom in Israel, and mainstream TV or newspapers report such statements without comment, implying acquiescence,

history is being deliberately falsified for political ends. It is no wonder then that the man in the street believes the canard that Israel is "occupied Palestinian/Arab land" and consequently feels hostility against Israelis/Jews.

Moreover, the pseudo-reasoning that leads such people into anti-Israeli views has to be challenged. Double standards are clearly involved, as above shown. This is not entirely due to dishonesty – in some cases, the fake arguments are difficult to unravel and expose. Even so, there is obviously a great deal of dishonesty out there. There is a perverse will to mislead public opinion; most of the journalists, professors and politicians involved are not innocent bystanders, but active enemies of Israel. As other commentators have already pointed out, they adhere to a new secular religion – one in which the nation of Israel ("*le juif des nations*") plays a central role as the bad guy, towards which negative passions are deliberately channeled.

The absolute necessity of Israel. We are indeed witnessing "lynch-mobbing" on an unprecedented international scale – totally unfair and unrelenting criticism of Israel, without concern for the destructive consequences, indeed relishing them. This is objectively not just anti-Israeli propaganda; its ultimate aim has got to be the destruction of the Jewish people as a whole. Eretz Israel houses almost half the world Jewish population, and has the sympathy and support of the vast majority of Diaspora Jewry. As Arab propaganda makes clear[75],

[75] See for instance the websites www.pmw.org and www.memri.org which give many examples – like the following

the Arabs make little distinction between the groups. When they speak of Israelis, they call them simply *al-yahud* – the Jews. They openly and explicitly dream of Jewish genocide[76].

If anything proves the need for Jews to have their own independent and strong country, even today after the Holocaust, it is precisely this world-wide anti-Israel media campaign. We see here again, barely half a century after the murder of 6 million Jews of Europe by apparently civilized peoples, how easy it is for the modern media to excite the masses against Jews. Journalists are the new priests, preaching hatred. Some do so explicitly – but most do it in a more "politically correct" manner: by selective information (i.e. withholding relevant information) and by disinformation (i.e. peddling false information)[77]. The message "Israel is the bad guy" can be transmitted loud and clear in tacit, subliminal ways – by the choice of pictures, by background music, by the tonality of voiceover, by the wording used, and many similar propaganda tricks.

The way things are going, I sometimes fear that one day soon, if we are not careful and we do not react energetically to this new war against the Jews, the world as a whole will conspire to erase our race from this planet. The United Nations will vote to

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video from Egyptian TV: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koGCMT9Pevs.

[76] Even while loudly accusing Israel of having genocidal intentions against the Palestinian Arabs. But there are no such velleities among Jews – it is a pure invention of Israel's enemies.

[77] See for instance the website www.camera.org which monitors some media.

annihilate us, using all sorts of pious arguments to give themselves a good conscience about it. They will say it is a necessity for the sake of world peace and international progress. Everyone will be relieved and happy at last; a sense of unity and common purpose will pervade the world.

An agency will be created and funded to overview the complex operation. Employment will increase and the economy will be stimulated. The Red Cross and Red Crescent will be appointed to ensure that humanitarian standards are maintained in this worthy cause. They will visit the construction sites of modern, computerized killing factories, and certify their painlessness and hygiene. If some of the Jews dare object or rebel, Amnesty International and Peace Now will brand them as terrorists. Other registered NGOs will make sure that, to be fair, all Jews are included in this Final Solution, and none are allowed to convert to other religions or to plead to have been Israel-bashing atheists. It will all be done cleanly and efficiently, putting Hitler and other predecessors to shame.

This is I hope an extreme, nightmare scenario – but who would have imagined the Shoah humanly conceivable a few years before it happened? We cannot ignore that Iran's current threat of nuclear war against Israel is looked upon with utter insouciance by the world's political authorities, media and populations[78]. Many may be suspected to hope Israel will indeed be "wiped off the map". This is not a mere Islamist or

[78] Consider also the absurdities emanating from the current so-called Human Rights Council of the UN. See http://www.unwatch.org.

Palestinian/Arab dream, but the secret desire of many anti-Semites in the West, on the Left as well as the Right. The bloodbath will surely not end there. Experience of past pogroms shows that once the killing orgy starts, it is hard to stop. No Jew in the world, whatever his or her political leanings, will be safe.

People of good faith must rally fully behind Israel. This Jewish State was created for a purpose, to ensure the future protection of all Jews against any velleity of genocide. Its necessity is manifest still today.

14. The Chanukah lights miracle: a new, more logical solution to the problem

During the eight days of the Chanukah festival, or festival of lights, Jews light candles every evening. The reason for this, tradition tells us, is that when in the 2nd Cent. BCE the Maccabees drove their Seleucid enemies out from the Temple, they wished to immediately resume its regular services, including the daily lighting of the menorah. However, they found only one sealed container, with enough pure olive oil for only one day's burning. They knew that it would take them eight days to resume a regular supply of oil[79]. They nevertheless lit the menorah and miraculously the available oil lasted eight days.

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[79] The Beit Yossef explains this eight day delay as either (a) due to their being ritually impure for temple service and needing seven days to get purified plus one more day to gather and press olives, or (b) due to their having to send for oil far away, a journey of four days there and four days back.

This story is mentioned in the Talmud, in tractate Shabbat, page 21b: "The vial contained sufficient oil for one day only, but a miracle occurred, and it fed the holy lamp eight days in succession"[80]. In a commentary to the later *halakhic* (i.e. Jewish law) work called Arba Turim, vol. II, chapt. 670, §2, R. Joseph Caro (also known as the Beit Yossef) raises a logical problem in relation to these reported events. ***If there was oil for one day and it miraculously burned for eight days, why do we celebrate the festival during eight and not merely seven days?*** He proposes three hypothetical scenarios to solve the problem[81], but upon closer examination all three are found wanting in some respect, casting some doubt on the whole thing. The three scenarios proposed and their difficulties are as follows:

1. One possibility is that the *kohanim* (priests), assessing the situation realistically, decided from the start that they would pour one eighth of the regular measure of oil into the menorah lamps every day, so that the one-day oil supply would last eight days though only for part of each night. As it happened, the one eighth

[80] A question arises regarding the wording of this sentence. Is the subject of "it fed the holy lamp" the vial or the oil? If we assume it is the vial, then the most fitting scenario would be the one labeled as number two; but this scenario leads to the difficulty of 7 days instead of 8. Therefore, we must assume "it" refers to the oil.

[81] It is not sure where the Beit Yossef gleaned this information. A rabbi I asked said that the sources for two of the proposed scenarios are thought to have perhaps been the Ritva and the Tosefot R. Peretz.

measure burned through the whole night every night for eight nights. This solution is interesting because it proposes an eightfold miracle. The main difficulty here is that by not filling up the menorah vessels they were supposedly not fulfilling the legal or at least traditional requirement for this ritual[82]. Another criticism leveled is that such a calculated act would have implied uncharacteristic lack of faith (at least on the first day, before the miracle was first manifested). Another traditional explanation of this first scenario is that the kohanim divided the available oil into eight parts with the expectation that each part would miraculously last all night; and the difficulty with that solution is that it is in principle not proper to deliberately rely on miracles.[83]

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[82] Maybe they were halakhically permitted to do so, since the Beit Yossef does not comment negatively on this practice here. Perhaps the legal requirement to fill up the menorah before lighting it is merely *derabbanan* (rabbinic) and not *deoraita* (biblical). I am told the menorah ritual is not counted as one of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments). The Torah passage concerning it, viz. Exodus 27:20-1, is very brief and does not answer such questions. See also Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Avodah, Daily and Additional Sacrifices, chapt. 3, law 3, which mentions daily cleaning of the menorah. This matter needs to be further clarified.

[83] Someone suggested to me that perhaps they filled only one menorah cup for each night, rather than partially fill all seven of them every day. However, upon reflection, this is not a better hypothesis, in that they would not manage to completely fill that one cup each day, since one eighth part of the oil daily cannot fill up one seventh part of the menorah (and this is all the more true if we take into consideration the continually burning western lamp –

2. An alternative solution proposed is that the kohanim poured all the oil they had on the first day into the menorah cups, as normally required, and (a) the miracle was that the oil cruse was not emptied as they poured oil from it but remained full all the time (as in the miracle by Elisha mentioned in II Kings 4:4), or perhaps (b) the level of oil in it miraculously rose up again during the night so that it was full again by the morning, or perhaps (c) it refilled entirely in the morning after the oil in the menorah was burnt out so they could pour oil from it again. This happened again on the second day, on the third, etc. – and thus they were able to make the menorah burn normally for eight nights. However, here the main difficulty is that this scenario implies only seven miraculous events: for either the first day or the eighth day must be regarded as non-miraculous[84]. In other words, this putative solution does not actually solve the problem initially posed! (A possible reply to this objection

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see later footnote regarding that)! Not to mention that lighting only one branch of the menorah per night would probably not be halakhically acceptable.

[84] If (a) the cruse did not empty as oil was poured from it, then the miracle occurred for the first seven days, and on the eighth day there was no such miracle. If (b) the cruse emptied when poured out and refilled miraculously during the whole night, the miracle likewise occurred in the first seven nights, but not on the eighth; whereas if (c) the cruse was miraculously refilled only in the morning, after all the oil was burnt out, then the miracle occurred on the last seven days, not on the first day.

would be to say that there were eight days of miraculous oil, and a full measure of oil was left for the ninth day – but then we might ask why was a superfluous eighth miracle performed?)

3. Another proposed solution is that the kohanim poured all the oil they had on the first day into the menorah lamps, and the miracle was that (a) the menorah flames did not at all burn out the oil, so that a full measure of oil was available in the menorah the next day, or perhaps (b) the level of oil rose up again in the menorah every morning when all the previous night's oil was burnt up. This happened again the next day, etc. – so that the menorah could be lit for eight nights as required[85]. This solution is a bit of a compromise between the previous two, in that it implies that the presumed legal requirement of a full menorah was obeyed every day (unlike the first scenario) and that

[85] I visualize (a) the lamps as having remained full of oil all night for the first seven nights, rather than assume as usually done the more visible miracle that (b) the oil burnt away during the night and then rose up again in the morning. Either way, the oil burnt away naturally on the eighth night, and did not rise up again the next morning. In hypothesis (a) the miracle occurred all through the night on every one of the first seven nights, whereas in hypothesis (b) the miracle occurred at the end of every night (i.e. in the morning) and therefore seven miracles occurred starting on the second day and ending on the eighth. Note that in case (a) the kohanim needed to extinguish the lamps in the mornings and light them again in the evenings, whereas in case (b) the lamps were naturally extinguished and the service consisted only in rekindling them.

the miracle actually occurred in the menorah (unlike the second scenario, which rather places the supernatural oil production in the oil cruse). However, this third solution has the same main difficulty as the preceding one, namely that it implies only seven miraculous events – so it is not an effective solution to the problem posed. Either the first day or the eighth must be viewed as non-miraculous, unless we accept (as one rabbi has argued to me) that the eighth miracle consisted in the timely cessation of miraculous oil production!

While meditating on these things, I realized that there is **a fourth solution**, which to my knowledge[86] was not considered by the Beit Yossef or other commentators – a solution more logical than the three he proposed. It is this:

4. The kohanim **poured all the oil** they had on the first day into the menorah (as legally or traditionally required to) and found the next morning that **only one eighth of it had burned out**. So they extinguished the flames and left the unburned oil ($7/8^{th}$) in place, igniting it again in the evening. The next morning they found the same thing had happened and repeated their service. And again the next day and the next, so that the original oil lasted eight nights! This new solution resembles the first, in that the rate of burning

[86] I assume this hypothesis is a *chidush* (innovation) – if not, forgive my ignorance and tell me about it!

is one eighth of the normal rate and after the first night the lamps are lit even though not full of oil, but it is better than the first in that, full of faith, they poured the full measure of oil into the menorah on the first day and then let *Hashem* (G-d) take care of the subsequent events miraculously (by slowing the normal burning process). Note that a service was still required of them every day (snuffing out and rekindling the lamps). And this new solution is better than the second and third in that it implies eight days of miracle, and not just seven like them – so it really does answer the original question. It is such a simple, obvious and elegant solution to the problem that one wonders why matters were made so complicated by previous commentators!

This fourth solution seems to me the most plausible, granting that that the Chanukah lights miracle occurred. But an acquaintance of mine, who prefers to remain anonymous, has suggested *a fifth solution*, which does not assume any such miracle occurred, as follows:

5. The kohanim may have used *slower burning wicks* with a daily one-eighth measure of oil as in the first scenario or using full lamps to begin with as in the fourth scenario! This is a neat solution, assuming the required shortening of wicks was halakhically and physically possible (and that they were able to accurately predict the length of wick needed to retard

> oil consumption). This hypothesis recognizes that not just one but two variables affect the consumption of oil: namely, the quantity of oil used and the type or length of wick. Of course, this is not such a nice solution from a religious point of view, in that it denies the miracle parameter given as a premise by the Talmud. If this naturalistic suggestion is nonetheless preferred, it must be supposed that what we are celebrating by lighting the Chanukah lights is simply the miracle of victory in battle, as mentioned in our prayers throughout the festival.

Whatever all that may be[87], I take this opportunity to pray Hashem to make many miracles for the Jewish people today,

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[87] One final issue to mention parenthetically. After writing all the above, I found out about the "western lamp" that (at least according to some opinions) had to be kept alight continually (i.e. during the day as well as the night). This was one of the branches of the menorah – either the one on its west side or its central one (depending on how the menorah was oriented; see Menachot 98b). Let us briefly consider the implications of this additional factor on the various hypotheses above treated. Presumably, an oil cruse like the one the kohanim found contained enough oil for one day of normal service – i.e. enough too for the daytime western lamp. In that case, in the first solution the kohanim simply divided the oil into more fractions, but each fraction (including that intended for the western lamp) miraculously did its usual job for eight days instead of just one; more precisely, the continual lamp would receive its allotted portion of oil twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. In the second solution, the oil cruse always miraculously provided the oil required, including that for the western lamp. In the third solution, the full measure of oil was poured on the first morning into the continual lamp, and at the

especially to save Israel from its many internal and external false friends, opponents and enemies. Written and distributed during Chanukah 5770.

(With many thanks to R. Mendel Pevzner for his recent lecture on this topic, which revived my interest in it, and to R. Yacov Holzman for his kind help in researching and translating relevant sources.)

Postscript

In writing the above account of the miracle of Chanukah, my motive was not to argue as to its historicity. It was (as always) primarily to teach logic. I wanted to help unravel a logical problem long known in Jewish tradition, while staying within the bounds set for Talmudic discussions. The method was to visualize the three known alternative solutions in as much detail as possible and consider their consequences, and then to see if additional solutions could be suggested. This yielded the fourth solution. A fifth solution, suggested by an acquaintance, was outside the Talmudic bounds, but quite legitimate as a scientific explanation.

However, reacting to the above article, a reader wrote to me suggesting that the explanation for the eight days celebration was just a wish by the Maccabees to celebrate belatedly the

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evening service it was miraculously either still full or it rose up again. In the fourth solution, the rate of burning must have been miraculously slower in the western lamp than in the others, since it had to burn twice as much, i.e. both day and night.

festivals of Succoth and Shimini Chag Atzeret, which they had missed due to being busy fighting. She offered as evidence 2 Maccabees 10:6-8 "And they celebrated it [the purification of the sanctuary] for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore bearing ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public ordinance and vote that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year".

But to my mind this statement does not contradict the Talmudic account. That year, they celebrated Succoth late, but it was obviously not their intent to shift this biblically ordained festival forevermore to the 25th of Kislev. The last verse makes clear they instituted a new festival (viz. Chanukah) for future years, in remembrance of this historic occasion. It is not logically excluded, though not mentioned here, that one of their motives may have been to remind us of the miracle recounted in the Talmud, that one day's supply of oil sufficed to keep the menorah burning during those first eight days. It is still of course quite true that we may reasonably doubt the very occurrence of a miracle. Faith is required to believe in it.

It is true that the historical books of the Maccabees do not mention the miracle described centuries later in the Talmud,

and that is of course suspicious. Looking further into the matter, I found the following[88]: 1 Maccabees 1:21 informs us that the menorah was earlier stolen by Antiochus IV Epiphanes: "He arrogantly entered the sanctuary and took the golden altar, the menorah for the light, and all its utensils". In 1 Maccabees 4:49, we learn that, after the Maccabees had purified the temple, "They made new holy vessels, and brought the menorah, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple". Presumably, this means that a new menorah was made at this point; this must have taken some time to do. In 1 Maccabees 4:50, we are told: "Then they burned incense on the altar and lighted the lamps on the menorah, and these gave light in the temple". This is confirmed in 2 Maccabees 10:3 they "set forth… lights".[89]

The Jewish revolt against Seleucid domination occurred in 175-135 BCE, roughly a century and a half after the conquest of Judea by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. After the latter's death, his successors split the empire in two; the Seleucid half was based in Syria and included Judea in its dominions. The Temple was liberated in 165 BCE, but the

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[88] See http://www.livius.org/te-tg/temple-treasure/menorah.html.

[89] No mention anywhere in these books, note, of a single leftover cruse of oil or that the oil it contained lasted eight days. One would think such a miracle would have been mentioned. Confronted with that criticism, a rabbi once replied to me that miracles were so common in those days that it was not felt necessary to record them. However, one can reply: how would he know for sure? To say so is just an act of faith.

war continued for many years after. The first book of Maccabees is thought to have been written quite soon after the events it describes, sometime in 135-63 BCE, possibly circa 100 BCE, which gives it considerable authority. It seems to have been originally written in Hebrew, by a Jew living in the Holy Land; but only a Greek translation has survived. The Rabbis did not include it in the Jewish canon, though it is quite pious and patriotic, possibly because it seems to have been written by a Sadducee. The second book of Maccabees was apparently written rather later in the 1st Cent. BCE and directly in Greek by a Jew living in Egypt. It seems to be a much more second hand and revised account of events. Compared to the first book, it is less of a history and more of a religious tract. In short, it is less reliable, but is still considered to have some value as history.

Be all that as it may, it is not unthinkable that, however well-informed the first author may have been on many other matters, he may still not have been privy to the information about the miracle of the lights that the Talmud later reported. And if this is true of the earlier author, it is all the more true of the later one. In other words, there is still room for faith regarding this report.

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All these works may be consulted on the Internet, at
www.TheLogician.net

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90 First published by author in Vancouver, B.C., 1990.

91 First published by author in Geneva, 1995.

92 First published by author in Geneva, 2003.

93 First published by author in Geneva, 1999. The first edition comprised only Phase I (Macroanalysis), whereas this edition also includes Phase II (Microanalysis).

94 First published by author in Geneva, earlier 2005.

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