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You Shall Be Holy

"You Shall Be Holy. For I, The LORD, Your God, Am Holy" (Leviticus 19:2)

Here, in the words of Leviticus 19:2, is the manifesto of this book. Here is the prescription for the future of Jewish theology. These words are uttered to the entire community, *kol adat*, of the people Israel; and they make an audacious claim upon them – to be holy. The audacity of this charge is not muted or dulled many, many centuries after they were uttered. The charge is audacious because it assumes that not only individual Jews, but every single Jew, and the community as a whole, can be holy. As we will see, this is not as easy task, but God assumes that it can be accomplished by the natural human being through human will and actions. And there is even a sense that it is the unique destiny of the people Israel to be holy. This is explicitly stated in Exodus: "You Shall be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation (Ex 19:6)." Making the charge to be holy, the manifesto of the book on Jewish theology is, then, reasserting an ancient doctrine, an old biblical charge, that might appear both arcane and foreign to contemporary sensibilities. However, I have become convinced that the notion of holiness or "*qedushah*" that we have in the Torah and interpreted in rabbinic

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exegesis, liturgy, and philosophy, holds the key to a revival of Jewish theology in the contemporary age.

Still, the notion of holiness as we have it both in the Torah and in rabbinic literature is not an easy one to grasp. The people is charged to be holy, but they very well might ask, what is holiness? It is certainly not, as philosophy demands, a "clear and distinct" idea. And it is also not a naturally occurring human experience. Rather, holiness appears as a dynamic quality that can inhabit a person, time, or place, for a moment and then be gone. Holiness is associated with God and with God's power and transcendence from the physical and worldly realm, yet it is also a term that is used to speak of God's presence on earth. Holiness is definitely a spiritual phenomenon, but it is equally a moral one. In the book of Leviticus we see that the holy is both a matter of ritual action and interpersonal ethics. Leviticus begins with all the ritual prescriptions for the sacrificial cult, but it also includes the well-known commandment in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Discussions of holiness that include the spiritual and the ethical may be fairly easy to understand for the modern reader. However, holiness is also tied up with the terms pure and impure, clean and unclean, order and disorder. Here, an entire classification of the natural world comes to divide up animals that are available and unavailable for food. Included in the pure and impure distinction is an aversion to blood and to death that may appear to modern readers as a long outdated series of tribal taboos.

Yet if we step back and look at our modern societies the fear of blood, death, and disorder and the striving for cleanliness, purity, and order are just as prevalent in our societies as they were in ancient Israel. As rational and "civilized" as we may be, most of us still cringe at the sight of blood and dead bodies. And one could easily argue that modern Western societies are more obsessed with cleanliness and order than ancient Israelite society was.

Just as there seems to be a basic human fear of death and blood, we could also say that there is a human intuition and sense that God and the godly are pure, clean, and ordered. But the system of holiness in Israelite religion, which is continued and expanded in

rabbinic Judaism, tries to put both the most basic human abhorrence of death and blood together with the basic human longing and striving for purity to create an elaborate system of holiness. Through this system the body physical and the body politic together are to become holy. This occurs when the dichotomy pure–impure is coupled with the dichotomy just–unjust. Here, we see a move to apply the same natural abhorrence of blood, death, and disorder to political corruption and social injustice. Certainly, our societies remain riddled with corruption and injustice, and the longing for a political order free of corruption and injustice is no less intense today than it was in ancient Israel.

Beyond the social and political sphere, we are faced today with a massive problem of environmental pollution and a looming series of environmental disasters of truly "biblical" proportions. If we believe many of our best scientists who speak of global warming, we face the possibility of a world-wide flood no less severe than the one described in the Genesis story of the flood. And as myriads of animal and plant species continue to become extinct, day by day, the notion of an ark to preserve the variety of living species also has strong contemporary resonances.

In the biblical imagination, the holy seems to involve a sense of natural balance and a respect for natural limits. The unholy designates a surging beyond limits that threatens order and thereby brings chaos. And this fear of going beyond limits toward imbalance, disorder, chaos is something that we as moderns should also be able to identify with.

Being tied up with God, order and purity, life and death, justice and the social good, the holy is not easy to sum up or define. As with most of its religious terms, signs, and symbols, the Bible does not give definitions. Rather, it presents associations and synonyms and it displays the terms in its practical usage. Thus, to get a sense of the meaning of the term, one must track down the variety of associations, usages, and contexts in which it occurs. One may say that the holy is such an all-inclusive term that it requires an entire system to express. This is the insight of the work of the biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom and the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Their

view is that it takes a massive categorization of natural and animal life, a series of either/or dichotomies, an elaborate semiotic framework and a detailed ritual life to express the meaning of holiness. Their position is that, hidden in the complex distinctions and cult described in the book of Leviticus, is a map of and for holiness which sets forth the conditions and rules of a holy life. Thus holiness, as it is set forth in the writings of the priests of the book of Leviticus, is equally a matter of thought and action. In short, holiness is a way of life that needs to be learned and practiced.

From what I have said thus far, I hope it is clear that holiness is a spiritual reality that is tied up with the human body. This is why matters of blood and death, food and eating, are so central to Israelite notions of holiness. Thus, when God says, "You Shall be Holy," what is meant is not that you should involve yourselves with only spiritual things and matters divorced from the physical body, but that you should attend most deeply to matters of the body; so that the body becomes a vessel of holiness and all life becomes sacralized. And the goal of the life of holiness may then be said to be a matter of bringing the heavens down to earth, like rain to parched soil, "like showers on young growth, like droplets on the grass" (Deut 32:2).

The book of Leviticus begins the attempt to systematize the holy and unholy in Judaism, but this attempt achieves much more elaborate distinctions in the first great systematic work of the rabbis, the *Mishnah* of Judah the Prince in 200 CE. This is further developed in the Talmuds and the codes of Jewish law or *halakhah*. The Jewish recipe for holiness is then meticulously set forth in Jewish law. And I would say that the purpose of Jewish law is precisely to map out a path through which the people Israel can follow the commandment of God to be holy. This means that *halakhah* provides the means to holiness. And it follows that *halakhah* has a holy dimension. Because it is *halakhah* that provides the means to be holy, part of the manifesto of the book which calls for a return to the holy life, is that Jews must return to the practices dictated by *halakhah*. *Halakhah* holds the keys to the life of holiness for the Jews, even Jews immersed in the modern world. For without *halakhah*, there is no point of entry into the holy life.

The Jewish existentialist Martin Buber (1878–1965) tried to develop a philosophy of the holy life, summarized by the phrase, "the hallowing of the everyday," by extracting only the ideals and mystical ideas of Judaism and leaving Jewish law behind. Much of his inspiration for the holy life came from an interpretation of the pietistic and mystic movement of the *Hasidut* of early eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. Yet as beautiful and inspiring as Buber's writing on the holy life is, in subtracting *halakhah* from that life, Buber deprived Jews of the vehicles in Judaism to make the corporeal and earthly life of the Jew holy. For holiness cannot live on inspiration alone; to be achieved, it requires training, and disciplined habits, and repetition of ritual and liturgical actions.

Holiness Theology

To say that holiness is bound up with the body and the earth is to point to the essential element of embodiment in biblical and Jewish notions of holiness. But it must be said that holiness finds its source in God and all that is holy gains its holiness from God. Thus it is no accident that the most popular rabbinic designation for God is *HaKadosh Barukh Hu*, The Holy One, Blessed Be He.

Since God is "the Holy One," a book on holiness in Judaism must be concerned with God and a book on holiness in Judaism can thus be considered a book of theology. It is often said that Judaism does not have a theology in the systematic sense that Christianity does and there is some truth to this. Where Christianity adapted Greek philosophical categories – being, substance, necessity, and cause – to present a system of theological doctrines, Judaism focused more of its energy on a system of Jewish law. Entrance into Christianity is often put in terms of giving assent to certain beliefs, for example that Jesus is the messiah, that he is the incarnate son of God, and that he died to atone for the sins of humanity. In Islam one must assert both that Allah is the one God and that Muhammad is his prophet. The Torah, on the other hand, sees Judaism as a matter of being part of a people and living a life in accordance with

God's commanded *Mitzvot*. We see, in the answer of the people to God when he placed the commandments in front of them, *naaseh v'nishmah* (Ex 24:7), "we will do (first) and understand (afterward)," a characteristic Jewish position that places actions in front of beliefs.

However, beginning with Saadia Gaon in the tenth century and continuing with Maimonides and Halevy in the twelfth century, and then flourishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews did devote themselves to developing a Jewish theology. Maimonides famously said in his *Commentary on the Mishnah Sanhedrin* in the introduction to *Peraq cheleq* that it is belief in God that sits at the foundation of Judaism and assures the Jew entrance into the people Israel. Maimonides initiated the development of a form of Jewish theology that has often been called "Ethical Monotheism." Ethical Monotheism, in its mature nineteenth- and twentieth-century form, focuses both on God's unique oneness and on the intricate connections between Jewish monotheism and social ethics. Jewish social ethics was often seen as most clearly represented by the concerns of the classical biblical Prophets. Precisely because Ethical Monotheism was so focused on ethics it was often criticized as leaving out biblical and rabbinic concerns with holiness. Thus, as this book tries to remain loyal to some of the theological and ethical ideas of Ethical Monotheism, it also tries to restore biblical and rabbinic focus on holiness as it is expressed in Jewish ritual and liturgical life.

The Experience of the Holy

Holiness, especially as we have it described in biblical narratives, is not always a pleasant and friendly experience. Indeed, if we take Moses's encounter with God in the burning bush (Ex 3), the meeting with the Holy One is fraught with danger and fear. Moses is instructed at the site of the bush: "Do not come closer, remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Ex 3:5). The metaphor for the holy as fire, itself suggests that the holy will burn if one touches it, even as it gives off light and warmth.

In his famous book *The Idea of the Holy* (1958), Rudolf Otto attempts to articulate the qualities of holiness. He allows that holiness includes rational and moral attributes but then he argues that its essence is in the realm of feeling. In trying to capture the feeling, he supplies us with a Latin term, "the *mysterium tremendum*" (Otto & Harvey, 1958, 12). He tells us that the *mysterium* is meant to communicate the sense that the holy is ultimately a mystery, something "hidden, esoteric …, extraordinary and unfamiliar" (Otto & Harvey, 1958, 13). The adjective "*tremendum*" is then meant to point to "an emotional response" that the holy elicits in humans. This response is like fear, yet Otto prefers the notion of "religious dread or awe" (Otto & Harvey, 1958, 14). This awe, he says, "may be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man's hair bristle and his limbs quake" (Otto & Harvey, 1958, 17). Much of Otto's analysis of the holy as the *mysterium tremendum* comes from the Bible. Perhaps the paradigmatic event here is the revelation at Sinai where "the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Ex 19:18) and "when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off" (Ex 20:15).

Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God In Search of Man* (1955) has a series of meditations on the Hebrew word *yira*, fear/awe, that draw us deeper into the rabbinic understanding of this aspect of holiness. Heschel tells us that awe "is the root of faith" and the "cardinal attitude of the religious Jew" (Heschel, 1955, 77). He tells us that "awe enables us to perceive, in the world, intimations of the divine … to feel, in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal (1955, 74–75)." Heschel informs us that, for the rabbis, *yirat hashem*, the fear/awe of God, or *yirat shamayim*, the fear/awe of heaven "is almost equivalent to the word 'religion.'" He also says that in rabbinic literature "the religious man is not called 'believer' … but *yare hashem* ['God-fearer']" (1955, 77).

In the Talmud, we have the following statement about the importance of fear. "Said, Rava bar Huna: A person who possesses Torah but does not have fear of God is like a treasurer who has been entrusted with the key to the inner chamber, but has not been entrusted with

the key to the outer gate. How is he to enter?" (BT *Shabbat* 31b). Whether we use the language of the Talmud or Otto or Heschel, it is important to bring forward the element of fear and awe that the holy evokes in humans. For this fear and awe points to the dynamism and the paradox of holiness in which it is both loved and feared, both attractive and repellent to humans who get near to it. We see this again clearly in the Exodus where the people say to Moses: "Let not God speak to us lest we die" (Ex 20:16). Moses, for his part, is told by God, "you cannot see me and live" and yet he still "drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Ex 20:18).

The holy is opposed in the Bible by the profane (*chol*). In the dichotomy between the holy and the profane there is a sense that each needs to be protected from the other. Holy vessels and instruments of sacrifices and the holy ark must be carefully separated from the profane; and the profane must be protected from the holy breaking out to consume it.

The commandments make pathways within the profane through which the holy can be brought to it. This means that the holy is not to be totally kept apart from the profane. Indeed, the goal seems to be to ritually bring them into contact so that that which is profane becomes holy. But how this is done is carefully regulated, as Jacob Milgrom says in his monumental commentary on the book of Leviticus, "through divinely imposed restrictions" (Milgrom, 1991, 730). These "restrictions" can be seen in the complex rituals connected to the sacrificial cult. These restrictions are then reinterpreted and adapted in *halakhah*. The result is that, for example, the everyday action of eating becomes a pathway to holiness when food is fit or kosher and prepared in the proper way. Relations with fellow persons can be a pathway to holiness, and proper behavior in business, farm, and court can also be vehicles to holiness when pursued under ethical guidelines.

In saying that fear/awe in front of God is the beginning of faith, Heschel was already in the 1950s offering a critique of much of contemporary Judaism. And after a half-century that critique remains very relevant. For in many Jewish communities God is not really taken seriously. Jews more easily talk about the intimacies of

their sex life and the amounts of money they earn than they talk about God. And when the topic is raised, God can easily be dismissed, since after all where was He in the Holocaust? Similarly, one can say that fear and awe in the face of the Holy and sacred is also rather hard to find.

However, there are times when vestiges of the sense that the holy must be handled with care still can be felt. And one of them might be the ways in which the Torah is handled in synagogue. First of all, the Torah sits protected and unseen in a large cabinet, the *aron qodesh* ("holy ark"), at the front of the assembly. The ark is then only opened at certain high points in the synagogue service when God is addressed. The Torah is then handled very carefully with rituals for taking it out and returning it to the ark in which congregants are allowed to touch it, not directly, but through the aid of a prayer shawl or prayer book.

Something of this sense of fear and danger connected to the holy is retained for observant persons who attempt to lead a life of *Mitzvot*. Here, one can observe a type of holy fear not only in the presence of holy objects but also a fear when the holy is contaminated by the unholy or profane. One can observe this in an observant Jew who accidentally eats non-kosher food or is caught traveling close to the time when Shabbat comes in. One can also see this attitude in non-Orthodox synagogues on the night of Yom Kippur as the haunting *Kol Nidrei*, the "All Vows" prayer, is chanted, or on Rosh Hashanah when the *shofar* or ram's horn is blown. One has only to look at the faces of children when they hear the at once triumphant and pleading sounds of the *shofar* to get a sense of what holy awe is.

Recapturing the attitude and feeling of awe before the holy may be described at the first step in reconstituting a sense of the holy. The Proverbs say that "Fear of God is the beginning of knowledge" (Pr 9:10). Fear of the holy is the beginning of the religious life because the holy is equally a spiritual and an ethical quality. Thus fear of the holy is also the recognition of the infinite responsibilities of the moral life. Fear of the holy is fear of sin and recognition of the all-seeing eye of God who sees our sins.

Holier Than Thou

If fear of the holy is the beginning of the religious life, we must say that it also has its pitfalls. The holy life is like a sacred ladder that one climbs through much personal sacrifice and hard moral discipline and spiritual work. Rising up the ladder of holiness, the religious searcher can easily come to look down upon those who they perceive to be below them or those who do not even try to make the climb. And thus we have the common phenomenon of the religious person who regards himself "holier than thou." Because *halakhah* carefully delineates a system of the holy and the profane, the pure and impure, it is easy to get caught up in the intricacies of what can and cannot be eaten, what can and cannot be touched, and the when and how of the performance of *Mitzvot*, and thereby forget the spiritual and ethical goal of the fulfillment of *Mitzvot*. And if the less observant Jewish religious communities suffer from a loss of a sense of fear in front of God and the holy, we may also say that the ultra-Orthodox "*Haredi*" and Hasidic sects suffer from an over-abundance of holy fear. This has led to what can only be called obsessive observance of *halakhah*, excessive fear of making small mistakes in ritual observance, *Kashrut*, and purity laws. The latter has taken an especial toll on the status of women in Haredi and Hasidic communities, where extremely priggish and prim standards of modesty and the separation of the sexes in all aspects of life have been developed. These customs have severely limited women to the small sphere of the home and excluded them from much public religious life.

Prophetic Holiness and Ethics

The Jewish figures that tried most forcefully to check the abuses of the quest for a holy life are the prophets. Here are the words of Isaiah:

> What need have I for all your sacrifices
> I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,
> And suet of fatlings, And blood of bulls,

> … Incense is offensive to me, New Moon
> And Sabbath, Proclaiming of solemnities
> I cannot abide ….
> Put your evil doings away from my sight
> Cease to do evil; Learn to do good
> Devote yourselves to justice
> Aid the wronged.
>
> (Is 1:11–17)

With Isaiah, who refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" (Is 12:6), God's holiness receives a decidedly ethical definition so that holiness includes God's righteousness, God's justice, and God's concern for the poor and enslaved not only in Israel but beyond Israel to the other nations. In Isaiah, holiness receives its messianic definition where "all the nations" and the "many peoples" will go up to the "mount of the LORD" and "nation shall not take up sword against nation" (Is 2:2–4).

The prophet's critique of the abuses of the life of holiness, from those who obsess over ritual purity and forget to serve the weak to those who cynically go through ritual motions without any holy intent, remain surprisingly relevant today. The great modern Jewish philosophers from Moses Mendelssohn, to Hermann Cohen, to Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, and Emmanuel Levinas can be seen as attempting to restate the prophetic critique of Isaiah and the other prophets to open up the Jewish community to the larger ethical concerns of the world.

Certainly this larger ethical concern for the world, outside of the holy communal circle that Jewish law tries to create, lies behind the liberal movements in Judaism from Reform, to Conservative to Reconstructionist. Thus, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, liberal Jews have adopted the Hasidic term "*Tikkun Olam*," repair of the world, to refer to their deep involvement and commitment to issues of social justice throughout the world. Along with the prophetic critique and vision, the concern for the enslaved, the persecuted, and the ill-fed of the world emerges from the Jewish people's own long history of enslavement and persecution and poverty. But the liberal communities often use their own concerns

for the world to elevate themselves in their eyes and berate the more traditional Jewish communities for being concerned only with themselves and their own ritual holiness.

However, the manifesto of the book for the future of Jewish theology is that Jews must bring together once more their concern for ritual and ethical holiness. Where it is true that the traditional Jewish communities are at times excessively concerned with matters of ritual purity and the well-being of their Jewish communities alone, the liberal communities have lost a sense of ritual holiness and concomitantly a sense of the holiness of God. As the practical theologian Brian Mahan has said, the simple question that can be put to the liberal Jewish community is, what do you do that a good social worker, community activist, or international aid organization does not? If the goal of Judaism is *Tikkun Olam* alone, why do we need synagogues, and *Kashrut*, and Torah, and the State of Israel, and all the "*mishigas*" (craziness) of Judaism at all? Why not devote all our energies only to the world?

This last question is a question that Jewish theology needs to be able to answer today. It is important to note that this is a peculiar question for Judaism that is tied to the modern world; for before modernity the world simply would not allow Jews to enter into it to repair it! But in this book the question, why not devote all Jewish energies to the world? will receive a direct theological answer. And the answer is, God! Jews cannot abandon the holy life for the world alone because God requires them to be holy! Being holy, Jews must neither abandon God nor the world. And describing the complexities, difficulties, and joys of this twofold mission is the goal of this book.

Chapter Outlines

Part one

Part one of this book focuses on the ways in which the blessings, festivals, laws, and ethical teachings of the Bible and Rabbinic Judaism serve to foster a life of holiness. I begin in chapter two with

a brief introduction to the nature of Jewish theology as an embodied theology, and then focus on blessings, the Torah, and the people Israel as central theological themes. The blessings are those formulated by rabbinic Judaism that the Jew says on everyday occasions like sleeping, rising, eating, and walking in nature. If we present the blessings of everyday life as a form of Jewish theology, we are saying that Jewish theology, in it simple form, is an acknowledgment of and gratitude for God's life-giving and holy presence in sensate existence. Torah, as both the Pentateuch and all holy Jewish texts, provides the fulcrum around which all of Judaism revolves, marking Jews as the "people of the book" and providing determining theology in Judaism as an exegetical or "hermeneutical" enterprise. Because Torah as text, and not beliefs and concepts, rule Jewish theology, the reader will find that in every chapter of this book and all discussions of the past, present, and future of Jewish theology an interpretive method is employed that places Torah at the center.

In chapter three we look at the central holy day of Judaism, Shabbat. In Genesis we see that God, Himself, engages in the act of blessing and this he does both after the creation of humans (1: 28) and after the creation of the seventh day (2:2). In addition to blessing the seventh day, however, God also "makes it holy," (y*iqadesh oto*) (2:2). As God made the Sabbath holy, so Israel must make the Sabbath holy by fulfilling the commandments that surround the Sabbath. And in doing this Israel, as heir to Adam and Eve, lives up to the meaning of being created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27).

There is no clearer way to say that holiness in Judaism is embodied than to focus on what Jews eat. This is the focus of chapter four. Food builds and sustains the body; without it we die. The preoccupation with eating as a holy act says that Jewish theology is "not in heaven" but on earth and in the body. Being concerned with food, the theologian is brought to reflect upon not only food, but the home in which food is eaten, the women and men who acquire and prepare food, the special foods that are eaten on certain holidays and festivals, and the times when eating food is prohibited on designated fast days.

Concern with holiness quite naturally brings us into the synagogue and to synagogue liturgy. The natural world is, perhaps, God's first temple, but God's holiness is more concentrated and directed in his houses of worship and his liturgies. An understanding of the liturgies of Judaism requires some understanding of the priestly cult of sacrifices that lies behind the synagogue. Sacrifices left a decisive stamp on its replacement – synagogue worship. This stamp is seen not only in the structure of rabbinic worship, which like the sacrifices must occur in three services each day, but also in the goals of worship. These goals include the central act of expiation of sin and repair of the relationship to God which is threatened by sin.

Chapter five specifically engages the personal and interpersonal ethics that the seminal nineteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus contains. Purified and spiritually renewed by worship, the Jew is commanded to act ethically in the world outside of the Temple and synagogue. Many rabbinic commentators have seen, in Leviticus 19, not only a restatement of the moral teachings of the Decalogue, but also a compact and concentrated biblical articulation of the essentials of interpersonal and social ethics. The interpersonal and social ethics that Leviticus 19 gives rise to show that holiness cannot be limited to communing with God in the ancient Temple or modern synagogue, but must be carried into all the spheres of human social relations.

Where the Levitical priests have a highly integrated notion of holiness as both ritual and ethical, the prophets push the point about the necessity of ethics to holiness very hard. In chapter six we review the prophetic critique of the Temple cult as a form of spiritual temptation – the temptation of the cult and worship alone that attracted Israelites in ancient times and remains a problem for Jews to this day. The moral standards and sensitivity of the prophets were so lofty that they remain a source of all Western moral ideals with an abiding relevancy to this day.

Part two

In the second part of the book, I focus on modern and contemporary resources to talk about a theology of holiness for the present and the

future. Chapter seven investigates the modern movement in Jewish philosophy and theology called "Ethical Monotheism." Ethical Monotheism relies heavily on the rationalist Western tradition of philosophy which stretches back to the medieval and ultimately the classical Greek philosophical tradition. Building upon the prophetic tradition, Ethical Monotheism stresses the ethical dimension of Judaism and utilizes the conceptual tools of Western philosophy to refine Jewish ethics. An extremely important contribution of Ethical Monotheism in the modern period is its attempt to specifically articulate a Jewish moral duty to the non-Jew and to participation in the building up of a tolerant and pluralistic modern society.

However, as complex and sophisticated as Ethical Monotheism is, it remains limited precisely for the form of holiness theology that I am attempting to develop in this book. Indeed, one could say that what Ethical Monotheism most lacks is an appreciation of the importance of holiness as a crucial supra-rational spiritual sensibility of Judaism. Therefore, in chapter eight I take on the task of refashioning a Jewish theology of holiness that is able to deal with both contemporary challenges of modern intellectual thought and the modern situation of religious and cultural pluralism. Here, I argue that the language of the Bible and rabbinic texts – filled as it is with metaphors, images, and divine pathos – constitutes the primary language of Judaism. This religious language, which we can call the language of Torah, and not the abstract conceptual language of philosophy must supply the basic categories and forms of expression for Jewish theology.

In chapter eight I address the rabbinic notion of "Talmud Torah," or Torah study and a recent form of Torah study called "Textual Reasoning" developed by Peter Ochs, Robert Gibbs, Laurie Zoloth and myself. Textual Reasoning is a form of group study of Torah that attempts to address contemporary ethical and religious issues within and outside of Judaism today. Chapter eight concludes with an example of Textual Reasoning sessions on the "Name of God" that I ran in Jerusalem in from 2010–11.

I have already mentioned that holiness in Judaism is deeply tied to worship and liturgy. In chapter nine I look at the *Siddur* or Daily Prayer Book as a resource for Jewish theology. Here, I try to argue

that the *Siddur* offers Jewish theology a kind of elementary or "common theology" for the whole Jewish community. I attempt to highlight the everyday access to holiness that central prayers of the daily liturgy, the *Shema*, and *Amidah*, afford contemporary Jews.

In chapter ten I attempt to refocus the Ethical Monotheist's insight that Jews must be active ethically in the public spheres of contemporary life but argue that there is an imperative for Jews to be involved in interfaith dialogue especially with our fellow monotheists, the Christians and Muslims. This obligation is increasingly important as Jews, Christians, and Muslims find themselves in situations of violent conflict in today's world. I try to develop a Jewish obligation to Christians and Muslims through their presence in our Torah in the figures of Ishmael and Esau. At the end of the chapter I address the contemporary movement of Scriptural Reasoning that I have been involved with which adapts Jewish forms of text study to the group study of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures.

In chapter eleven I focus on the moment in the annual liturgical calendar in which Judaism most deliberately commands Jews to "be holy." This is the High Holiday period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur when ritual and especially ethical purity is demanded. The High Holiday liturgy then offers Jews the best opportunity to have the spiritual experience of *qedusha*. I suggest, following Franz Rosenzweig, that the high point of the Yom Kippur liturgy is found in the *Avodah* Service when the story of the High Priest uttering the Divine Name is told and the worshippers in today's synagogue kneel to the floor and declare: "Blessed is the Name of His Glorious Kingdom for all Eternity." Yom Kippur shows that the ethical-spiritual experience of *qedushah* involves Jews in the theological enterprise of guarding the integrity of the Name of God who is *ShomerYisrael*, Guardian of Israel.

Theoretical Addendum: Jewish Theology as a Language-Game

Part of the task of unearthing the intrinsic forms of Jewish theology has led to a search for different ways of thinking about the

nature of theological reflection than the typically modern ones that were developed in the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries. In early modern interpretations of theology, Christianity and Judaism were alternatively presented as proto-rational forms of ethics or supra-rational systems for personal mysticism. The former left out the textual, ritual, and liturgical structures of Western religions and the latter side-stepped the social and political dimensions of religion. A significant dimension of the modern study of religion involved a quest to discover the unifying essence or underlying unity of all religions. And this had the effect of reducing complex historical traditions like Judaism that have existing and developed multiple forms over many centuries into simple ideas like the "quest for meaning" or the "oneness of all being and the world" or some "ultimate concern."

More recently, at the end of the twentieth century, scholars of religion sought more compelling models and paradigms through which not only Judaism but other textual and ritually based historical religious traditions could be understood. Here the search was for a way of respecting the uniqueness of particular religious traditions while still allowing for some meaningful comparison between religions.

One helpful way of understanding the nature of Jewish theology has been developed through applying a notion formulated by the British philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In thinking about the fact that there are multiple ways of putting the world together in a conceptual system, Wittgenstein developed the notion of a "language-game." A language-game is a system of expressions that is built upon signs that are related to one another through a series of rules like a grammar. Languages are the model here. It takes time to learn them and one only really learns them through practice and use, through speaking and listening. Languages are so complex that one cannot learn them overnight. Languages also have both a historical dimension through which they change and a systematic dimension in which they achieve an internal coherence and unique distinctiveness. The notion of language-games has been applied not only to linguistic systems but to other complex systems

like mathematics and physics which are built upon certain presuppositions, terms, rules. Simple examples of language-games are board games like chess and sports games like baseball and soccer. Each of these games has its own rules, terminology, boundaries, and behaviors which must be learned in order to play. The rules of these games preserve a common structure over time and place. Thus, baseball played in the 1960s will resemble the baseball of 2010 and baseball played in Japan will resemble baseball in the United States even as it displays aspects that are unique to the time and place of its playing.

The notion of a language-game has been extended by anthropologists to cultures. Therefore, we have come to see cultures themselves as a combination of signs, symbols, behaviors, and values. When these are learned they become something of a "second nature" that is assumed and often not reflected upon. The sociologist Peter Berger and cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz have helped us see that cultures are built on presuppositions and basic values that are so fundamental to the system that they are not questioned, since questioning them could undermine the system upon which they are built. Cultures as language-games create worldviews that dictate the "forms of life" that people live. Taken together, the worldview and forms of life that cultures make possible determine the realities which people inhabit.

Cultural-linguistic model for religion

In the 1980s, the Yale Divinity School scholar George Lindbeck put together the notion of a language-game with a theory of culture to suggest that we view religions as language-games and cultural systems. This "cultural-linguistic" (*The Nature of Doctrine*, 1984) model for religion is helpful because it takes into account the language, worldview, and form of life that religions endeavor to shape. The model also preserves the distinct differences in each religion and explains how it is that religions maintain continuity over time and geography. In this model, religion is not just a series of ideas that can be neatly summarized, but a complex series of

presuppositions and values, a system of signs, symbols, and rules and a concomitant series of rituals, behaviors, and relationships that define both a worldview and a form of life. Theology, in this conception, is the expression of fundamental assumptions and overarching rules of the culture and language-game of religion. In this view, theology does not rest above the religious system as its essential ideas, but is found throughout the religious system not only in its fundamental presuppositions and values but in its signs and symbols, its texts and rituals, and in the very form of life that the religious system is designed to produce.

I find the language and culture model particularly apt for Judaism because Judaism is built so strongly upon linguistic and cultural foundations. In this model, we may see the signs and symbols of Judaism as its "words" and Jewish law or *halakhah* as the rules which determine how Jewish signs and symbols are used in life. One task of Jewish theology would then be an attempt to map out the relations between the signs and rules of Judaism and show how it determines a worldview and a form of life. Jewish theology would also be the attempt to articulate certain assumptions, presuppositions, and values that lie at the base of and throughout Judaism as a cultural-linguistic system. Here, the notion of the existence and power of God would certainly be paramount as an assumption of the system. Yet because we are talking about an integrated cultural and linguistic system, we may just as well find God in certain cognitive assertions as we would in prayers, holiday symbols, or rites of passage like marriage and death.

The cultural-linguistic model helps us to understand, from the outset, that Jewish theology comes out of a specific language, cultural context, and textual heritage and a series of human relationships and behaviors. The culture and language model of religion helps us to understand the embodied and social nature of Jewish theology. It allows us to appreciate that the form of life that Judaism intends to produce is also a form of thought. This model for religion and theology also helps us to appreciate why living the Jewish form of life is regarded as more important by Judaism than knowing and believing in Jewish ideas and concepts. This is why

the question Judaism is more apt to ask is "are you Jewish?" rather than "do believe in the Jewish God?" Being Jewish suggests a mode of existence rather than a set of beliefs that one affirms. Rather than a statement of metaphysical beliefs about the nature of God, "being Jewish" suggests a series of ontological commitments, an attitude toward life, a stance vis-à-vis a fellow person and a trust in the faithfulness of God. Being Jewish includes being a member of the Jewish people; this can happen either through birth into a Jewish family or conversion. But being born Jewish or converting is only the beginning of a long process, since being Jewish requires living a Jewish form of life. This certainly includes ideas, ideals, and values, but these may not necessarily be brought to the level of cognitive expression by Jews and Judaism in the manner, for instance, of Christianity with its dogmas and creeds.

What I am suggesting here is that Judaism comes out of a cultural complex that includes not only the Hebrew language and Jewish peoplehood, but the everyday customs of a Jewish culture, which includes the foods that are eaten and the Jewish rituals and customs that are practiced. Therefore, to understand Jewish theology one must learn the language and symbols and ritual behaviors of Judaism. To have a truly significant relationship with the God of Israel, one must enter into a Jewish culture and community of those who live the life of the Jew. This is a far more significant commitment than picking up a book on Judaism or Jewish philosophy. But what is to be gained from a real encounter with God through a Jewish religious language, culture, and community is not only a new perspective on life but a transformed way of living. And what this way of living promises is a holy life full of meaning and purpose and continued contact with God.

Thus, in living the life of a Jew a new criterion for belief and a new way to validate the existence of God come into focus. This is a form of validation that does not lie in a preliminary exercise in which one evaluates the cognitive claims of Judaism's assertions about God. This is a form of validation that comes in the middle of a process of living a Jewish life. If, for example, one tries to judge Judaism on its arguments for why one should not mix milk and

meat, the religion might seem rather strange. This is especially so if one comes from a secular worldview where a kind of utilitarian commonsense approach to food and the matters of everyday life rules. But if one lives a life in which Jewish dietary laws are followed, one might very well find that the simple act of eating becomes an occasion to make life holy. Therefore, looking at Judaism as a cultural-linguistic system establishes a new series of justifications for the truth of Judaism, where the religion is considered true and belief in God valid because life is more meaningful and opportunities to confirm the existence of God come at every moment of living. Thus, the cultural-linguistic approach asks that one judge Judaism neither on its views of God nor on some isolated elements like dietary practices, but on the Jewish cultural-religious system as a whole and upon the type of life that is lived in and through Jewish religious culture.

The cultural-linguistic model of religion and specifically of Judaism offers one way to respect the linguistic and cultural complexity of Judaism as a unique religious tradition different from yet comparable to other religious forms, specifically the monotheistic ones of Christianity and Islam in the way that one might compare French, Italian, and Spanish as a family of romance languages. In a period of great diversity and confusion about the very nature of Judaism where Jews are offered widely divergent definitions of Judaism, and individual Jews feel that they can fashion their own Judaisms in accordance with their individual likes and dislikes, the model of a language-game is one way of drawing boundaries, clarifying rules, and establishing identity. In languages and in games one can declare "you cannot say 'x' in French" or "you cannot make 'y' move in chess" without violating the basic rules of the language-game. Similarly, one might say that you cannot eat leavened bread at a Passover Seder, or fail to give a Jewish boy a *brit milah*, or circumcision, in the language-game of Judaism.

The advantage of the cultural-linguistic approach to religions, and particularly Judaism, is that is gives us a way of speaking about Judaism and Jewish theology in a manner that both respect the

complexity, sanctity, and history of the religion without reducing it to a simple series of values, principles, ideas or practices. The cultural-linguistic approach also begins with the recognition that Judaism is first a collective and communal enterprise meant to be celebrated communally, and only secondarily an individual phenomenon. Lindbeck argues that religion "like a culture or language, is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities" (Lindbeck, 1984, 33). This concurs well with Judaism, which exists as an external series of texts, laws, narratives, and social norms that intends to shape the individual life and thinking of Jews rather than the other way round. The primacy of the collective in Judaism means that Judaism is not invented anew with every Jew. Were this the case we would have as many Judaisms as we have Jews and the very meaning of Judaism would collapse into confusion. The cultural-linguistic model for Judaism also suggests that Judaism has social and moral norms, and most importantly certain expectations and requirements that must be met. In traditional Jewish terms these expectations are the commandments or *Mitzvot* which range from the moral to the ritual spheres.

Finally, although the cultural-linguistic model highlights the distinctive and unique aspect of Judaism and all religions and resists the tendency to reduce religion to one essence, or belief, or practice, it does still allow for comparison. Wittgenstein developed the notion that language-games, while being distinct also show "family resemblances" to other language-games. With regard to religions we can clearly see parallels between Judaism and Christianity and Islam as both monotheistic religions and religions based on sacred scriptures. Hinduism is very different from Judaism in its theology yet its attention to diet and to a rich ritual life allows us to draw connections between the religions. It is particularly important in the present world, where Jews regularly interact with people of different religions and where tensions between the religions can lead to violence, that we continue to

bring to expression the family resemblances between religious cultural-linguistic systems.

Limitations of the model

As with all paradigms and models, the cultural-linguistic model, which looks to language and culture to define religion, has its limitations. The clearest limitation is that this model tends to limit religion to social human forms and can be seen as leaving out the transcendent God. Like language and culture, religion can be seen as solely a product of societal and human forces. Thus, the model fails to adequately allow for the role of the divine in the creation of the cultural-linguistic system. In theological terms the model lacks a notion of revelation. In the terms of this book, the cultural-linguistic model does not adequately allow for the much-needed continual spiritual replenishment of life on earth through the wellsprings of *qedusha* provided by the transcendent, utterly free and powerful God. Therefore, this book must be seen as utilizing the cultural-linguistic model to provide a necessary understanding of Jewish theology as grounded in linguistic, textual, ritual, legal, and liturgical structures of Jewish culture and society even as the system of Judaism as a language and culture will be recognized as both given, sustained, judged, and redeemed by what Isaiah calls the "holy God of Israel."

Notes on Names

The maleness of the Name of God

In this book I will use the traditional male gendering of God as "He." Hebrew is a gendered language and almost all nouns are assigned a gender. There is therefore no gender-neutral designation for God. One could use the word *Tzor* or "Rock" as in *Tzor Yisrael*, "Rock of Israel," but with this word God is rendered inanimate and thereby a central theological insight of biblical and rabbinic Judaism, that God is alive and that God is a personality to whom humans can

relate as a person, is negated. Maimonides and other philosophers have worried for centuries that the personality of God and the human attributes that come along with that personality in the Bible and rabbinic literature, brings along with it the sense that God has a body and the attributes and emotions of living beings. This problem is obviated by Jewish philosophical attempts to speak of God as an utterly transcendent, non-corporeal mind or spirit. But this leaves us again with a God who is not a living being.

A related but different strategy to deal with the anthropomorphic and male designation for God is adopted by contemporary "New Age" Jewish theologians like Art Green. Green has adopted the strategy of Mordechai Kaplan, who refers to God in naturalistic terms. Green refers to God as the "single unifying substratum of all that is" (Green, 2010, 18) or "the inner force of existence itself" (Green, 2010, 19). But here, the fundamental distinction between God and the world is blurred and it is no longer possible to talk of God as the "creator" of the world since he is coterminous with it.

The attempts to see God as part of and not separate from the world also suffer from the problem of leaving us with an essentially a-moral God. For in asserting that God is the "underlying oneness of being" God has no mind, no consciousness, no personality, and therefore no ability to discern, judge, dispense mercy or command. The God of nature is attractive, especially today, in an age of science and increased attention to the natural environment. However, as the earliest monotheists realized, this God sorely lacks a moral sense. For although nature is often beautiful and ordered it can be brutal, cruel, and radically destructive when its power is unleashed in earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and floods. Recall that for Judaism, God's transcendence and power to create is equally matched by His righteousness. Indeed, one can say that this is the peculiar quality of Jewish monotheism (which it bequeathed to Christianity and Islam as well), that the One God is also a good God who is fundamentally concerned with good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice.

Feminist theologians have been particularly sensitive to the ways in which the male-gendered appellations for God support the

patriarchal aspects of Judaism. Many Jewish feminists see the attempt to preserve God's transcendent "otherness" from the world as a "rejection of the human domain – the physical, the sensuous, the immanent, by relegating it to women" (Adler, 1998, 89). Feminists have, therefore, been attracted both to more naturalistic notions of God and to feminine appellations for God like "She" or the feminine noun for God "*Elah*," or even names for Goddesses like "Queen of Heaven." Here, however, some feminist theologians themselves have suggested caution, since feminine designations of God bring associations with paganism and "risk breaking with the community of Israel" (E. Umansky as quoted in Adler 1998, 100). Rachel Adler, our most sophisticated contemporary Jewish feminist theologian, also sees important value in the transcendence or "otherness of God," and she puts the value this way: "The otherness of God is compellingly real and infinitely precious. Eradicating otherness, breaking down all boundaries between self and other, self and God, God and world simultaneously eradicates relatedness. How is it possible to have a covenant without an other?" (Adler, 1998, 91–92).

Names as metaphors

> When I judge my creatures I am called *Elohim*
> When I wage war against the wicked I am called
> *Savaot*; When I suspend judgment for man's sins
> I am called *El Shaddai*, When I have compassion
> upon my world I am called YHVH.
>
> (*Exodus Rabbah* III:6)

As the quotation on the multiple names of God taken from the rabbinic Midrash *Exodus Rabbah* suggests, all names that we use for God are metaphors, signs that point to the infinitely complex reality of God without fully capturing Him. At once transcendent and immanent, judge and warrior, merciful and compassionate forgiver, God cannot be captured by any gender or name, metaphor or symbol. Contemporary attempts to find replacements for the gendered names of God will each have their advantages and

drawbacks and can be added to the long historic theological attempt to refer to God in ways that at once designate what and who we are talking about as we grant the one of which we speak freedom from our very designations.

In this book, however, I maintain the traditional designation of God as "He" not to assign God a gender but to place my theology in continuity with the tradition of Jewish theology that is long and deep and endlessly complex. In this book of Jewish theology, the reader will find that I build my theology on both Jewish texts and Jewish liturgies. I understand that, for many Jews today, these texts and liturgies have lost their religious relevance precisely because they are hopelessly archaic, misogynistic, non-linear and unscientific. However, here, I must turn to my own studies and experience and life and say, as both a student of Jewish theology and person of Jewish faith and observance, that I still see these texts and liturgies as *Mayim Chaim*, as living waters, that hold the keys to a life filled with holiness and goodness for women and men, for children and adults and the aged. And in a combination of humility in the face of the immense tradition I wish to speak about and some fear of being ignored by my contemporaries, I will say too that I see the source of the living waters of Judaism as God, the Holy One of Israel, Who makes the Jewish people holy.

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