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Relationship Between Ideals and Commandments in Judaism

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Introduction

For many hundreds of years, Judaism has been defending its ideals against those of Christianity. In the Medieval Era everybody knew which religion they belonged to, and conversion from one religion to another was more of an exception than the rule. In the modern era, however, an overwhelmingly large proportion of Jews and Gentiles have become indecisive about which religion they belong to. This has caused the relationship between Judaism and Christianity to change drastically: Judaism is now in a constant state of competition with Christianity for the souls of these uncertain individuals.

So far, Judaism has been losing, and the reason is clear: While Christianity has always revolved around ideals, Judaism has evolved to be a religion of commandments. This is, of course, very disturbing because original and authentic Judaism is very clearly a religion of ideals. If Judaism were to return to its ideals, more and more Jews would find meaning in identifying with and practicing it. However, Judaism must win this contest for another, much broader reason: for the sake of the general advancement of the world through the acceptance of Jewish values. Even if this proves to be too vast a goal, then Judaism must win for the sake of these assimilated Jews.

These two goals are intertwined. The only way to develop the world and to bring the assimilated Jews back to their roots is to restore Judaism to what it used to be in the times of the *Tanakh*—namely a religion of ideals and morals; the commandments function as a tool to express its values. Once this transformation occurs, both Jews and Gentiles will understand the truth of Judaism, and that in itself will be a great achievement for all of humanity.

Part 1: A Problem in the Orthodox World Today: Jewish Religious Consciousness Lacks the Concept of "Ideals"

Historically, Judaism has come to be seen as a religion of commandments and laws. If someone unfamiliar with Judaism approaches many contemporary rabbis with queries, they would likely briefly be told about faith in God and the Bible, but then would immediately be encountered by an enumeration of commandments and laws. Similarly, in the library of any Orthodox synagogue or yeshiva, we would find a huge number of books under the general category of halakha (Jewish law), with the laws of everyday life, the holidays, Shabbat, *kashruth*, and so forth. What we are unlikely to find in this collection is a book called *The Ideals of Judaism.* We may find bits and pieces in different places, but a systematic exploration of ideals in Judaism is lacking. For this reason, the Judaism that has evolved in the Diaspora, at least outwardly, creates an impression of being a religion that is devoid of ideals.

This tendency to reduce Judaism to a system of law and observances is not a recent development, however. Beginning with early Christianity this charge was being made, most famously by Paul of Tarsus, who argued for the abolition of the Mosaic Law, at least in any obligatory sense, identifying the law itself as the cause of sin. The charge was that Rabbinical Judaism, and the very institution of the law, was associated with the neglect of higher divine ideals. This motif continued to be echoed almost two millennia later among German Idealist philosophers, particularly Kant and Hegel. In their understanding of Judaism, the Torah is, above all, law. Kant held that if the Torah was given by a deity external to reason, then the Mosaic Law could not represent morality based on autonomous reason. Hegel also believed that, for this reason, Judaism had been superseded by Christianity, and therefore become irrelevant to history's march toward absolute universal religion, which, he said, was on the horizon in his day. Many contemporary thinkers continue to give voice to this view today.

However, this view of Judaism is incorrect and represents merely a reduction of the authentic Hebraic system in which moral ideals are in a dynamic interaction with the law. It is correct, however, that, unfortunately, as a result of the long exile where the Jewish people could not manifest the original idea of a sovereign and independent society, there arose a tendency within Judaism to emphasize the laws and commandments over moral ideals. This tendency is still prevalent today and permeates much of the discourse in Jewish Orthodoxy.

Judaism, in fact, has a two-fold approach to the issue: It recognizes that people generally dislike laws, mainly because laws evoke a sense of obligation. Even if a person agrees with the necessity of obligations, he would still prefer that ideals, goals, and meaning stand behind these obligations. It is no coincidence that Christianity focuses precisely on this issue and accuses Judaism of being a religion of duties, laws, and formalities, devoid of freedom and flight of the soul. On the other hand, the need for laws is also defended: *After all, everything falls apart without the laws; the laws are the basis of life. Without self-restraint, spirituality would greatly suffer.* Thus, laws have a clear dichotomy: Although they push some away from Judaism, others find Judaism meaningless without them. We claim that while laws are an important part of Judaism, an obsession with, or imbalanced over-emphasis on them,

destroys the spiritual content of Judaism.

Some think that what drives people away from observing commandments is the external secular influence of our day. The problem, however, is much deeper; the divine nature of humanity resists seeing the commandments, the laws, and the duties as the main focus of Judaism. Freedom is a divine quality. It is intrinsic to human nature to strive to emulate God, and everything that creates a distinction from God makes us feel uncomfortable. Therefore, seeing Judaism as merely a set of commandments creates a negative view of the human soul. The commandments are necessary, but only after a person moves freely in the direction of ideals. Self-restraint must stem from freedom, and not the other way around.

The Source of Morality

There are two levels to this topic that should be differentiated. The first question is that of the source of morality: Is God the exclusive source of moral knowledge for humans, meaning that an act is good solely because God has declared it to be so—and if He were to declare otherwise any act would become moral or immoral accordingly? Or is moral knowledge, from the human perspective, something that can be engaged with independently of revelation by God—and that God, in fact, cannot or will not change it?

We argue that the Jewish answer to this question is that it is actually a false dichotomy. The truth is that God is, on the one hand, the source of everything, including the moral conscience of humanity. On the other hand, because God endowed humans with the capability for moral thought, it is incumbent upon humanity to use it.

The most classic source that illustrates this is Genesis (18:25), where Abraham is described as arguing with God. God informs Abraham of his intention to destroy Sodom, but Abraham resists, asserting that God must do justice. Beyond the obvious implication arising from the text that Abraham has the ability to engage in a debate over morality with God, none of the classic Jewish commentators criticize Abraham for asserting his opinion.

Of course, the account of the Binding of Isaac (the *Akeidah*) is often raised as the ultimate example that proves that God's will must be obeyed even in the face of morality. This is also, we argue, a simplistic and inaccurate reading of the story. A thorough treatment of this story is beyond the scope of this article but it can be explained as follows: The most important point to note, here, is that at the end, Abraham does not actually slaughter his son. And it is clear from passages throughout the *Tanakh*[1] that God is not interested in child sacrifice. In fact, God forbids it in the strongest terms.

The message of the *Akeidah* can be understood thus: to clarify once and for all that, by definition, there cannot be a situation where God will command something that is immoral—not because God's command defines morality, but because God wants to promote moral behavior. The *Akeidah* story is a dramatic way of driving this point home. Rabbi Avraham Yitchak Kook relates to the *Akeidah* in his commentary on the Siddur, *Olat Hara'ayah* (I, p. 92):

…the ultimate [moral] command, whether the imperative to not engage in the evil of murder, or from the natural avoidance of anything that undermines the feelings of love of a father for his child, stands stridently in its place. The clarity, that is natural and holy, which is engraved in the spiritual and material nature, does not lose its high stature at all, by the encounter with the higher vision of God's word…. Do not think that there is any inherent contradiction between the pure love of a father for his

son, and the higher love of God.

R. Kook is saying that the natural moral conscience—that rejects hurting Isaac—is not in contradiction to the divine command. Any apparent contradiction between humanity's moral conscience and God's command will always be superficial. This is because both the feelings of love of a father for his son and the moral conscience that rejects murder are both integral parts of the system of God's command. Accordingly, Kant's mistake is that he saw autonomous morality and heteronomous morality as being contradictory to begin with. In Judaism they are not and cannot be so.

R. Kook says this even more clearly in *Orot haKodesh* (Section 3:12):

The fear of heaven must never be allowed to thrust aside man's natural morality, because then it would cease to be a pure fear of heaven. A sign of the pure fear of heaven is when the natural morality, rooted in man's upright nature, is brought to higher and higher heights that he would not otherwise reach, because of it [the fear of heaven].

But this is not only a position held by R. Kook. The classic sages seem to say the same thing. R. Nissim Goan (990–1062) states that all people, including non-Jews, are beholden to the moral imperative, even if they were not directly commanded by explicit divine revelation. The human conscience is also a source for approaching God's will, even where God has not spoken. He states: "All the commandments that are dependent on common sense and the hearts' understanding are obligatory from the day that God created man in this world" (Introduction to *Sefer haMafteah*).

Likewise, R. Abraham ibn Ezra in his commentary on the Torah (Exodus 20:1), states:

God forbid that even one of the commandments should contradict common sense, but we must in any case observe everything that God commanded, whether its secret is revealed or not. And if one of them seems to contradict common sense, we must not understand it at face value, and must search our sources for its meaning, possibly as a parable.

Maimonides, in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (II:45), argues that humanity's internal moral compass is itself a form of prophecy:

The first degree of prophecy consists in the divine assistance which is given to a person, and induces and encourages him to do something good and grand, e.g., to deliver a congregation of good men from the hands of evildoers; to save one noble person, or to bring happiness to a large number of people; he finds in himself the cause that moves and urges him to this deed. This degree of divine influence is called "the spirit of the Lord."

The nineteenth-century Italian rabbi, Elijah Benamozegh, puts it slightly differently, in what he called the "unity of the law"—the unity of the universal or divine law, and the law of humanity. He

explains that the law of the universe and of humanity are one and the same. “God keeps the laws,” as it were, and this is the meaning of the midrashic statements where God is described as observing the commandments such as *tefillin* and *sukkah*. R. Benamozegh says that God and humanity are bound to the same moral imperative, in essence. Humans are expected to emulate God because they must both meet the demands of morality. In fact, God observed the *mitzvoth* [the commandments] before there were humans; and it is because God did so that God commanded humans to do so as well. As he states in his work, *Israel and Humanity*:[2]

The many biblical passages which declare that the true knowledge of God is moral knowledge, the fear of the Lord, thus become clear… Practical morality or ethics is thus raised to the level of divine knowledge. The law of man and the law of God are but a single identical law…. (p. 226)

…The Torah affirms that the moral life is indispensable to the dignity of all men without distinction… Moses says: “for all the abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled” (Lev. 18:27), **suggesting that ethical laws are universal, applying to Gentiles as well as Jews**…. This text is but a single example… in which we see God approving or condemning, rewarding or punishing the Gentiles—appraising their conduct, whether as Lawgiver or Judge, and **doing this with reference to a higher law to which they are held as responsible as the Israelites, which is in fact the same for all men.** This universal moral standard is invoked not only in the pagan’s relation to God but also in his relation to Israel, and in a general way in the relations of all men with one another…. Moral values are perhaps assumed to be generally known, whether by a natural instinct of mankind or through a tradition common to all peoples. (p. 279)

The Reasons for the Commandments *(Ta’amei haMitzvoth)*

This first level of the fundamental source of morality leads directly to the second level, which is how exactly this morality is related to Judaism’s system of commandments. Should we be occupying ourselves with the details of this relationship at all? And how are we to incorporate general moral considerations when deciding issues of halakha over time and in different contexts?

Here, there seems to be a certain tension that is built into Judaism even among the classic commentators. All seem to recognize that, in principle, there are deep reasons for all the commandments; but many express great caution over involving ourselves with these reasons out of concern that it will result in a loss of the fear of heaven and lead to neglecting observance. So the obligation to observe the commandments even without directly engaging with their particular moral ideals is a fundamental part of the rabbinic tradition. It is only the over-emphasis, the extreme imbalance that we seek to correct. Let us take note of some of these sources.

The most famous source that demonstrates a deep skepticism of the attempt to engage with the higher ideals of the mitzvoth is in the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 21a:

Why were the reasons in the Torah not revealed? Because the reasons for two commandments were revealed and the great one failed through them. It says: “[The king] must not have many wives, so that they not make his heart go astray” (Deuteronomy 17:17). Solomon said: “I will have many, but I will not go astray.” And it says: “And it was, when Solomon become old, his wives led him astray after

foreign gods" (I Kings 11:4). It says: "[The king,] however, must not accumulate many horses, so as not to bring the people back to Egypt to get more horses" (Deuteronomy 17:16). Solomon said: "I will have many, but I will not bring them back." And it says: "And the horses went up out of Egypt" (I Kings 10:29).

Here, the sages demonstrate that the concern regarding revealing the reasons behind the commandments is justified. If a reason is given, people may come to see the validity of the commandments not as resting in God, but as resting in the supposed reason. In such circumstances, it will be human nature to relate to it in a lax fashion and propose changing it if it seems out of date or inconvenient, as King Solomon demonstrated.

Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, known as the *Ba'al haTurim*, writes in his major work of halakha the following: "We need not seek out the reason behind the commandments, because the King's command is upon us, even if we don't know the reason" (*Tur*, *Yorah Deah*, 171). He expresses the concern that knowing the reason will undermine our recognition of the kingship of God, and we will only observe the commandments with which we identify with and feel attachment. Other sages over the generations have voiced similar opinions. It should be noted, however, that none of them seem to believe that there is no deeper reason behind the Mosaic Law, but only that we, as humans, cannot fully grasp it, and, that pursuing this realm of knowledge will do more harm than good.

The above quotations notwithstanding, many classic and modern commentators very much believed that we should be engaging ourselves in the pursuit of the meanings, ideals, and reasons behind the Mosaic Laws. In *Guide to the Perplexed* (III:31), Maimonides writes clearly that the commandments include intelligible logic and that a person can and should understand them:

There are persons who find it difficult to give a reason for any of the commandments, and consider it right to assume that the commandments and prohibitions have no rational basis whatsoever. They are led to adopt this theory by a certain disease in their soul, the existence of which they perceive, but which they are unable to discuss or to describe…. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations? But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits.

Nachmanides presents a similar view in his commentary on the Torah (Deut. 22:6):

…this is one of two possible positions: There is the position that there are no reasons for the commandments beyond God's desire, but we are of the second position that every commandment has a reason…. The only explanation for cases where we do not know the reason is our own intellectual blindness.

Often, the commandments are classified into two categories, *mishpatim* and *hukim*, meaning commandments that are rationally understandable and ones that are not (*Yoma* 67b; Maimonides,

Guide III:26). However, many sages did not seem to feel that this distinction is so absolute as to preclude finding ideals and meaning even in the commandments that are not readily understandable.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch described the commandments as symbols that come to express ideas. In his book *The Mitzvot as Symbols,* he states that God commanded the observance of practices so that we will be constantly aware of certain concepts and truths and that they will be engraved in our hearts. For him, it is precisely the commandments that are not clearly rational that have symbolic meaning that represent ideas to those who perform them. In justifying his approach, he explains that the reformers of his time claimed that because they identified the higher ideal behind the commandments, actual observance of them was no longer needed. As a reaction to this, he explains, the traditional circles that came to be called "Orthodoxy" insisted that there is no symbolic or expressive meaning at all. Both, however, are wrong in R. Hirsch's eyes, because there is symbolic meaning in all the mitzvoth.

R. Kook agrees that all the mitzvoth have meaning beyond the simple fulfillment of God's will. However, he disagrees with R. Hirsch's position that the mitzvoth only represent philosophical ideas, that they are symbols of the idea. Instead, R. Kook says that the mitzvoth are not just philosophical symbols but are organically related to the world. They act on the world independently of our understanding of the ideas behind them. He states,

When one penetrates to the depths of knowledge it is clear that the commandments are not symbols, that come merely to remind us and to emulate a depth on the imagination. Rather, they are the substance that make up the human and cosmic reality. (*Igrot Hara'ayah* II, letter 378)

R. Kook proposed a synthesis whereby he rejected the clear distinction between *hukim* and *mishpatim* altogether. We can't say any of the commandments are merely rational, but they're certainly not irrational either. He proposed that within each category of commandment, both *hukim* and *mishpatim*, there is both a rational quality and irrational quality. We understand somewhat, but we can never understand them in the totality of their depth. Both aspects must be felt when observing the commandments and, in doing so, we can connect to their higher meaning without coming to devalue the divine authority vested in them.[3]

The above sources are but a sample of the numerous classic and modern Torah scholars who state clearly that the commandments do hold within them moral ideas and ideals. Despite this, much of Jewish practice has become imbalanced, where the emphasis was put heavily on the side of the irrational and blind commitment at the expense of the substantive ideals. Furthermore, the focus of the engagement with ideals that has existed was on the personal, individual realm, mainly in character development and not the national societal level.

The reasons often discussed are of two types: *hidur mitzvah* (the enhanced performance of a commandment) and *tikkun haMiddot* (a person's continual struggle to improve his personality traits). Some of the few classical ideals discussed in books like *Mesilat Yesharim* are *zerizut,* haste in the performance of the commandments; *zehirut,* prudence, carefulness not to sin; *tseniut,* modesty; *teshuva,* repentance; and so forth. *Hovot haLevavot* speaks mainly about one's obligation to believe in God's existence, unity, and eternity, in His wondrous wisdom and His providence.

The problem with placing *middot* (character traits) at the center of Judaism is that they are not ideals toward which society as a whole can strive; they do not provide a direction for national development. Ideals, on the other hand, are not limited to personal goals but rather they transcend the boundaries of neighborhoods, communities, and countries. A system of *middot* played an essential role

in the closed Jewish communal life in exile. Being part of the "national life" was not an option for individual Jews due to external factors and internal self-censorship. Today, with the creation of the State of Israel and the exposure of the Jews to the larger world, Jews can no longer progress without adapting the broader view of Jewish ideals. *Middot*, therefore, are only a part of a system of ideals and must be viewed as such. Perfecting one's *middot* is a worthy cause for an individual, but a system built only on *middot* is insufficient for the end purposes of a community or society or, all the more so, a government.

As such, much of the discussion of the reasons behind the commandments focused on providing interpretations for the various commandments, and not necessarily presenting a coherent, overarching system of ideals and how they interact with each other. It seems, that during the exile period, it was natural that legalistic concerns and the individual realm became the focus of scholars' attention. However, with the return to a national existence we must refocus our attention precisely on clarifying the system of ideals. This is not just because we live in modern times but also because of the universal meaning expressed by the Jews' national existence as a holy nation.

We believe that the very essence of Judaism is the integration of laws and ideals, where ideals are placed before the commandments. To become a leading force in promoting Judaism, the ideals should not be derived from commandments, but on the contrary, commandments should be derived from Torah ideals, and serve to protect and preserve these ideals.

Developing the ideals into a well-formulated logical system will promote Judaism as a world religion, and consequently provide the motivation for increased observance of the commandments by Jews, as people are willing to do what is meaningful to them. Indeed, the non-observant Jews do not keep the mitzvoth not because they are difficult to observe, but because these Jews do not see the rationale behind the commandments.

It is vital that the true rapport that exists between the ideals and the commandments enters into the public conscience. To achieve this, it would be necessary to write an entire book that will organize and promote the ideals of Judaism as an essential part of our spiritual horizon. To make things clear: We certainly have no intention of creating a new religious system. On the contrary, we seek only to return to Judaism in its original form. This article is only a preliminary sketch that outlines the general direction of our work. To give a wider picture of the ideals in Judaism, it would be necessary to give a detailed analysis of each of the ideals rooted in the Talmud and the Rabbinic and contemporary Jewish philosophy literature. Our immediate goal in this article is only to define a specific problem in the Jewish Orthodox worldview and to outline a way of solving it.

Particularism versus Universalism in Judaism

Rabbi Marc. D. Angel, founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals,[4] claims that Judaism's main goal is to maintain equilibrium between being both particularistic and universalistic, i.e., be careful about preserving our traditions and rituals, but at the same time maintain the universalistic vision of being "a light unto the nations." He claims that the current tendency in the Modern Orthodox world has been to lean toward particularism, as manifested by the extreme growth of the Haredi community and its domineering influence throughout all aspects of Jewish thought. The turn inward, which can be explained by centuries of persecution and the negative attitude toward Gentiles that are expressed in rabbinic literature, is the result of a tradition of hateful attitudes toward the Jews. Even today, modern leadership is cautious regarding our acceptance and responsibility toward Gentiles. For example, R. Aharon Soloveitchik argues that our responsibility toward the non-Jews is conditional: If they are decent to us, we are obligated to act decently to them; if they persecute

us, however, we have no *hiyyuv* (obligation) to work for their wellbeing.

In another article, Rabbi Angel[5] quotes Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a nineteenth-century Italian Torah commentator, on the verse "love your neighbor as yourself" to mean as follows:

Torah Judaism demands not only a keen commitment to truth, but also a keen sense of responsibility to human beings. Rabbi Reggio's universalistic understanding of the "golden rule" teaches that all human beings—whatever their race, religion, or nationality—are entitled to be treated "like ourselves." They too, were created by God. They, too, have the human qualities with which we are endowed. If we can see "them" as being just like "us," we are more likely to develop a sense of kinship and responsibility to all of humanity.

R. Angel is echoing here the view expounded greatly by R. Elijah Benamozegh. R. Benamozegh believed that Judaism has an inherently universal dimension and that this is reflected in both the Mosaic and Noahide laws. The Mosaic Law, is incumbent only on the Jewish people, whereas the Noahide law is meant for all humankind. Regarding the relationship between the two codes of law, he writes (*Israel and Humanity* p. 317),

The eternal truths, practical as well as theoretical, are—like the universal Noachide Law—older than the revelation to Moses. This does not, however, mean that they are not part of it. Indeed, the entire Noachide code is contained in the Mosaic revelation, at the same time that (from a different perspective) the one is independent of the other… From the philosophical point of view, all this may be summed up in the concept of a double law: the rational and the supranational, the knowable and the unknowable, the intelligible and the super intelligible. It is the first of these two dimensions which we find in the Noachide Law; it is the second which corresponds to the Torah.

As a prime example of the way Judaism's particularism is itself directed toward a universalist aspiration, R. Benamozegh cites the sages' comment on the passage in Deuteronomy (11:12): "It is therefore a land constantly under God your Lord's scrutiny; the eyes of God your Lord are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." On this passage, The *Midrash Sifrei* asks if we are to understand that God is only interested in this corner of the Earth, and answers: No—but through the care that He lavishes on the land of Israel, God extends His providence toward all the other countries. On this R. Benamozegh writes (*Israel and Humanity* p. 318),

It seems to us that the strikingly universalist idea which the sages derive from this text, which is apparently so exclusive in its implication, beautifully characterizes the authentic spirit of Judaism. A country which finds itself chosen to be a means of grace and blessing for the entire world, but is in no way licensed to hold others in contempt: This is dominating the concept of the entire law, written and oral, beginning with Abraham, in whom all races should be blessed….

Deriving Ideals from the Torah

We said before that introducing the concept of "ideals" into the social consciousness is essential for a proper structural organization of Judaism. We also discussed at length the correct interrelation between mitzvoth and ideals, but what are these ideals that we are discussing here? Consider two specific examples of ideals: freedom and love of humanity.

We all know that freedom plays a crucial role in Judaism. It is clear that without freedom of will there can be no true fulfillment of the Torah. Into what category should freedom be included? Obviously freedom is not a commandment enumerated among the 613 mitzvoth, but we do have a mitzvah to remember that we were slaves and then became free. If we were to have a category of ideals, then liberty and freedom would become the most essential parts of Judaism. Jews became a nation when they received the Torah on Mt. Sinai, but first they had to leave Egypt to become a free people. Thus, while the commandment of "*zekhirat yetziat mitzrayim*" (remembering the Exodus from Egypt) is written explicitly in the Torah, the ideal of freedom is derived from this commandment.

The second example also has this double aspect of commandment and ideal. In the non-Jewish world, the verse "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is understood as love for all of humanity. In Judaism, however, the commandment of "love your neighbor" obligates us to love only the Jews but not non-Jews. It often happens that when non-Jews hear about this, they are dismayed. How can this be? Does Judaism not have that same love of humanity that they believe to be the most important achievement of the Jewish Bible? The answer is that, of course, Judaism has the concept of love for all of humanity. But again, the commandment of "love your neighbor" is written explicitly, while the ideal of loving humankind is culled from the text.

This dichotomy is also felt in the halakha that rules that there is a fundamental difference between the love for Jews and the love for Gentiles: Loving other Jews is an obligation, whereas loving all of humanity is an ideal. Again, only after we introduce the category of ideals, is it possible to assign the "love of humankind" to its rightful place in Jewish *hashkafa* (worldview). Additionally, love of humanity is ranked; the love for those who are closer to you precedes the love for those who are more distant. As the Rambam states (*Matanot Aniyim* 7:13):

A man's poor relative has priority over any person; the poor in his own household have priority over the poor in his town; the poor in his town have priority over the poor of another town as it is written: "Open your hand to your brother, to your needy, to your poor in your land" (Deut. 15:11).

(A similar idea is expressed in the English expression, "charity begins at home.") In this way, Judaism defines "love your neighbor" in a much more complete manner by coupling a commandment with an ideal, as opposed to Christianity, which sees this principle only as an ideal.

A third example is found in the traditional commentary on the *Shema*, which says: "Why does the passage of *Shema* precede the passage of "*veHaya im Shamoa*"? So that a person would put on the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and only afterward the yoke of the commandments" (*Berakhot* 13a). Although the second paragraph also speaks of love of God, the first paragraph is called *kabalat malkhut shamayim* (accepting the yoke of heaven), and the second one *kabalat mitzvoth* (accepting the commandments) because the second paragraph discusses rewards and punishments. The word "yoke" gives the impression of some type of obligation. However, the first passage is not talking about responsibilities, but about ideals. Of course, the first fragment can be read in a halakhic sense, deriving from the commandments of the Shema, *tefilin*, and *mezuzah*. However, focusing too much on the commandments prevents us from seeing the ideals, namely, to love God and to understand the divine unity. This is an example of how an ideal is realized through a mitzvah: The ideal of loving God is facilitated by the mitzvoth of *tefilin* and *mezuzah* mentioned in the Shema. This understanding of the

interplay between mitzvoth and ideals should fill all aspects of our lives (both in our secular and religious pursuits), sitting at home or traveling on the road, lying down or getting up.

Interplay Between Commandments and Ideals in Halakha

The above discussion has related to the issue of the essential meaning of the various mitzvoth; but there is an additional realm—the practical application of the commandments in life in various contexts—the determination of halakha. To fully appreciate the complexity of authentic Judaism, we need to further analyze the interconnection between ideals and halakha. It is important to note that any positive aspiration may develop in the wrong direction if it is not restricted. Ideals are not absolute and their implementation is not a guarantee of any "good." Ideals are important, but they are also dangerous. Therefore, in addition to ideals we also need commandments that will preserve the ideals. The commandments become vessels and the ideals become the substance that fills these vessels. Another major difference between commandments and ideals is that each of the commandments is intrinsically valuable. However the ideals are valuable primarily as the building blocks of a system. If a person fulfilled commandment A but did not do commandment B, the fulfillment of A is still good. However, if a person realizes ideal A at the expense of ideal B, then the result is dubious. It could be that the person is acting wickedly although the ideal is very good.

The question is what happens if we encounter a contradiction between the commandments and the ideals? Which one takes precedence? Let us consider the following allegory: driving by car through the city. Locally, the traffic signs direct the car's movement, but it is the final destination that defines the car's ultimate direction. So, too, regarding commandments and ideals: As we go through life, the commandments take precedence locally, but it is the ideals that guide us in the bigger picture. Without understanding the ideals, the commandments can easily turn into an empty formal system that does not interact with the reality around us. Hence, the commandments and the ideals do not contradict each other but rather, the commandments show us how to successfully and correctly implement the ideals into our day-to-day life.

The twentieth-century scholar, R. Eliezer Berkovits, discussed this issue at length in his writings. He took a clear position that the halakha is primarily about moral values rather than rules. He states that the halakha is meant to translate the intention of the Torah into application in real-life situations, and in doing so, it grants "the priority of the ethical, according to which it is understood as furthering the larger moral principles embodied in the Torah."[6] Thus, the law is a vehicle for realizing this morality in society and advancing human history.

R. Berkovits's approach is not the same as that promoted by Conservative Judaism. For the Conservative movement, changes in halakha are necessitated by the need to create a synthesis between traditional Judaism on the one hand, and modern life and its values on the other. The impetus for change, then, is not the result of eternal Jewish principles, but from some external source, from modernity. R. Berkovits's understanding of halakha, and what is being described by the present authors, is entirely different. For R. Berkovits, change in halakha is meant

…to reflect the careful, incremental adjustment of legal means to further moral ends that are themselves intrinsic to Judaism and unchanging. These moral ends are not an external "anti-thesis" with which the tradition must come to terms by changing its internal content in keeping with them; they are themselves the moral core of the same revealed message from which the law receives its authority… while the law may change, the values which underlie it do not; on the contrary, the purpose

of the change is to permit the continued advancement of the Bible's eternally valid moral teaching under new conditions.[7]

To summarize, the Judaism of the Diaspora has come to emphasize the system of commandments. In this essay we have presented a very different approach, claiming that Judaism is really a system of ideals, and the commandments are required for the correct realization of these ideals. We believe that the more people see the truthfulness of the second approach, the more advanced Judaism will be.

Conclusion to Part I

We do not intend to provide an analysis of all the Jewish texts here, but rather are endeavoring to intuitively derive some of the ideals from the Torah. "Intuitively" means that we use our modern way of thinking to build a system of values. This is not the usual way for Judaism that customarily uses the traditional *galut* philosophy developed during the Talmudic Era and the times of the *Rishonim*. On the other hand, if we believe that there is an ongoing Divine Revelation, then the fact that today we look at the world differently is also part of the Divine Revelation. Therefore, when this philosophy is used for the derivation of ideals, this means that the ongoing Revelation is being integrated with the Classical Revelation (of Sinai). This methodology is far from perfect, but for the purposes of this article, it will suffice.

Note that the purpose of this article is merely to give food for thought and to crystallize and categorize the main points, to begin the discussion but not to end it.

Part II: Organization of the Ideals

We looked at the ideals of freedom and love of humanity and the way they are intertwined with mitzvoth, but what are the other ideals in Judaism? Is there a way of systematizing them into one concrete, all-encompassing scheme?

Let us begin by looking for ideals in the Torah that are not derived from the commandments. The natural place that comes to mind is the Book of Genesis, as this book precedes the vast majority of the commandments that begin only in the middle of the Book of Exodus. We see that ideals take up a large part of Genesis; it is therefore critical to formulate the commandments so that they take their rightful place in our contemporary understanding of Judaism.

It would be logical to put the ideals into the following categories:

a) Ideals of Adam and Noah: ideals of humanity as a whole
b) Ideals of Abraham, Isaac,and Jacob: ideals of our forefathers
c) Ideals of Joseph and his brothers: family ideals
d) Ideals of Moses and Aaron: ideals of the Nation of Israel
e) Ideals of the Mashiah: a special group of messianic ideals for future times.

In this section we are going to talk about the ideals of *Adam haRishon* (primordial man), Noah, Abraham, and a bit about the Messianic ideal. The ideals of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron are currently in the process of being developed. Any suggestions are more than welcome.

Ideals of Adam and Noah: Ideals of Humanity as a Whole

The first mitzvah that Adam receives is, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and rule over it" (Genesis 1:26–28) or, in modern terms, develop the world. In a similar way, two aspects of human's mastery over nature are described later on: "The Lord God took man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it" (Genesis 2:15). It is clear what "cultivate the world" means, but from whom or from what should man guard the Garden? The answer is from man himself. For, as we all know, it was man himself who destroyed the Garden through the violation of the prohibition of not eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In our society, we protect the world and the environment from the destructive influence of humans. Progress and environmental protection can coexist, but they should keep each other in check. Progress is a spiritual necessity, although the role of religion is to keep it from self-destruction.

These sources disprove the common notion that religion opposes the advancement of civilization, progress, and technology. According to the Rambam, authentic Judaism is very much concerned with material and technological progress—so much so that it sees scientific and technological progress as a religious value.

To counter the mitzvah to advance the world comes the Torah's account of the creation of humans, "…in the image of God He made him" (Genesis 1:26–28). This verse teaches us that a person as an individual becomes closer to God by imitating Him through one's own personal choices.

The story of Noah comes to show us how seriously God takes an improper imbalance between advancement of the self and advancement of the world. Noah was a man of great righteousness, who "walked with God" (Genesis 6:9). He wanted to be closer to God, but at the same time, as the commentators tell us, he did not have a sufficient sense of responsibility for all of humanity. Extremely laborious work in the Ark during the flood corrected Noah in that it showed him the importance of the correct balance between closeness to God and responsibility for civilization. Noah learned to balance Adam's ideals, and his children took this balancing act even further. Shem became responsible for the ideal of coming closer to God, and Japheth for the ideal of building and advancing civilization. They were all instructed to integrate: "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27).

By juxtaposing the story of Adam and Noah, we see that a personal level of self-advancement must be counterbalanced by building and advancing civilization. If *Imitatio Dei* can be understood on an intuitive level, granting religious significance to building a civilization is far from being obvious. These two ideals exhibit internal tension: striving toward a transcendental God may lead a person away from the world, while building a civilization forces him to be very much involved in the world. Being in opposition to each other, it is important that these ideals co-exist in equilibrium and that none of them are realized at the expense of the other. If a person leans toward the ideal of *Imitatio Dei* and exhibits indifference to civilization, it would mean that his *Imitatio Dei* is deficient. The opposite situation also holds true: If one is only involved in the needs of civilization, leaving aside "striving to imitate the ways of God," one will not be able to rectify the world, and all one's efforts would lead to the wrong result. Thus, the creation of humans in the image and likeness of God is the starting point of a human endeavor to bring humanity as a whole as close as possible to God.

Imitatio Dei in Judaism versus *Imitatio Dei* in Christianity

The Jewish version of *Imitatio Dei* is clearly stated in Leviticus 11:14: "Ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I *am* holy." We see that holiness is something that increases the similarity between God and humans, and brings us closer to God. This is a Jew's obligation toward God, on a solely individual level.

The ideal of *Imitatio Dei* is not only found in Judaism. Christianity borrowed the same idea from Judaism and accepted it as a pure monotheistic principle that stands at the core of its ethics. The essence of monotheism is that the Higher Power, or God, has a personality. It is based on the fact that God created the entire world and created humanity in His own image. Of course, human is not God, but the more one realizes the divine potential, the closer one moves toward God. For example, *Imitatio Dei* is based on the commandment of keeping Shabbat: "And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made" (Genesis 2:2). The implication is clear: So you, too, should have a day of rest.

However, Judaism and Christianity implement *Imitatio Dei* rather differently. In the Christian view of the world, the Gospels evoked an image of Jesus that identified with God; therefore, the Christian ideal is to be similar to Jesus and *Imitatio Dei* turns into *Imitatio Christi*. Accordingly, all of the classical Christian ethics hallow poverty and missionary work, as this lifestyle imitates Jesus's life. Judaism, on the other hand, believes in imitation of the divine attributes or divine actions that we find in the Torah. The Talmud explains this idea (*Shabbat* 133b) as a commentary to this verse: "Just as He is merciful, so should you be merciful. Just as He is kind, so should you be kind." Similarly, Maimonides cites Deuteronomy 11:22 as the main source for a specific biblical commandment to develop a virtuous personality: "If you carefully safeguard and keep this entire mandate that I prescribe to you today, [and if you] love God, walk in all His ways, and cling to Him." Maimonides interprets "*Ve-halakhta bidrakhav*" (and walk in all His ways) as imitating God's traits. Thus, in Judaism there is no other way to "be like God" than through action or perfecting of the self.

A Closer Look at *Imitatio Dei* in Genesis

In this section we will show how ideals can be derived from the first few verses of Genesis. The first verse in the Torah, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1), shows that God is the Creator. So, it is clear that the first ideal of Judaism is to create. Creating is the most divine act that a person is capable of doing. Creativity brings a person pleasure and divine light. However, there are not many books about Judaism that emphasize this as the main ideal. Creativity cannot be commanded. A commandment is an obligation, and creativity is free in its very essence; therefore, ontologically, creativity is independent because it precedes the commandments and carries forward the entire system.

Creativity, like religion, cannot be realized without restrictions, for once restrictions are removed, creativity also disappears. If an architect creates freely without considering the laws of gravity and the laws of mechanics based on strength of materials, the structure will collapse, and creativity will have no effect. Any freedom has to be limited by some rules to make it possible for this freedom to be realized. If these rules are violated, freedom has no effect. Similarly, in religion there are rules called commandments, and if these commandments are violated, the religion collapses.

The second act of God represents another ideal: "And God said: Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). This verse shows that *words have the power to create*. Indeed, human beings, whose creativity

stems from God's creativity, live in order to express and possibly to create something of importance using words. A variety of arts, such as music, literature, and sculpture may well fit into this definition. Art strives to communicate something of consequence, and this desire should be recognized as an important aspect of Judaism. Thus, opening an art school would not only be a cultural act but a divine one. Similarly, if words are so powerful that they serve as the building blocks of the universe, then a School of Rhetoric would not only teach individuals to attain personal eloquence, but would have religious meaning as well. Thus, building a system of ideals in Judaism has practical implications for Jewish culture today.

The third act of God is described: "And God saw the light" (Genesis 1:4). This is obviously not referring to simply a "vision" but "an evaluation of the situation." Therefore, we, like God, like to assess and evaluate, regardless of any practical application. Judaism should see this personality trait as an important part of a person's religiosity, and should advance and encourage people to develop and state their opinions.

God's fourth act is, "And God separated the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:4). We, too, like to divide the world into black and white, into right and wrong, into good and evil, in our understanding of things. This should not be seen as simply a tendency of the human mind, but part of the religious experience. Therefore, like creativity and the desire to evaluate, Judaism should encourage people to develop their ability to discern right from wrong.

Finally, people like to give definitions to everything because "God called the light day" (Genesis 1:4). When we give a definition to a certain event, experience, or idea, we imitate the Creator and thus perform a spiritual act.

The ability to differentiate between good and evil, to create, and to evaluate a situation are characteristics that God implanted in us. To develop these characteristics is an ideal. The problem with contemporary religious society is that it does NOT present these ideals to its followers. This is unfortunate because what is really significant is what ideals we (the society) define as religiously meaningful; this in turn influences society's development. This is so because a society is very much defined by the development of those ideals that are encouraged by its followers. The question, "What is an ideal?" means, "Which characteristics do we want to develop?" Obviously they are all implanted in us; otherwise there would be no possibility of developing them. Therefore the question, "What are the ideals whose development should be considered of religious value?" is crucial to the advancement of Judaism.

Thus, in the first four verses of the Torah, we are presented with the basic ideals of human life in relation to the divine. By integrating ideals into Judaism, we let it influence our lives to a much greater degree.

The Ideal of Truth

The Torah states: "Keep away from anything false." (Exodus 23:7). From this we learn that there is a basic ideal of Truth in Judaism. Surprisingly, this ideal is not trivial, as there exist cultures that lack it, where personal advancement dominates over truth, and therefore lying could be a social norm.

Ideals of Abraham

Let us proceed to the next subject of our study: the ideals of Abraham. First, we note that in Judaism there are two kinds of covenants between God and the Jewish people. One is called "the covenant of Abraham" and the other "the covenant at Sinai." In "the covenant at Sinai" the Israelites received a system of precepts, and at its foundation lay the Ten Commandments. The "covenant of Abraham" was built on ideals and was in no way connected to commandments. Even circumcision was not a commandment *per se* but a symbol of the covenant. It is not our goal here to analyze in detail all of the ideals of Abraham and the Patriarchs. We will only attempt to learn what lies on the surface and understand what is relevant to us today.

Universalistic vs. Nationalistic Ideals of Judaism

As discussed in the first part of this essay, universalism is an important part of Judaism. We see this explicitly written in the Torah when God selects and blesses Abraham, "All the nations of the world shall be blessed through your descendants—all because you obeyed My voice." (Genesis 22:18). Thus, a universalistic goal of Judaism is to make an impact on all of humanity, to become a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6) and to look broadly beyond the scope of Jewish life.

On the other hand, Abraham did not just spread religious and ethical teachings; he was commanded to create a nation, a special, separate people that would realize his ideals. Here too, we see that all aspects, the universal, cosmopolitan and the national, have to strike a balance to create a nation that is universalistic.

The Ideal of Progress through Argumentation

One of the important characteristics of "Jewishness" is the capacity to debate with God. Abraham argues with God regarding Sodom. This is the most striking example of a dispute with God in all of the monotheistic literature. This dispute is not simply a request or presentation of arguments. Abraham is openly critical of the divine plan, and he doesn't refrain from using rather severe words: "It would be sacrilege even to ascribe such an act to You—to kill the innocent with the guilty, letting the righteous and the wicked fare alike. It would be sacrilege to ascribe this to You! Shall the whole world's Judge not act justly?" (Genesis 18:25). If a person on trial in a state court said anything like that to a judge, he would be accused of contempt of court. God however does not react in that way. On the contrary: He provokes Abraham to argue with Him. Abraham's debate with God teaches us an important lesson about how humanity progresses: If a person always agrees, he will never grow in understanding. To truly understand, one must first put forward arguments and then discuss them. Judaism should therefore strive to encourage Jews to ask questions, no matter how sensitive they are, and they should not to be afraid to seem "impious," for even Abraham disputed with the Almighty!

In monotheism, there are three levels of humanity's relationship with God: the level of subordination, when people carry out the divine orders; the level of love, when God wants to bestow benefits upon humanity; and the level of a dialogue, when God conducts a dialogue with humans. Judaism stresses the importance of all three levels. When God commands Abraham to "walk before me" (Genesis. 17:1), commentators note that it is said about Noah that he "walked with God." "Walking with God" is to agree while "walking before God" is to argue and disagree when the divine guidance contradicts the divine spark of intuition within humans. Thus, the Jewish ideal is to "go before God." Later, the Torah explains the reason for selecting Abraham as follows: "I have given him special attention so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep

God's way, doing charity and justice. God will then bring about for Abraham everything He promised" (Genesis18:19).

The way of God is a covenant of ideals. One of them is a combination of *tzedakah* (kindness) and *mishpat* (judgment). It is impossible for the world to exist on mercy alone, but the world cannot survive solely on justice either. Theoretically, we could say that one of the ideals is mercy, and the other is justice. This however would not be precise: mercy and justice must be pursued together rather than separately. This synthesis of mercy and justice is the ideal that God teaches us through our ancestors. Each of our forefathers added a fundamental ideal: Isaac taught us a lesson of self-sacrifice, and Yaakov sanctified God's name by building a nation and wrestling with God.

Messianic Ideals

Christianity puts messianic ideals at the center of its belief system. Judaism also has these ideals, but we believe that there is great danger in attempting to implement messianic ideals at a time when society is not ready for them. Any attempt to implement these ideals will immediately lead to undesirable results. Perhaps that is why the messianic ideals of Judaism are not given in the Torah, which is a guide to action, but rather are given in the Books of Prophets. Pacifism, a situation of "beat their swords into plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4), is precisely one of the criteria of the Messianic Era. A few other messianic ideals include nations of the world bringing offerings to the God of Israel and vegetarianism, which R. Kook believed to be a messianic ideal.

It is well known that different strands of Orthodox Judaism agree mainly in understanding the actual commandments but differ significantly on the question of *hiddur mitzvah*. Apparently, with regard to ideals, the same holds true. It is imperative to start formulating the ideals of Judaism. By doing so, we will promote Judaism and move closer to being a "Light unto the Nations."

Instead of a Conclusion: Moses's Appearance Is Like that of Abraham's

The Midrash relates that when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels opposed him claiming, "Is a man fit to receive this Torah? It should not be given to humans!" Then God made Moses's appearance and face similar to Abraham's, and He then asked the angels: "Was it not to him that you came and with him that you ate?" The angels had no choice but to agree.

According to R. Kook (Kovets, "The Last of the Boyska," § 24), the angels did not object to Abraham's teachings being given to humans. Abraham taught that the world has a single Master, who created humans in His image and after His likeness, and from this concept he deduced principles that could be understood by humankind, such as loving and helping one's neighbor. Abraham taught ideals of mercy, love for all creatures, and above all, love for one's neighbor; these concepts are so comprehensible that it is clear why people need them. Moses's teachings, on the other hand, are commandments whose meanings are not always clear; this raises the question whether or not this doctrine is suitable for humans. By rendering Moses's appearance and face similar to Abraham's, God demonstrated to the angels that Moses's commandments are rooted in Abraham's ideals and that they are the specification and implementation of the ideals that Abraham proclaimed. As a consequence, the angels withdrew their objections.

Today, we in our lower world need to do what God did in His upper world on high at the time of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai—show that Moses's appearance resembles Abraham's, and

that Moses's commandments are the realization of the ideals that Abraham declared; in this way we need to demonstrate that Abraham's ideals are primary, while Moses's commandments are a means of realizing these ideals. This understanding will help bring humankind closer to the Torah.

[1] There are numerous passages that prohibit the sacrificing of children to *Molekh*. See also Jeremiah 19:5.
[2] Benamozegh, Elijah. *Israel and Humanity*. Paulist Press, 1995, Mordechai Luria, editor and translator. [Translated from the French version edited by Emile Touati, published in 1961.]
[3] See also R. Kook's article: *Talelei Orot*, in *Ma'amarei Hara'ayah*, p. 18.
[4] http://www.jewishideas.org/
[5] http://www.jewishideas.org/angel-shabbat/religion-its-best
[6] Berkovits, Eliezer. *Essential Essays on Judaism*. Shalem Press, 2002, p. 41.
[7] Hazony, David. Introduction to Berkovits, 2002.