Theology and Ethics in Modern Orthodoxy

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The great figures in Modern Orthodoxy, such as Azriel Hildesheimer, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Joseph Soloveitchik were all concerned with theological and ethical as well as halakhic issues. These thinkers understood that Orthodox Jews had to carve out a place for themselves in the modern world, and this meant that they needed to be educated in modern philosophy and science even as they were required to study Talmud and apply halakha to the new problems that modernity posed. These thinkers believed that Judaism could be a beacon of religious observance and ethical idealism in the modern world. They, of course, focused on Torah study in the yeshiva and halakhic observance throughout the Jewish community; but they also sought to use modern philosophy to find new ways to explain both to Jews and non-Jews, the meaning and role of Torah in modernity.

However, something has happened in late modernity or what some call “postmodernity” that has changed the relationship between Orthodox Judaism within and without the Jewish community. Increasingly, it appears that Orthodox Jews are abandoning the world for the safe confines of the yeshiva and the four cubits of halakha alone. This has led to the adoption of all sorts of halakhic strictures and a hyper-sensitivity to fulfilling minute details of halakha as the sole criterion of Jewish authenticity and allegiance to God. It has also led to the strange phenomenon of the self-ghettoization by Jews in Western countries and Israel, despite the fact that these countries are largely open to Judaism and give Jews freedom of religion. The self-ghettoization of the observant community has

also brought with it an aversion to pursuing careers in the secular world. This in turn has led to a situation of self-inflicted poverty that requires increasing numbers of Jews to become dependent on hand-outs from the very secular States that they loathe and deride. As these communities continue to grow while at the same time liberal forms of Judaism are shrinking in appalling numbers, responsibility for an intelligent, theologically and morally sophisticated observant Judaism falls upon Modern Orthodoxy. However, given that modern Orthodoxy itself is moving toward Hareidi forms of Judaism, it is not clear that Modern Orthodoxy will be up to the challenge that faces it.

Postmodern Hyper-Secularism

Certainly the world has changed radically since the heyday of Modern Orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth century. The world has become more secular, more focused on individualism and less on family and community, more permissive of all kinds of activities that the Torah prohibits, and also less open to the advice that traditional religion offers. The traditional values of respect for authority, personal humility, self-restraint, and communal loyalty have been replaced by a culture of emotional release, self-expression, and radical individualism that looks askance at any structures that would limit the personal quest for gratification and fulfillment. What was impossible to show and say in popular media in the 1950s and 1960s is now commonplace. Cable television and the internet open up ever-new portals to the expression and celebration of sex, greed, vice, and violence with a peculiar fascination with vampires, zombies, and the occult. The pace of the process of assimilation and intermarriage in the larger American Jewish community continues to increase; and what is most alarming here is that most non-Orthodox Jews do not really seem to care. Unfortunately, our treasured State of Israel is very much part of the postmodern global world and is therefore just as vulnerable to global postmodern culture as the United States is. Given these realities, it is understandable that Orthodox Jews are closing themselves off from the larger world and turning more and more inward. This has led to the growth in Hareidi forms of Judaism in both the Diaspora and in Israel. As members of these forms of Judaism retreat from the world, they have rejected precisely those theological and ethical elements in Modern Orthodoxy that sought to connect observant Jews to modern philosophy, ethics, politics, and culture.

In my recent book, The Future of Jewish Theology (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), I argue that Judaism cannot afford to abandon the world. I try to show that the Torah requires Jews to live up to a standard of holiness in which both ritual and moral purity are paramount. Furthermore, I argue that moral purity does not mean

focusing on helping only fellow Jews but non-Jews as well. It is therefore neither an Orthodox nor Reform idea, neither a religious nor a secular Zionist idea that Jews should act for the sake of the world. Indeed, it is a divine imperative that forces Jews out of the safe and secure confines of their communities to act to redeem the world. And I would venture to say that one of the real misunderstandings of holiness or kedusha is the belief that one can be holy by focusing on ritual purity alone; it is one of Judaism's unholy temptations to think that one can fulfill the manifold mitzvoth of kedusha by focusing on ritual observance alone. Certainly, Jews must live according to the dictates of halakha; but following these dictates must include a consciousness of Who commands them and what Hakadosh Barukh Hu wants observance of His laws to bring about. And that involves not only the holiness of the Jewish community as a goy kadosh, a holy nation, but the redemption of the entire world.

In my book I also argue that Judaism today is particularly in need of a theology to explain to both Jews and non-Jews what its central beliefs and doctrines are. This is especially necessary in a pluralistic world where Judaism competes with multiple religious, philosophical, and secular ideologies in what has been called the global "supermarket of meaning." A good Jewish theology is necessary for Judaism, for Jews often are unclear about what their beliefs are and they then have difficulty explaining to themselves, let alone, others what Judaism requires them to believe.

In another situation of pluralism, in Muslim Spain, Maimonides faced a similar problem to the one we see today, and this is one reason he wrote both the Mishneh Torah and the Guide of the Perplexed. In a certainly novel move for a book on Jewish law, Rambam began his Mishneh Torah, his "Repetition of the Law," with theology.

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His Being. (Maimonides, 1982, Knowledge: Foundations of the Torah 1:1)

To say that the "foundation of foundations" of all existence is God is to say that God is not only the foundation of Torah and Israel, it is to acknowledge that God is the foundation of all that is; and this includes both the physical world of the heavens and the earth and the spiritual world of religion, knowledge, and truth. The scope of God's creative being and concern thus reaches well beyond the Jewish community to the larger horizons of the earth and heavens. And as His goy

kadosh, his holy people, Jews must recognize the near infinite scope of their concerns. This infinite scope is there precisely because God is infinite and beyond limits. In addition to celebrating God's infinite power and concerns, Maimonides went on to paint a picture of God as infinite in wisdom, transcendent of all materiality, One and unique among all that is. In his Guide of the Perplexed each of these aspects of God were carefully delineated through the use of both logic and verses from the Torah.

Maimonides followed the theological beginning of the Mishneh Torah with a section on "moral dispositions" and ethical conduct. Here, he adopted Aristotle's "character ethics" to the Jewish system of halakha, arguing that doing mitzvoth was a form of habituation that cultivated Jewish moral virtues and produced a uniquely Jewish moral character. The combination of theology and ethics that begins Maimonides' Mishneh Torah suggests a marriage of theology and ethics in Judaism that culminates in the modern world with the notion that Judaism is a religion of "Ethical Monotheism." Here the Jewish belief One God is coupled with the manifold ethical commandments and prophetic ethical ideals to suggest that Judaism can play a leading role in representing and motivating ethical action in the modern world.

Ethical Monotheism had an enormous impact on both modern Jewish thought and practical Jewish life in the modern period. Ethical Monotheism set the terms and concepts and language through which much of European, American and Israeli Jewish thought and theology was developed. In the area of Jewish practice one of the great products of Ethical Monotheism was the Pentateuch and Haftorahs of J.H. Hertz. Hertz was Chief Rabbi of the UK and in the latter half of the twentieth century his tall blue Humash could be found in both Orthodox and Conservative Synagogues throughout the English speaking world (and even some Reform Congregations)—thus giving expression to a theology that was common to Kelal Yisrael. This book combined commentaries from Hazal, parashanut, philosophy, theology, literature and politics—Jewish and non-Jewish—to suggest that Judaism, as "Ethical Monotheism," had played and could continue to play a central role in the ethical project of modernity.

Times have changed making both Ethical Monotheism and the Hertz Chumash seem dated, although Jewish theology and ethics and the notion of Kelal Israel are certainly not dated. Indeed, I would argue that the need for compelling expressions of these notions are all the more needed in our contemporary world. It must be said however, that the overly rational and universalizing moves of Ethical Monotheism were never totally adequate to comprehending and

expressing the particularity and depth of the communal, textual, legal, and liturgical aspects of Judaism. The theology of Ethical Monotheism, schooled in Greek metaphysics as it was, stressed the distance and transcendence of God over His immanent and personal characteristics thus rendering him unapproachable to the everyday Jew. In some modern expressions of Ethical Monotheism, universal ethics instead of monotheism came to dominate, thus robbing Judaism of both its connections to the Jewish people and to God. This led, particularly in modern liberal forms of Judaism, to leaving Jewish peoplehood and God behind and focusing on social and political ethics in the world alone. One the other hand, the overly intellectual and conceptual character of Ethical Monotheism gave it a kind of elite character that removed Jewish theology from the people, favoring individuals with philosophical training. Ethical Monotheism also supported the modern focus on the individual over the community. Therefore, one could say that whereas Ethical Monotheism facilitated the relationship of Jews to the modern world it did not bring Jews very deeply into the spiritual heart of Judaism and the Jewish community.

The Medieval Response of Halevi

Already in the Medieval period there developed a response to the austere and utterly transcendent God of Maimonides. Here, the central philosophical opponent was Yehudah Halevi, (1075–1141) the Spanish Jewish poet, philosopher, and theologian. In his Kuzari in which a rabbi has a dialogue with the King of the Khazars to convince him of the superiority of Judaism over other religions and philosophies, the rabbi points out that the God of Israel is certainly El Elyon, God on High, but He is also “the God of the ancestors, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Halevi, 1964, 58). This is the God of a family and a people. Halevi points out the central problem of a purely philosophical approach to God. The doctrine of the perfect God of the philosophers “leads them to teach of a Supreme Being which neither benefits nor injures, and knows nothing of our prayers, offerings, obedience or disobedience” (Halevi, 1964, 201). Indeed, how does one pray to the God of Ethical Monotheism? How find solace in His utter transcendence and awful power? How does one even address Him? How call on Him? Halevi tells us that the pious ones of the Torah had to comprehend God by means of “intermediaries,” and he calls these intermediaries: glory, kavod, presence, shekhinah, dominion, malkhut fire, esh cloud, anan, likeness, tzelem, and form d’mut. These intermediaries Halevi says “proved to them that He had spoken to them, and they styled it Kavod HaShem: Glory of God” (Halevi, 1964, 200).

Kedusha-Holiness: The Missing Link

In my book I summarize the limitations of Ethical Monotheism by arguing that it overlooks the Torah's concern with issues of kedusha.[1] Kedusha or holiness is a dynamic concept that includes both ritual and ethical concerns. Kedusha is a goal set for the entire Jewish community, kol adat Israel, and requires a community to be achieved. Kedusha is centered in God as the common designation for God, HaKadosh Barukh Hu, The Holy One Blessed Be He, suggests. Yet although kedusha ultimately resides in God, His mitzvot supply the conduits and intermediary structures that bring holiness into the very body individual and body politic of Judaism. Kedusha traces out a domain that encompasses both God's transcendence and immanence, and assures that at every moment the Jew can be in contact with God. That the mitzvot intend to supply conduits to bring kedusha into the human sphere is articulated clearly in the basic formula of the berakhah or blessing: Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam asher Kiddeshanu Bemitzvotav. "Blessed art You, LORD, Our God, King of the universe, Who has made us holy through his commandments."

In focusing on kedusha, I mean to both uphold the rich theological and ethical traditions of Ethical Monotheism and correct its overly intellectual approach by highlighting the importance of halahkic, ritual, and communal structures of Judaism. Since kedusha as it is presented in the Torah has both ritual and ethical qualities, a focus on it has the capacity to bring Jewish concerns with ritual observance and social and political concerns for the moral state of the world. In this sense I hope that a focus on kedusha can served to revive the original theological and ethical spirit of Modern Orthodoxy. However, given the recent turn in Orthodox Judaism toward intense halakhic study and ritual observance one hardly needs to argue to Orthodox Jews that Judaism concerns this issue. So what I will do in this essay now is to make the case that seems to have been lost in the recent turn inward in Orthodoxy, and that is the case for the ethical dimension of kedusha.

Leviticus19: Kedoshim Tiheyu

To make my case that a concern with kedusha requires Jews to be concerned with ethical issues, I take as my central text Leviticus 19 Kedoshim Tiheyu: You Shall Be Holy. Sitting in the middle of the third book of the Torah, the first chapter of Parashat Kedoshim, is found close to the middle of the Torah. Given its comprehensive scope, many rabbinic commentators have spoken of it as containing a condensed summary of all of Torah. Rashi reiterates the words of the Sifra when he says of chapter 19 that "the essentials of the Torah are dependent on it" (Rashi on Lev 19:1). And R. Levi in Midrash Vayikra Rabba says that most of

the commandments of the Decalogue are included in chapter 19.[2]

Chapter 19 begins with requirements of the sacrificial cult and then moves outward to include how one deals with every form of social relation. The vision is at once ideal and practical, religious and secular, moral and spiritual. In his commentary on Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom stresses that what we have in this text is a full recipe or rule for the holy life. “Its unique placement here underscores the importance of the prescriptions that follow: they are quintessentially the means by which Israel can become a holy nation” (2000,1603).

The combination of ritual and ethical directives as they are presented in Leviticus 19 will become a model for the rabbinic Judaism that follows the Israelite religion of the Bible and creates one of the distinctive marks of Judaism as it develops into the modern period. That the ethical commandments have the same status as the ritual commandments means that holiness can never be purely a matter of ritual purity or other-worldly spiritual engagement. That the ethical commandments are included along with the ritual commandments in a code of holiness means that there is a holy dimension to ethics and an ethical dimension to holiness. Because God commands both ethical and ritual purity, Jewish theology can neither be only about ritual nor about ethics, but must deal with both equally. This gives Jewish theology its embodied social and political form. And because Leviticus 19 is not only a list of ethical and theological commands, but includes matters of ritual, economic, and everyday life, that is, because Leviticus 19 presents the holy life in a comprehensive life pattern, this means that Jewish theology is not simply a series of ideas and moral laws, but has a systematic quality that aims to penetrate all aspects of life.

One of the most famous lines of Torah is found in Leviticus 19:18 “You shall love your fellow/neighbor as yourself,” v’ahavta l’reakhah kamokha.” The commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself” requires great personal insight as it requires one to at once put oneself in the shoes of the other and to see the other one like ourselves. Rabbi Akiba called this commandment, the “great rule of the Torah.” It is a kind of Kantian categorical imperative of Judaism. And we can take it as the ultimate rule for the holy life. Note that it is not an abstract rule but a very concrete and living one that requires an inward act of imagining the other as a self, indeed, as oneself. This rule is essentially different from the moral laws of the Decalogue in that it requires something like an act of introspection before one acts in relation to other humans. The rule supplies a kind of moral rationale that we do not find in the Decalogue. There we are told, “Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not covet.” And here, in Leviticus, we are told why: because the other is

a human self like you! But Leviticus 19 also pushes the holy person beyond his neighbor.

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God (Lev 19:33–34).

Here, the stranger is brought into the code that rules the holiness of the community. The ethical standards given to the kinsperson are extended to the stranger. He and she are to be regarded “like one of your citizens” and even like yourself! And the text gives us the reason: “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” With this statement, the moral import of the experience of the people in Egypt becomes clear. Israel was made to experience slavery, homelessness, and strangeness “in a strange land” so that she could understand and have compassion for the stranger in her midst.

The Torah text of Leviticus 19 stands as a central text of an extensive ethical discussion of what the holy life requires of Jews. It is a clear portrait of the Torah’s sense that holiness is “not in heaven” (lo ba-shamayim hi (Deut 30:12) but on earth and embedded in the everyday relations of family, friends, and work life. Rabbi Israel Salanter, (1810-1883) the great Lithuanian Musar (Ethics) scholar, stresses the “earthly” quality of holiness. He says that although it is commonly “accepted in the [Jewish] world to associate the holy person with one who is great in Torah and Fear (of God), according to hazal (the rabbinic sages) there is another aspect to holiness—how one deals in money matters.” Rabbi Salanter argues that holiness involves our daily interactions in “commerce, work, and interpersonal relations.”[3] Referring to Leviticus 19 he says, it “establishes that the conditions for holiness are: do not steal, do not lie, you shall not do an injustice in judgment.” He supports his reading by the following interpretation of Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.” “I, God, am holy, so to speak, in heaven, so if I require holiness of you, my intent is that you be holy in earthly, material matters.” [4]

The model that Leviticus 19 establishes for holiness follows the dictate of the command in Exodus that Israel “Shall be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation.” This means that no aspect of life can escape the exacting standards of holiness so that the profane sphere of everyday life is just as open to holiness as the sphere of the sanctuary. The ethical vision of the priests in the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus means, too, that the Holy God is never far off from any human action.

Indeed, the fact that God declares his presence “I am the LORD, Your God,” at the end of almost every one of His ethical commands, suggests that He wants to insert Himself at the nexus of all human actions and all human relations. And this means, too, that every “horizontal” relation that humans have with humans includes a “vertical” relation with God.

Holier Than Thou

The holy life is like a sacred ladder that one climbs through much personal sacrifice and hard moral discipline and spiritual work. Rising up in 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 halakha 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 mitzvoth and thereby forget the spiritual and ethical goal of the fulfillment of mitzvoth.

Prophetic Holiness and Ethics

It is well known that the classic yeshiva curriculum is dominated by the Talmud, not by the Torah and its rabbinic and philosophical exegetes. When Torah is studied, it is largely limited by a focus on Humash, or Pentateuch, and does not go beyond this to the Ketuvim (Writings) and Neviim, (Prophets). Given the theological and ethical treasures in these books, it is certainly a shame and a loss to the observant world. It is also somewhat odd that these texts are not systematically studied, given that we read from these books in the Haftarot every Shabbat and Festival. Of the many Haftarot that we read, the book that we read most often is Yeshayahu or Isaiah. If Orthodox Judaism ignores Isaiah, Devarim Rabba places Isaiah alongside Moses as the greatest of the prophets (2:4). Isaiah has a central standing among the prophets of Israel and it is noteworthy, given our concerns with kedusha that the most common epithet for God that Isaiah uses is K’dosh Yisrael “The Holy One of Israel” (Is 1:4).

According to Isaiah and most of the other classical prophets, holiness is articulated in terms of social justice and political ethics. In focusing on social morality, the prophets, at times, appear to be opposing the centrality of the cult and issues of ritual purity. Despite this however, Jewish critics like Yehezkel Kaufmannn, Moshe Weinfeld and Shalom Paul, argue that the prophets did not

seek the end of sacrifices and traditions or ritual purity any more than they wanted the monarchy to end. Rather, they were critics of these institutions who sought to rid them of corruption and place them in their rightful place in service to God. That Isaiah's vision of the angels proclaiming God's holiness: Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, occurred in the Temple (Is 6:3) and that the prophet Ezekiel was himself a priest, certainly suggests that the prophets did not intend to do away with the priesthood. However, with Isaiah, we do have one of the most forceful critics of excessive concern for the intricacies of ritual purity and holiness alone. That Isaiah refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" and uses this appellation consistently throughout his text, suggests that ethics is not only required by the Holy One of Israel, but that the Holy One Himself is morally righteous and that human righteousness is grounded in God. In verse 5:16 Isaiah says: "And God the Holy One is sanctified through righteousness" (Holy Scriptures, JPS translation,1950); or an alternative translation could be "The holy God shall make Himself holy (n'qadesh b'tzedeq) through righteousness." So Isaiah's view, following the Torah's view, is that the moral law is underpinned and founded in God. Let us hear the words of Isaiah, which as he says, are the word of God.
Hear the word of the Lord…
"What need have I of all your sacrifices?"
Says the Lord.
"I am sated with the burnt offerings of rams,
And suet of fatlings,
And blood of bulls…
Who asked that of you?
Trample my courts no more;
Bringing oblations is futile,
Incense is offensive to me,
New moon and Sabbath
Proclaiming solemnities
Assemblies with iniquity
I cannot abide. …
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen
Your hands are full of blood—
Wash yourselves clean
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight,
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good

Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged,
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.”
IS 1:10-17

The words of Isaiah here, uttered with so few Hebrew words are a wonder to behold. Isaiah rips through the fabric of sacrificial life, the very nexus of the relationship with God established by the Levitical priests, “Your hands are full of blood.” Here, the expiatory power of the blood of sacrifice is mocked and the line seems to suggest instead that there is an excess of bloodshed. The extent of the verbal charge against the sacrificial cult is comprehensive, from daily sacrifice, to Shabbat, to the festivals, and even unto verbal prayer. “What need have I of all this? Who asked this of you?” The answer could be easy: “What do you mean?” the people might say. “Certainly, it was You, God, who asked this of us. It was You, God, who established the sacrificial cult, who determined the rules of Shabbat and the festivals as the very vehicle to make us holy. Now you are telling us you have no use for it all!” Without answering these questions, God uses the language of purity, “wash yourselves clean,” and directs it in a thoroughly moral and non-ritual direction. Here, Isaiah makes a move that we often see in the prophets, to use ritual purity, as a metaphor for moral purity.

Then, through Isaiah, God presents the people with what simply could be called an ethical manifesto, which, following the short form of the Hebrew, could be put this way.

Cease evil,
Learn good
Seek justice;
Correct oppression,
Defend orphans,
Plead for widows.

Here, in short, is an ethical doctrine which begins in stopping evil in oneself, moves to education in the ways of goodness, and then extends human efforts outward to seek justice. Justice, here, is seen in countering oppression against those that are powerless, the orphan and the widow, thereby representing all who are marginal and have no obvious figures of power to protect them.

Isaiah is not alone in speaking the words of social ethics. His contemporary Amos, who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom, also put forth a doctrine of social justice:

Hear this, you who trample on the needy
And bring the poor of the land to an end,
Saying when will the new moon be over
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath that we may offer wheat for sale
That we may make the ephah small and the shekel great,
And deal deceitfully with false balances,
That we may buy the poor for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals,
…
I will make the sun set at noon,
I will darken the earth on a sunny day
I will turn your festivals into mourning
(Amos 8:4-10).

Is this a new instruction, a new Torah replacing the old? Is this a new way to holiness dispensing with all the laws of sacrifice, of Shabbat, of the festivals, and of dietary laws and ritual purity? Certainly, this is the position of Protestant Christianity.

Yet here I would suggest that the prophets are speaking to their contemporary moment in the strongest way possible. They mean to correct abuses in Israelite religious life and the cult, and were not attempting to abolish its institutions and structures. Certainly, from the position of rabbinic tradition, the Torah and its rituals laws of holiness and purity will never be abrogated. The Torah is given as an eternal covenant, berit olam, between God and Israel, and all of rabbinic Judaism is built on the divinely sanctioned status of the laws and rituals that are given in the Torah.

The great Jewish biblical critic, Yehezkel Kaufmannn, while recognizing real innovation in the texts of Isaiah and the classical prophets, argues that Isaiah works upon already existing moral themes in the Torah. Kaufmannn states that “the prophetic demands for social justice echo, for the most part, the ancient covenant laws” (1960, 365). He reminds us that, in the flood story, God dooms a whole society for moral corruption.” Sodom and Gomorrah were also destroyed for lacking ten righteous men, and the Canaanites lost their land because of their

corrupt sexual ways” (1960, 366).

However, if Kaufmannn believes that the prophets did not want to abolish sacrifices and the cult, he is also clear that what we have in the classic Israelite prophets is not just a repetition of the morality of the Torah but an innovation beyond it. Here, Kaufmann argues that the prophets offer a heightened sense of morality. Where the Torah equated destruction of Israel with the heinous sins of idolatry and incest committed by a large group of people, we see that God “threatens national doom and exile for everyday social sins” (1960, 366). Kaufmannn states that it is remarkable how few times Isaiah refers to the sin of idolatry and how sensitive he is to moral slights to the poor and the powerless. Indeed, it is these “small sins” of social justice that bother the prophets and not the “venal sins” of murder, idolatry, incest, and inhuman cruelty that the Pentateuch is concerned with.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also points us to the heightened moral sensitivity of the prophets. “Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it s a deathblow to existence: to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world” (1962, 4).

As to why the prophet is so sensitive to what appears to be trivial moral concerns, Heschel sees this as a reflection of the acute moral sensitivity and highest moral standards of God. The God of the prophets is concerned with the details of little human lives, his compassion is so great that he is fundamentally concerned with the seemingly insignificant poor. “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world” (1962, 5).

It is a shame that the curriculum of our Orthodox yeshivot do not include intensive, sophisticated study of the Neviim and have left these texts of the written Torah to the Liberal Jewish Seminaries and the Christians. For the words of the Prophets are no less words of Torah and divrei Elokim than are the words of the Humash and Psalms and the Mishna and Gemara.

In the pre-modern world where Jews were excluded by Christians and Muslims alike from working and participating in their host cultures, there were good

reasons why Jews kept to themselves. In those times when Jews were often persecuted and Judaism derided as a dead or false religion, one can also understand that there was Jewish fear and antipathy toward non-Jews. Today, however, where Jews have civil and political rights especially in the West, the continued self-ghettoization of the Jews and negative remarks one sometimes hears uttered by some Jews and even their rabbis toward non-Jews are morally and spiritually reprehensible. When one hears of a group of Orthodox Rabbis in Israel who issue public prohibitions against renting apartments to Arabs, or "religious" Jews in the old city who spit on Catholic Priests, one wonders why these Jews, who so devoutly study Talmud, manage to miss these words of the great Tosafist, Rabbenu Tam. "One should be envious of the pious and more than these of the penitents, and more than these of those who…from their youth have been diligent in the service of the Lord, blessed be He…And one should be envious of the nations of the world who serve God in awe, fear, and submission." [5] And our devout co-religionists might also learn from the words of Bahya ibn Pakuda, who said in his introduction to Hovot haLevavot, The Duties of the Heart.

I quote from the dicta of the philosophers and the ethical teachings of the ascetics and their praiseworthy customs. In this connection our Rabbis of blessed memory already remarked (Sanhedrin 39b): In one verse it is said "after the ordinances of the nations round about you, you have done (Ezek 11:12); while in another, it is said "After the ordinances of those around you , you have not done (Ezek. 5:7). How is this contradiction to be reconciled? As follows: Their good ordinances you have not copied; their evil ones you have followed." The Rabbis further said (Megillah 16a). "Whoever utters a wise word, even if he belongs to the gentiles, is called a sage."[6]

The Orthodox community is where many Jews look for "authentic" Judaism. The Orthodox community is where Jews seek and expect to find our Tzaddkim and our Kedoshim, our righteous and holy ones. And one can say, too, that what the religious world needs most today are precisely these kind of exemplars of the righteous and holy life. Yet precisely at his moment of great need, Torah Sages are retreating from the world and advising their students and followers to do the same. This is tantamount to taking Torah and God out of the world at the time when the world most needs Torah and God. So my plea in my book and in this article is that Orthodox Jews live up to the challenge of the great figures of modern Orthodoxy and the command of God in the Torah. Kedoshim Tiheyu: Be holy in mind, in deed, in ritual and behavior, in the synagogue, in court and field. We must be exemplars of the Torah way of life, committed to performance of the

ritual mitzvoth as well as the mitzvoth of justice, righteousness, compassion and derekh erets.

[1] My book also offers a philosophical defense of religious language in which I use contemporary philosophies of language taken from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (see Kepnes, 2013, Ch.1, “Addendum.”) and Paul Ricoeur (ch.7, 176ff). Contemporary philosophies of language, with their focus on text, narrative, metaphor, and religions as “language games” offer a different basis than Greek philosophy which is built on propositions, concepts and syllogistic logic. These Greek tools are not really native to the language and rhetoric of Torah so that Jewish philosophers who use them are constantly involved in processes of translation of Torah terms into Greek terms. Torah and rabbinic literature naturally swims in the language of text, metaphor, parable, and analogy. I therefore would suggest that the turn to language in contemporary philosophy supplies an alternative paradigm that can serve Modern Orthodoxy well as it searches for a new “non-Greek” basis beyond Maimonides and classical Ethical Monotheism, to ground its claims to truth and wisdom and supply a connection to the postmodern world.
[2] See Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Leviticus 19 for a quick and handy list of parallels between Leviticus 19 and Exodus 20.
[3] Salanter’s on Vayiqra 19 in Itorei Torah, The translation is by Walter Herzberg.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Sefer Hayashar Book of Righteousness (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1967), 43.
[6] Bachya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda, Duties of the Heart, Trans. Moses Hymanson (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1970), 45.

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