

Brief Account of the Jewish Religion, from Its Origins to the Present

TO EQUIP READERS TO UNDERSTAND the part of my life story that has to do with my *views on religion*, I will give a brief *practical account of the history of the Jewish religion*. First, I will discuss the concept of *religion in general*, as well as the difference between *natural* and *positive* religion.¹

Religion in general is an expression of the feelings of gratitude, awe, and so forth that stem from the relationship between our happiness and unhappiness, on the one side, and one or more unknown forces on the other. If one looks at how *these feelings are expressed only in a general way*, ignoring [151] *specific expressions*, then religion is natural for people. Many of the phenomena that interest people have unknown causes, but people feel compelled to presume causes for these effects—this is the generally accepted *Principle of Sufficient Reason*²—and to articulate the feelings that these causes bring forth.

This articulation can take two different forms, the one being the product of the *imagination*, the other of *reason*. Either you can imagine the causes of effects by way of *analogy*, and ascribe properties to causes that are then revealed in their effects, or you can conceive of causes intellectually, purely as the causes of certain effects, without wanting to determine their properties as such. These two forms are both natural. The latter is

¹ Throughout this chapter, Maimon is, in part, responding to the account of Judaism in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, and, more immediately, his erstwhile mentor Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power in Judaism* (1783) a decade earlier. His contemporary interlocutors include Saul Ascher, whose political theory of Judaism, *Leviathan*, was also published in 1792.

² Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason asserts that "nothing happens without a reason" (Leibniz's Second Letter to Clarke in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 321) and that "we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise" (Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 646). Essentially, the same principle motivates many of Spinoza's claims as well. Maimon's description of the principle as "generally accepted" is surprising in light of the severe restrictions Kant placed on its validity. See Longuenesse, "Kant's Deconstruction of the Principle of Sufficient Reason." Maimon himself was one of the most strict and radical advocates of the principle.

characteristic of the *earlier* condition of humankind, the former of its *fully developed* state.

The difference between these two ways of representing the causes of things results in a crucial difference between religions. [152] The first way, assuming as it does that causes will be *similar* to effects, is the mother of *polytheism*, or *paganism*. The second way is the basis of *true* religion. For if different phenomena are different from each other, their causes, if they are to be similar to their effects, must be different from each other as well. If, on the other hand, and in accord with the truth, you consider these effects using the concept of *cause in general*, and forgo the aid of the imagination, not trying to define the cause *as such* by way of *analogy* (since it is, after all, fully unknown), then you will no longer have any need to assume multiple causes. Rather, one needs to posit only one single unknown subject as the cause of all phenomena.

Different philosophical systems of theology are nothing other than *refined extensions* of these different modes of representation. The *atheist* system of theology, if one can call it that, entirely dispenses with the concept of a *primary cause* [153] (since as a necessary *idea of reason*, its use is, according to the *critical* system, only of *regulative value*³). All effects are attributed to particular causes, known or unknown. This assumes no *connection* whatsoever among the different effects, because otherwise the *reason* for the connection would have to be sought beyond the connection.

Spinoza's system, by contrast, proceeds from the idea that one and the same substance is the immediate cause of all effects, which should therefore be viewed as predicates of the same subject.⁴

Matter and spirit are, for Spinoza, one and the same substance, which appears now under this and now under that attribute.⁵ This single substance is, he writes, not only the sole possible self-subsisting Being (independent of all external causes), but also the only one that *exists solely for itself*, whose *modi* (these attributes limited in a particular way) make up all so-called beings except it.⁶ [154] Every particular effect in nature is

³ On the first cause as mere regulative idea of reason, see Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, A671. Interestingly, Maimon seems to present Kant's system as atheistic. This might be Maimon's subtle response to Kant's insinuation that Maimon was a Spinozist (Ak. 11:50).

⁴ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. 1, proposition 16: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)."

⁵ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. 2, proposition 7, Scholium: "The thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that."

⁶ Namely, what appears ("so called") to be a being outside good is really just a mode of God.

ascribed not to its proximate cause (which is simply a mode), but to the primary cause or substance, which is common to all beings.

In this system *unity is real; variety, though, is merely ideal*. In the atheistic system, precisely the opposite is the case. *Variety is real, grounded in the nature of the things themselves*, while the *unity* one sees in the order and laws of nature is merely *accidental*, according to this system. Thus, we tend to define our *arbitrary* system for the *purpose of knowledge*.

It is hard to fathom how Spinoza's system could have been made out to be atheistic, since the two systems are diametrically opposed. The atheist system denies the existence of *God*; Spinoza's denies the existence of the *world*. Thus, it should really be called *acosmic*.⁷

Leibniz's system occupies the middle ground between these two. Here all *specific phenomena* are drawn into an immediate relation with *specific causes*. [155] But the different effects are conceived of as *belonging together* within a single system, while the cause of the connections among the variety of things is sought in a Being that is outside the system.⁸

Positive religion is distinguished from *natural* religion in just the same way positive civic laws are distinguished from natural ones. The latter are those resting on a murky foundation, the result of an internal

⁷ Maimon coined the term “acosmism” as the proper description of Spinoza's philosophy in response to the distortions of the “Pantheism Controversy,” in which Mendelssohn had been centrally involved. This view of Spinoza as a radical *religious* thinker who denies the reality of the world and asserts that only God exists helped initiate a major revolution in the perception of Spinoza among the German Idealists. He himself had espoused a version of acosmism in his early Hebrew manuscript, *Hesheq Shelomo* (e.g., folio 139). See Yitzhak Melamed, “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004). The view of Spinoza as denying the reality of the world rather than that of God appears already in Ernst Platner's 1776 *Philosophische Aphorismen*: “Spinoza leugnet eigentlich nicht die Existenz der Gottheit, sondern die Existenz der Welt” (p. 353). Platner does not use, however, the term “acosmism.” We are indebted to José María Sánchez de León for drawing our attention to this passage. For a helpful discussion of the passage, see Turro, “Qué tipo,” pp. 160–61.

⁸ The view of Spinoza's system as diametrically opposed to atheism was adopted from Maimon by Hegel. Hegel follows Maimon also in describing Leibniz's position as a mere compromise between the two poles: “The relationship between God and the finite, to which we belong, may be represented in three different ways: firstly, only the finite exists, and in this way we alone exist, but God does not exist—this is atheism; . . . Or, in the second place God alone exists; the finite has no reality, it is only phenomena, appearance. To say, in the third place, that God exists and we also exist is a false synthetic union, an amicable compromise. It is the popular view of the matter that the one has as much substantiality as the other; God is honoured and supreme, but finite things also have Being to exactly the same extent. Reason cannot remain satisfied with this ‘also,’ . . . [According to Spinoza] There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever; according to Spinoza what is, is God, and God alone. Therefore, the allegation of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God.” Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, pp. 280–81.

process, not defined in view of their actual use. The former, by contrast, are given a precise foundation, and they are defined from the start in view of their use.

However, there is an important difference between a *positive* religion and a *political* religion. The former has *correcting and defining knowledge precisely as its sole goal*: that is, it gives *instruction* with regard to the first cause. This knowledge is communicated to others according to their capabilities; in just the way one has received knowledge oneself. The latter, however, has as its main aim *civic happiness*. [156] But one doesn't leave knowledge as one finds it; rather, one communicates it insofar as one sees it as furthering this goal. *Politics*, qua politics, is just as irrelevant to *true religion* as it is to *true morality*, a potential hazard that can be prevented by acting upon people in other ways, thereby keeping everything in balance. Every political religion is also positive, though not every positive religion is also political.⁹

Natural religion has just as little in the way of *mysteries* as purely positive religion does. For if an inability to communicate the full extent of one's knowledge is considered a mystery, then all forms of knowledge would contain "mysteries." There would be *mathematical mysteries* just as much as *religious ones*.—Only *political religions* can have mysteries, which serve as indirect ways of guiding people to a *political goal*. [157] The people are made to believe that this is the best path for reaching their *private goals*, when in fact the case may be otherwise. There are *small* and *large mysteries* in political religion: The former consists of *material* knowledge of all particular operations and their relation to each other; the latter consist of knowledge of the purely *formal* or of the end that defines the small secrets. The former represents the embodiment of *religious laws*; the latter contains the *spirit of the laws*.

Even at its earliest beginnings as a *natural religion*, when it had nomadic patriarchs, the *Jewish religion* was different from *pagan religions*, because it was based on the *unity of one incomprehensible divinity*, rather than on *the many perceptible gods* of paganism. Because the particular causes of natural phenomena are unknown, and it doesn't seem possible to attribute particular effects to specific causes and to use these causes to characterize the effects, [158] all that remains is the concept of cause in general, which can be applied to all effects uniformly. This cause cannot be defined *through analogies*. For the effects oppose each other, and they cancel each other out in a single object. If one attributes them all to one and the same cause, the cause cannot be defined by likening it to other causes.

⁹ Maimon draws upon Maimonides, *Guide* 3:27: 510–12 here, which argues that the Law (i.e. religion) "aims at thow things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body," a key passage for Maimon.

In *pagan* religion, on the other hand, every kind of effect can be traced back to a specific cause, which can be characterized, in turn, through its effect. As a *positive* religion, Judaism differs from paganism in that it is not a *purely political* religion, that is, one that pursues society's interests (as opposed to true knowledge or private interests). Instead, Judaism is, in accordance with the spirit of its author, suited to a *theocratic* form of government, which has as its fundamental principle that only a religion grounded in knowledge gained through reason can be compatible with both civic and private interests. [159] In its *purest form*, Judaism has no mysteries in the truest sense of the word: not mysteries that, for particular reasons, one does not *want* to reveal, but rather that inherently *cannot* be revealed to all.

After the fall of the Jewish state, religion was separated from the state (since the state no longer existed). The religious leaders no longer tried to organize their religion with an eye to applying it to the state; now their concern was to *sustain* their religion, upon which the *nation* depended for its very existence.¹⁰ Motivated by hatred toward the nations that had destroyed their state,¹¹ as well as by a desire to ensure that the demise of their state wouldn't mean the end of their religion as well, they developed the following ways to preserve and expand of their religion:¹²

- 1 A method, handed down from Moses, of interpreting laws and applying the laws to particular cases. This is not the method that orders reason to modify laws [160] according to their intentions as times and conditions change, but rather the method that is based on certain rules of interpreting *what has been set down in writing*.
- 2 The granting of legal authority to the new decisions and pronouncements brought about through this method; that is, giving these decisions and pronouncements the same authority as older laws. It is easy to imagine the kind of pettifogging dialectics that have been employed in this process, right up through our own times, and one can just as easily imagine how this process would generate an enormous number of laws, customs, and ceremonies of all kinds.

¹⁰ See Saadia Gaon, *Book of Beliefs & Opinions* (New Haven: Yale University Press) Samuel Rosenblatt trans, p. 158: "Our nation of the children of Israel is a nation only by virtue of its laws." Spinoza makes similar claims in chapter 17 of his *Theological Political Treatise*.

¹¹ Cf. Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise*, ch. 5 (3/72/19–21): "The Pharisees retained [the religious ceremonies], or at least many of them, after they lost their state; but they did this more in a spirit of opposing the Christians than to please God."

¹² Maimon's discussion here relies primarily on Maimonides' introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and his preface to *Mishneh Torah*.

The history of Judaism can thus be divided into five main epochs.¹³ The first epoch, stretching from the patriarchs to the exodus from Egypt, was that of *natural religion*. The second, from Moses to the time of the *Great Council* (*Keneseth Hagdola*), was that of *positive* or *revealed religion* as such. This council should not be understood as a particular gathering of theologians [161] at a specific time. Rather, it covers all the theologians from the destruction of the first temple until the founding of the *Mishna*.¹⁴ The lesser prophets (Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi, etc., who are still regarded as belonging to the 120 elders¹⁵) were the first of these, and Simon the Pious was the last.¹⁶ As their forebears had done since Joshua's times, they took the Mosaic laws as their foundation and, in keeping with the times, their circumstances, and traditional methods, they added new laws. The conflicts that arose during the creating of new laws were settled by votes, with *majority opinion* prevailing.

The third epoch began with Rabbi Jehuda the Holy compiling the *Mishna* and extends to Rabine and Rabassi compiling the Talmud.¹⁷ Up until this epoch, it was forbidden to put the laws into writing, due to the concern that they might fall into the hands of people who would misuse them. But *Rabbi Jehuda Hanassi* (or, as he was otherwise known, *Rabbenu Hakades*) recognized that such a great variety of laws [162] could be easily forgotten, and so *for the sake of preserving the totality of laws, he permitted himself to violate a single law*—that is, he allowed himself to commit the laws to writing.¹⁸ In doing so, he relied on a passage from the Psalms: “There are circumstances in which one shows one's devotion to God precisely by violating the law.”¹⁹ Jehuda

¹³ Although Maimon had read at least some of Jacques Basnage's *History of the Jews* (1707), when his Berlin patrons suggested that he might be commissioned to translate it, the following conceptual schema is his own, and probably owes more to Maimonides than Enlightenment historiography.

¹⁴ Namely, from 586 BCE (the destruction of the first temple) until the third century BCE, the time of Simon the Pious.

¹⁵ According to the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Tractate Megilah*, 17b) the Great Assembly consisted of 120 elders at the time of its founding.

¹⁶ Simon the Pious was a third-century (BCE) priest and is considered as one of the first figures of the *Mishna*. See *Mishna, Tractate Avot*, vol. 1.

¹⁷ Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (approximately 136–220 CE) was the president of the Sanhedrin. He compiled and edited the *Mishna*. Rav Ashi (352–427 CE) was the head of the Yeshiva of Sura, in Babylonia. He compiled and sealed the *Babylonian Talmud* together with his disciple and friend, Ravina.

¹⁸ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Temurah*, 14b.

¹⁹ Ps. 119:126. Maimon's translation of the verse reflects rabbinic interpretation rather than its plain meaning.

Hanassi lived during the time of Antoninus Pius;²⁰ he was rich and had all the skills needed for such an undertaking. And so he compiled the *Mishna*, in which he presented the Mosaic laws using either traditional or some other rational mode of exegetical practice. Here, too, some laws prompted debate.

The *Mishna* is divided into six main parts. The first contains laws about *agriculture*; the second contains laws about *festivals* and *holidays*; the third comprises the laws having to do with the relations between the sexes (marriage, divorce, and the like); the fourth has the laws dealing with judicial doctrine; [163] the fifth contains the laws about *temple service* and *sacrifice*. And the sixth part contains the laws of *purification*.

Because the *Mishna* was composed with great precision and yet cannot be understood without a commentary, it was inevitable that there would be questions and debates, both about how to interpret the work itself and how to apply it to cases not covered sufficiently in the text. Rabine and Rebase eventually collected all the questions and the various answers to them, along with the debates and their resolutions, within the Talmud. This represents the fourth epoch of Jewish law.

The fifth epoch began with the *completion of the Talmud* and continues through our times and through all eternity (*si diis placet*)²¹ up to the arrival of the *Messiah*. Since the completion of the Talmud, the rabbis have not exactly been idle, to be sure. But they are not permitted to alter the *Mishna* or the *Talmud*. Their chief tasks are 1) to explain these texts so that the texts seem internally consistent [164] (which is truly no small feat, for one rabbi will employ the most minute dialectical procedures to find a contradiction in the commentary of another), and 2) to extract laws from the labyrinth of different opinions, interpretations, debates, and resolutions, laws, that is, that can be applied in any given case. Furthermore, it is their duty to draw conclusions using familiar cases and thus bring forth new laws from those that have remained undefined, despite all previous efforts. It is also their duty to create a complete *legal code* by proceeding in this way.

Thus, what was originally a *natural* religion, *very much consonant with reason*, has been misused. A Jew is permitted neither to eat nor to drink, neither to sleep with his wife nor to relieve himself, without observing an absurd number of laws. One could fill a library rivaling the one in Alexandria with books about *slaughtering* animals, the construction of

²⁰ Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius Antoninus (86–161 CE), the Roman emperor from 138 until 161. The *Babylonian Talmud* narrates several stories about the close friendship between Antoninus and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (e.g. *Tractate Avoda Zara*, 10a).

²¹ “If you please” (Latin).

the knives,²² the inspecting of the intestines, etc. And what can one say about the absurd number of books [165] about laws no longer in use, such as the laws of *sacrifice* and *purification*? The quill falls from my hand when I recall how so many of my peers and I had to spend the best years of our lives, at the height of our intellectual powers, engaged in this enervating activity: staying up all night to find meaning where there was none, using our *cleverness* to discover contradictions where none existed and to resolve intractable ones, and chasing shadows through long chains of reasoning—building intellectual castles in the air.

It is plain to see that the misuse of the *rabbinism* is based on the following practices:

- 1 On an *artificial method* of interpreting the Holy Scripture, which differs from the *natural method* in that the latter rests on thorough *linguistic knowledge* and the true *spirit of the lawmakers*, gleaned in part through attentiveness to their historical conditions, while the former is [166] invented for laws arising out of new circumstances.

The rabbis regard the Holy Scripture not only as the source of the foundational Mosaic laws, plus the laws that can be derived from those laws using a rational method, but also as a source for laws they have fashioned themselves in response to the demands of their own age. Here, as everywhere, the *artificial method* is merely a way to create an *external connection* between the old and new laws, so that the latter are received better by the people, and also so that they can be memorized more effectively, since they have been derived from principles and can be ordered accordingly. No rational rabbi would believe that laws referring to biblical passages in this way correspond to the true spirit of the passages. Rather, if asked, he would say: These laws are historical exigencies, which allude to biblical passages for strategic reasons. [167]

- 2 On the manners and customs of nations whom the Jews have lived among in the diaspora resulting from the demise of their state, whose manners and customs the Jews had to adopt in order not to elicit revulsion. Laws of this type include, for instance, those about *keeping one's head covered* (at least in holy places and during sacred practices), *washing one's hands* (before eating or prayer), fasting until sunset, saying a number of prayers each day, going on pilgrimages, the walking around the altar, and the like. Such laws are clearly of *Arab* origin.

²² The proper design of the slaughtering knives was a particularly urgent topic in Maimon's time and was one of the major issues of halachic debate between the Hasidim and their opponents.

Out of hatred toward the nations that destroyed their state and later oppressed them, the Jews also adopted customs opposed to *Greek and Roman* ones.

In these processes, the rabbis took as their model the Mosaic laws themselves, which partly coincided with [168] established Egyptian laws and were partly opposed to them, as Maimonides shows quite thoroughly in his work *More Newochim*.²³

It is worth noting that for all the rabbinic excesses with regard to *practical* Judaism, namely, the laws and customs, the *theoretical*, theological part of Judaism managed to remain pure. Eisenmenger can say whatever he wants.²⁴ It can be proven incontrovertibly that all the (limited) visual representations of God and his characteristics are meant to make theological concepts comprehensible to the popular intellect. On this issue, the rabbis adhered to the following basic principle, which they established in direct reference to the Holy Scripture: *The Holy Scripture uses the language of the common man*,²⁵ because religious attitudes and behaviors—the immediate aim of theology—are disseminated best in this way. Thus, to aid the common intellect, they represented [169] God as an *earthly* king who confers about governing the world with his ministers and councilors, i.e., the *angels*. But the rabbis try to distance the educated intellect from all anthropomorphic representations, by saying: “The prophets were bold in representing the Creator as resembling his creature,” as stated in Ezekiel 1:26,²⁶ for example, “and on the throne was an image like that of a human.”²⁷

Having impartially revealed the missteps of the rabbis, I cannot conceal the good they have done. A non-partisan, judicious view must prevail. Compare Mohammed’s description of the rewards of the pious with the rabbinic one. The former reads:

“Here (in paradise) there are as many bowls as stars in the sky. Young maidens and boys pour and serve. The beauty of the maidens exceeds what we are capable of dreaming of. If one of these [170] maidens were to appear in the sky of the night air, the world would be illuminated just as it is by the sun, and if she were to spit into the ocean, its salty water would be transformed into honey, its bitterness into sweetness.

²³ See, for example, *Guide* 3:37 | Pines 2:541 and *Guide* 3:46 | Pines 2:585.

²⁴ Johann Andreas Eisenmenger (1654–1704) was a scholar of Semitics and radical anti-Jewish polemicist. His massive *Entdecktes Judenthum* (1700) was one of the most influential works of anti-Judaism ever published.

²⁵ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedarim*, 3a and *Tractate Baba Metzia*, 31b. Cf. Maimonides’ *Guide* 1:26 | Pines 1:56.

²⁶ The original edition has here Ezekiel 2:26. This is a typographical error.

²⁷ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 27:1.

Milk, honey, and white wine flow in the rivers that crisscross through this sweet place. The mud of these rivers consists of fragrant nutmeg, their gravel of pearls and hyacinth. The angel Gabriel will open the gates of this paradise for devout Muslims. The first thing they will see is a table, covered with diamonds, of such extreme length that it would take 70,000 days to walk around it. The chairs around it will be made of silver, the napkins of silver and gold. Once seated, they will eat the most exquisite dishes of paradise and drink its water. When they are sated, beautiful boys will bring them green clothes fashioned out of precious material and gold necklaces and earrings. Each one [171] of them will be given a lemon, and when they bring it to their noses to breathe in its scent, maidens of enchanting beauty will appear. Each one will embrace his with delight, and this moment of intoxication through infatuation will last fifty years without a pause. Each pair will receive a dazzlingly beautiful castle, where for eternity they will eat, drink, and enjoy all kinds of sensual pleasures.”^{(a) 28}

This description is beautiful, but how sensuous! The rabbis, in contrast, say, “Above [in the blessed dwelling reserved for the pious] there is neither nor food nor drink and other such things, but rather, having been crowned, the pious sit and delight in the sight of the divinity.”²⁹

Eisenmenger, in his book *Judaism Unmasked* (first part, chapter 8), uses crude interpretations in an attempt to ridicule the Platonic doctrine of *memory* enlisted by the rabbis. But what can't be made ridiculous in this way? [172] He also mocks them for giving the title “kings” to the wise men, as the Stoic does,³⁰ or for saying that God does nothing without first seeking the counsel of the angels³¹ (i.e., His omnipotence does not influence nature except through *mediating* powers), and for the doctrine *that everything is preordained by the divinity except the exercise of virtue*.³² Would a rational theologian find something ridiculous or godless in this? I would have to write a whole book if I wanted to refute all the accusations and abuse leveled against Talmudists by both *Christian authors* and *would-be enlightened Jews*.³³

^a [Maimon] *On the Characteristics of Asian Nations*, see part two, pages 159 and 160.

²⁸ Von Rollins, *Neuere Geschichte der Chineser, Japaner, Indianer, Persianer, Turken, und Russen*, 293–94.

²⁹ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot*, 17a. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 8:2.

³⁰ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin*, 62a.

³¹ Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 347. Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 8:3.

³² *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot*, 33b.

³³ Maimon's explicit critique of the Jewish Enlightenment's prejudices toward the Talmudists here should be noted.

Imagine someone who has penetrated to the true spirit of the Talmud, who has gained a thorough knowledge of the way *ancients in general*, and especially *those from the East*, presented theological, moral, and even physical truths in *fables and allegories*, and how they *exaggerated* [173] about everything that interests people. Imagine someone who has done all this and who then treats the Talmudists like those who hunt around in the passages cited above to defend Rabbi Maier (who had a heretic for a teacher³⁴)—such a person would certainly not find all the inconsistencies in the Talmud that these men think they discover so easily.

This method of relating theoretical or practical truths to passages from the Holy Scripture or other widely admired writings, that is, doing so as though these truths were being derived using the most rational exegesis, however bizarre the exegesis might actually be, may also be seen as an excellent *mnemonic*, one that makes such truths *accessible* to the common man (who lacks the capacity to comprehend them abstractly and has to take them on *faith*). For if everyone knows the passages, they will be able to retain the truths derived from them. Thus, it very often happens in the Talmud that [174] one commentator derives a new law from this or that passage in the Holy Scripture, another then raises the objection that the law cannot correspond to the true meaning of the passage in question, for the true meaning is this or that, and then the first commentator will rejoin: “This is a new rabbinical law, and the rabbis have merely related it to the passage in question.”³⁵

Due to the widespread presupposition that people know how to use this method, Talmudists believe there is no need to seize every opportunity to give instruction in it. A single example will suffice to illustrate this point.

One Talmudist asked another the meaning of the following passage from the Book of Joshua, 15:22: *Kinah Dimonah we-Adadah*. The latter answered: “The well-known places of the Holy Land are being enumerated.” “Yes, yes!” the first rejoined, “I know very well that these are the names of places, but rabbi . . . One can find [175] a *useful* exposition beyond the literal meaning, namely: The one (*Kinah*) to whom a

³⁴ A second-century CE rabbinic figure, and the main voice in the *Mishna*. Rabbi Meir’s teacher was Elisha ben Abuya, the iconic heretic of rabbinic literature. Maimon refers here to the Talmudic explanation for Rabbi Meir’s adherence to his teacher even after the latter became a heretic: “He found a pomegranate, ate its fruit and spit out the husk” (*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagiga*, 15b). Maimon invites the reader to adopt a similar attitude toward rabbinic teachings.

³⁵ This is the rabbinic notion of *asmachta* [אַסְמַחְתָּא]. Maimon follows the opinion of Maimonides—in the preface to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*—that *asmachta* is a mere mnemonic. This view is not universally accepted among rabbinic authors.

neighbor gives a cause for revenge (*We-dumineh*), and who nevertheless *remains silent* (out of generosity) and refrains from performing an act of revenge, him the Eternal One (*we-adadah*) will see as being in the right.”³⁶

What a nice opportunity to laugh at our poor Talmudist, who has derived a moral message from the names of particular places, and also, in a unique way, makes a compound out of the name of the final place, Sansena.³⁷ And didn't the one who asked the question also say that he didn't want to know the *true meaning* of the passage, but rather, a *teaching* that can be grounded in the passage?

Thus, the Talmudists have also related to a passage in Isaiah the important lesson that when it comes to morality, what matters is for the most part *practice*, not *theory*. The passage reads: “The anticipation of your joy (as foretold by the prophets) will [176] have as its consequences strength, aid, wisdom, knowledge, and the fear of God.”³⁸

They connect the first six with the six *Sedarim* or divisions of the *Mishna* (the foundation of all Jewish learning). *Emunath* (faith, anticipation) is *Seder Seraim*. *Etecho* (temporal circumstances or conditions of happiness) is *Seder Moad*, and so on. This means that however knowledgeable about all six of these *Sedarim* you may be, the most important is the last one (fear of God).³⁹

As to rabbinic morality, I am not sure there is anything to object to, except that it perhaps is taken *too far* sometimes. It is genuine *stoicism*. But for that very reason, it does not exclude other useful principles (that of perfection, a general good will, and so forth). Rabbinic *holiness* even extends to ideas. The rabbis relate this to the following passage of the Psalms in their characteristic way: “No strange God will reside within you.”⁴⁰ [177] For the rabbis say: “What strange God could live in the human heart, other than evil desire?”⁴¹ They don't even allow one to deceive a pagan, in neither word nor deed, even where such deception has no bad consequences (for example, making the common remark, “I'm pleased to see you looking well,” when this does not express what is actually in one's heart).⁴² The examples of Jews deceiving Christians or pagans that are commonly cited as evidence to the contrary prove

³⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, 7a.*

³⁷ Josh. 15:30. Thus, one of the Talmudists expound the name Sansena [סנסנה] as שוכן בסנה (He who abides in the Senna). *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, 7a.*

³⁸ Isa. 33:6.

³⁹ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbath, 31a.*

⁴⁰ Ps. 81:10.

⁴¹ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbath, 105b.*

⁴² *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, 58b.*

nothing, for in those cases the Jews were simply not acting in accord with the *principles of their morality*.

The commandment that you shall not covet what belongs to a neighbor is interpreted by Talmudists in such a way that one must guard against the *desire* to own that thing. In short, I would have to write an entire book if I wanted to enumerate the excellent teachings of rabbinic morality. [178]

Moreover, the influence of these teachings on practical life is unmistakable. *Polish* Jews have always been allowed to pursue all kinds of work, rather than just *trading* and *moneylending*, to which Jews elsewhere were restricted. Yet *Polish* Jews are seldom accused of *fraud*. They remain true to the laws of the land where they live, and they feed themselves through honest means.

Their sense of charity, their institutions for caring for the poor and sick, their special societies for burying the dead—all these are sufficiently well known. Such deeds are carried out *not by caregivers working for money*, but rather by *the nation's elders* diligently applying themselves to the tasks at hand. To be sure, *Polish* Jews are not yet enlightened, at least for the most part; their customs and manners are still *crude*. But they are faithful to the religion of their fathers, as well as to the local laws. They may not be the most polite people, but their word is sacred to them. [179] But if they are not gentlemen, they pose no threat to the women of other nations. Like other peoples of the East, they do not have a particularly flattering view of women, however, they are quite conscious of their duties toward women. Children are not compelled to learn set *phrases* meant to express their love and reverence for their parents (for *Polish* Jews don't employ French nursemaids), but as a result, they display their affection and devotion all the more fervently.

The sanctity and warmth of their marriages, along with the tenderness characteristic of them, warrant special attention. A man is completely separated from his wife for fourteen days every month (the monthly purification as mandated by rabbinic law). Couples are not allowed to touch each other, or eat out of the same bowl, or drink out of the same cup, and as a result, the complacency and resentment that come from too much contact are avoided. In her husband's eyes, a wife remains what maidens are in the eyes of their admirers. [180]

Finally, how innocent young people are before marriage here! It often happens that a boy and girl of seventeen or eighteen are married without knowing a thing about the purpose of marriage, something that seldom occurs, it is safe to say, among young people in other nations. [181]