THE INTERACTION OF JUDAISM WITH MORALITY: DEFINING, MOTIVATING, AND EDUCATING A MORAL PERSON AND SOCIETY*

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For Judaism and many other religions of the world, religion is closely intertwined with morality. There is not, however, a one-to-one relationship between religion and morality, for clearly moral people may deny belief in or affiliation with any religion, and, conversely, some people who see themselves as religious (and whom others see as such too) nevertheless do immoral things. Worse, some of history’s greatest moral atrocities have been done in the very name of religion.

In recognition of this complex relationship between religion and morality, here I first suggest at least some of the elements of Judaism that sometimes breed immorality, together with some suggestions for ways to avoid these ill effects. I then describe a number of aspects of Judaism that contribute to moral sensitivity and behavior.

Religious Factors Motivating Immorality

Individuals, of course, are perfectly capable of holding immoral beliefs and doing immoral things without the assistance of religion. Often people use religion as an excuse for doing what they have decided to do on other grounds. At the same time though, some elements of religions are prone to produce, or at least contribute to, immorality; and I discuss some of these elements next.

God’s Power and Goodness

In the three Western religions, God is the ultimate Person and Power. Whether God is actually omnipotent or something short of that is a matter of dispute among the philosophers of all three Western religions, but there is no doubt that in all three God is at least very powerful. That can lead people to have an appropriately humble sense of their own worth and power. At the same time, those who speak for religion sometimes

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think that they represent God and, therefore, share in God’s power. For that matter, some of their constituents contribute to that mistaken self-image, for religious people sometimes treat their leaders as mini-gods. So, for example, David Berger, a modern Orthodox Jew, has written a scathing book about Chabad, the largest Hasidic sect.\(^1\) Berger maintains—rightly, in my opinion—that their veneration of their deceased leader, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, as the Messiah is nothing short of idolatry.

Sometimes it is not the power of God that leads to immorality on the part of the faithful, but rather God’s goodness. If God is the ultimate fount of value, then some conclude that anything is justified if it is in the name of God. This is an old story, going back to the biblical tale of God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The Protestant theologian Søren Kierkegaard interpreted that story to justify the teleological suspension of the ethical—that is, that God’s command can and should override any moral demands, even the most basic of them like refraining from murder. The Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash interestingly drew the exact opposite conclusion—namely, that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and that the whole episode was intended as a dramatic rejection of the child sacrifice commonly practiced in the ancient Near East. After all, in the biblical account, God stops Abraham in the middle of the event and has him substitute a ram instead.

Many people throughout history, though, have adopted Kierkegaard’s view, in fact if not in name. Thus the Crusades, the Inquisition, Islamic jihads, and even the Holocaust have been rooted in the belief that God wants people to act in that way (consider the Nazi expression \textit{Gott und mein Recht}, “God and my law”). Some Catholic priests were able to sexually abuse children in their care because the children trusted the priests not only as people but also as the benign voice of God who would not do anything improper. Similar reasoning led several Orthodox Jewish institutions to justify to themselves non-payment of withholding taxes to the government, actions for which they were later prosecuted and convicted. They claimed that they needed the money for their institution and, quoting the Talmud, “Studying Torah takes precedence over all other commandments,”\(^2\) apparently including, in their view, outright theft. They, of course, misinterpreted that talmudic phrase: It simply means that study of Torah can be trusted to lead to performance of all other commandments, not that it can substitute for them. Still, a religious text served to justify their wrongdoing. Thus

\(^1\) David Berger, \textit{The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference} (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

\(^2\) B. \textit{Shabbat} 127a.