

**Session 5 – March 21, 1P (Beth El Library)**

Discussion of Hartman and Levinas on ‘uniqueness’ and ‘inclusiveness’

CHAPTER FIVE

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## Halakhic Sobriety and Inclusiveness

Modern Jewish consciousness has been deeply shaped by the dramatic events of recent Jewish history. The drama surrounding the Six-Day War, which was an important catalyst in reawakening Jewish self-awareness, testifies to the power of events in shaping Jewish identity. My own decision to leave the diaspora, to give up the security and economic comfort my family and I had enjoyed in Montreal and to take up residence and build a new life in Israel, was not only the result of intellectual reflection. The events preceding the Six-Day War awakened me to the power of Jewish solidarity throughout the world. I cannot forget the fear of another Holocaust that gripped many Jews before the war. Theologians suggested in all seriousness that we turn to the Book of Jeremiah to prepare Jews for another genocide. I recall my brother, who lived in Israel, telling me that thirty thousand graves were dug in Bnei Brak in antici-

pation of what might happen. I remember the strong sense of being unable to function normally because of my anxiety over the fate of Israeli society.

As a congregational rabbi and teacher of Jewish philosophy at McGill University, I remember the sudden sense of awakening diaspora Jews felt at the powerful drama of Jewish history that was now unfolding. Masses of people lined up at Jewish Federations prepared to give up their life's savings to help the war effort. Academics who had previously kept their connection with Judaism and the Jewish community hidden approached me and asked whether they could help by driving trucks or filling sandbags in Israel. I could hardly hide my surprise at their wanting to participate in the Jewish drama. And they too could not explain their feelings, even to themselves. The intensity of the event, of the historical moment, moved people in a way that defied rational comprehension. At that moment my family and I realized that our future could not be in North America when the fate of the Jewish people was being determined by what was taking place in Israel.

It might appear strange to argue for the importance of Maimonides and the Talmud, rather than of Halevi, to an appreciation of modern Judaism and the religious significance of the rebirth of the state of Israel. The early Zionist rejection of talmudic culture and its choice of the Promised Land as the place to implement its revolution suggests that biblical categories of thought and history are more fruitful keys to understanding the spiritual significance of Israel. An event-based theology like that of the Bible or of Halevi seems more in keeping with the modern Jewish experience. How can Maimonides' emphasis on the intellect as defining

the essence of a human being and on the centrality of the studies of physics and metaphysics (*pardes*) in leading us to a passionate love and awe of God provide a viable vision of Judaism for a people absorbed by the drama of history?

The Six-Day War taught me that a deep part of me agreed with certain features of Halevi's understanding of Judaism. Nevertheless, I also vividly recall the extreme emotional change from the elation over the victory to the despair and anxiety that gripped the country during and after the Yom Kippur War. Although I still acknowledged the power of events, I now recognize the manic-depressive consequences possible in an event-grounded theology. I am drawn to the intellectual sobriety of Maimonides and of the talmudic tradition as ways of moderating the event-driven passions of traumatic historical events.

The rabbinic tradition's focus on Torah study and its all-embracing halakhic way of life counterbalance the significance of events for an understanding of God's relationship to Israel. Maimonides' emphasis on nature and the ahistorical character of his philosophical quest for God, like the talmudic emphasis on the study of the Torah, can empower us to withstand not only the idolatrous appeals of the false gods of history but also the devastating psychological effects of an event-based theology. Moving the goal of mitzvah observance beyond reward and punishment to the idea that "the reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah," and using Torah study to illuminate our understanding of God's presence in history contribute to the sobriety and stability of a spiritual life. Maimonides and the Talmud lessen our vulnerability to the triumphant gods of history, be they conquering armies, nationalism, materialism, or whatever the modern equiva-

lents are of the biblical God who promises well-being and security in exchange for obedience.

In the Middle Ages, Maimonides was criticized for undermining the unique importance of the Halakhah. Maimonides claimed that passionate love for God was accessible to all human beings through the study of nature, so why, the criticism went, should Jews suffer and make extreme sacrifices for the halakhic way of worshipping God? The modern equivalent to this medieval argument would be, if a person can live an ethical and fulfilling life outside a Jewish religious framework, what is special about Judaism? If we can find spiritual refinement and a path to God through art, music, literature, and other forms of human culture, why should we make such efforts to continue the Jewish tradition? The typical response to this critique is Halevi's argument that the rituals of Judaism and study of the Torah unleash spiritual powers that alone make communion with God possible. The contemporary fascination with Kabalistic approaches to Judaism and to religious beliefs ascribing cosmic significance to mitzvoth (an idea that recalls Gershom Scholem's claim that Halakhah becomes compelling only when ritual is understood as sacrament) is often driven by the need to discover the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life.

Many Jewish theologians and rabbinic teachers believe that religious passion must be fueled by the nonrational, numinous features of Judaism. The only way to provide an attractive alternative to the secularism of the modern world is to emphasize the separation of Jewish religious life from everyday human experience. Judaism must be "radically other" and driven by its own distinctive logic in order

to defeat the pragmatic emphases of modern secular culture. Cultural distinctiveness and separation from the world are necessary to strengthen Jewish religious identity.

The modern threat that Jews might be absorbed by the majority secular culture affects the importance we ascribe to symbolic rituals. Those who fear Jewish assimilation emphasize ritual over ethics in order to highlight the distinct way of life that characterizes the Jewish family. The secular expression of this preoccupation with uniqueness can be seen in the way the Holocaust is used to emphasize the distinctiveness of Jewish suffering and destiny. It is often considered a desecration to compare any other people's suffering with that of the Jews in the Holocaust.

Although I can understand the obsession with uniqueness as a reaction to the fear of Jewish assimilation and disappearance ("Will my grandchildren be Jewish?"), I nevertheless believe that we distort the meaning of Judaism as a way of life when we equate uniqueness with significance. In referring to the prevailing notions of universal human psychology to explain revelation, Maimonides interpreted the purpose of mitzvoth in terms of their value in producing and sustaining moral health. That there are other ways of creating a healthy human psyche may undermine the uniqueness of Jewish law but not its significance and value.

One of the gifts of living in Israel and of building a completely Jewish society is in no longer having to choose between ethics and ritual as the basis of our Jewish identity. In becoming "a nation like all other nations," Israel should have liberated us from our preoccupation with uniqueness. When I would teach Israeli soldiers about Leviticus 19, which enjoins Jews to pay workers' wages on time, not to hate others

in their heart, not to take advantage of human weaknesses, and the like, I was surprised and disturbed by the following reaction: "All decent societies recognize these values. Why do you consider them necessary for building a Jewish society? I can live this way as a Norwegian or as a Dane. What makes this unique to the Jewish people and to Israel?" Apparently, it takes a long time to stop equating meaningfulness with uniqueness.

As I argued in my chapters on Halevi and Maimonides, one of the fundamental differences between the two is that for Halevi the history of Israel and of revelation are the points of departure for understanding Creation. Communion with God is linked to the divine gift God gave to Adam at the moment of Creation. This spiritual capacity eventually became the exclusive property of the community of Israel. In this way Halevi could explain the significance of Leviticus, with its detailed emphasis on animal sacrifices and ritual purity and impurity. What appears absurd from a rational perspective now becomes vital for achieving communion with God and nurturing this spiritual capacity.

We notice a similar tendency to interpret the Creation story in light of Israel's particular history in Rashi's commentary on the first verse of Genesis.

"In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1): Rabbi Isaac said: It was not necessary to begin the Torah, [whose main object is to teach commandments, mitzvot, with this verse] but from "This month shall be unto you" [the beginning of months] (Ex. 12:2) since this is the first mitzvah that Israel was commanded [to observe]. And what is the reason that it begins with Genesis? Because of [the verse] "The power of His works He hath declared to His people in giving them the heritage of the nations" (Ps. 111:6). For if the

nations of the world should say to Israel: "You are robbers, because you have seized by force the lands of the seven nations" [of Canaan], they [Israel] could say to them, "The entire world belongs to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, He created it and gave [it] to whomever . . . was right in his eyes. Of His own will He gave it to them and of His own will He took it from them and gave it to us."

The reason the Bible begins with the narrative of Creation is to justify the legitimacy of Israel's claim to the land of Canaan. The Lord of Creation can allocate the lands of the earth according to His preferences.

For Maimonides, the opposite tendency prevails. Maimonides doesn't allow the Creation narrative to become absorbed and defined by the narrative of revelation. Each narrative has its own distinct emphasis. On the one hand, the Creation narrative provides a universal path to the love of God. "When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the Divine Wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God ("Laws of the Foundations of the Torah" 4:12). On the other hand, the revealed law serves a social and political function in building a healthy Jewish community. The knowledge of what is permitted and forbidden "gives primarily composure to the mind. [This is] the precious boon bestowed by God, to promote social well being on earth" (4:13).

The Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body. As for the welfare of the soul, it consists in the multitude's acquiring correct opinions. . . . As for the welfare of the body, it comes about by the improvement of their ways of

living one with another. This is achieved through two things. One of them is the abolition of their wronging each other. This is tantamount to every individual among the people not being permitted to act according to his will and up to the limits of his power, but being forced to do that which is useful to the whole. The second thing consists in the acquisition by every human individual of moral qualities that are useful for life in society so that the affairs of the city may be ordered. . . . The Law of Moses, our Master has come to bring us both perfections, I mean the welfare of the states of people in their relations with one another through the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing and through the acquisition of a noble and excellent character. In this way the preservation of the population of the country and their permanent existence in the same order become possible, so that every one of them achieves his first perfection; I mean also the soundness of the beliefs and the giving of correct opinions through which ultimate perfection is achieved. (*Guide* 3:27)

These two narratives, the universal (Creation) and the particular (revelation), are the grounds for two distinct forms of solidarity. Identification with the covenantal community of Israel, its history and its Torah way of life, is the way Jews experienced intimacy with God. This intimacy was often understood in the tradition to mean that God has such a relationship only with Israel. "The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel" (Exod. 31:16). "Between Me and the people of Israel." But not between Me and the nations of the world" (*Mekhilta*, tractate Shabbata, 2).

R. Akiba says: I shall speak of the prophecies and the praises of Him by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world. For all the nations of the world ask Israel,

saying: "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so adjure us" (*Song of Songs* 5:9), that you are so ready to die for Him, and so ready to let yourselves be killed for Him? — For it is said: "Therefore do the maidens love Thee" (ibid. 1:3), meaning, they love Thee unto death. And it is also written: "Nay but for Thy sake are we killed all the day" (Ps. 44:23). — "You are handsome, you are mighty, come and intermingle with us." But the Israelites say to the nations of the world: "Do you know Him? Let us but tell you some of His praise: 'My beloved is white and ruddy,' etc. (*Song of Songs* 5:10). As soon as the nations of the world hear some of His praise, they say to the Israelites: "We will join you," as it is said: "Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy beloved turned him, that we may seek him with thee" (ibid. 6:1). The Israelites, however, say to the nations of the world: "You can have no share in Him, but 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (*Song of Songs* 2:16), 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine,' etc. (ibid. 6:3). (*Mekhilta*, tractate Shirata, 3)

For Maimonides, the narrative of the Sinai covenant and the Torah must be read in light of the narrative of the universal God of Creation. As I have shown, the Song of Songs, which was understood in the tradition as describing the exclusive love between Israel and God, was extended by Maimonides to include all philosophical lovers of God regardless of religious or ethnic background.

There is always a danger that the language of intimacy that conveys the experience of God's passionate love for Israel can create a narcissistic frame of mind in which the reality of God revolves exclusively around *my* people's history, *my* rituals and *my* traditions. The passionate attitude that characterizes covenantal communal religious intimacy can overshadow the religious importance of the universal spirit of Creation.

Maimonides used the universal story of Creation to expand the range of halakhic moral and legal responsibility. This is expressed in his explanation of the halakhah prohibiting unfairly harsh treatment of slaves.

It is forbidden to work any Hebrew slave with rigor. What constitutes work with rigor? It is work which has no fixed limits and unnecessary work which is done only with the purpose of keeping the slave occupied.

Hence the Sages say that the master should not tell his Hebrew slave, "Hoe under the vines until I arrive," because he does not give him a time limit; rather should he say to him, "Hoe until such-and-such a time or up to such-and-such a place."

Thus also one should not say to the Hebrew slave, "Dig up this place," where he has no need for it; nor should he command him even to warm or cool a glass of water for him if he does not need it. If he does so he transgresses a negative commandment, as it is said: "Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor" (Lev. 25:46). Hence the Hebrew slave does for his master only work that has fixed limits and for which there is a need. ("Laws of Slaves" 1:6)

After this moving psychological insight into the meaning of exploitation, it is surprising to read that from a strictly legal perspective, this divinely revealed law applies exclusively to Hebrew slaves.

It is permitted to work a heathen slave with rigor. Though such is the rule, it is the quality of piety and the way of wisdom that a man be merciful and pursue justice and not make his yoke heavy upon the slave or distress him, but give him to eat and to drink of all foods and drinks.

The Sages of old were wont to let the slave partake of every dish that they themselves ate of and to give the meal of the cattle and of the slaves precedence over their own. . . . Thus also the master should not disgrace them by hand or by word. . . . Nor should he heap upon the slave oral abuse and anger, but should rather

speak to him softly and listen to his claims. So it is also explained in the good paths of Job, in which he prided himself:

"If I did despise the cause of my manservant,  
Or of my maidservant, when they contended with me. . . .  
Did not He that made me in the womb make him?  
And did not One fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13, 15)  
("Laws of Slaves" 9:8)

Legally, Torah law prohibits treating a slave with rigor only in the case of a fellow Jew. The legal constraints that result from focusing exclusively on the revelation of the Torah to Israel, for whom communal solidarity defines legal obligation, obligate the family and those who participate in it to refrain from offensive treatment toward one another. But, argues Maimonides, when we move beyond Sinai to the God of Job—the God of Creation: "Did not He that made me in the womb make Him? And did not One fashion us in the womb?"—our obligations are expanded to include those who are not members of the Jewish community.

Maimonides thus reveals how the theme of Creation affects the application of the Sinaitic revelation. If we understood and applied the mitzvot in keeping with the universalistic spirit of Creation, we would realize that the true intent of God's revelation is to create a people who would embrace and feel responsible for and compassionate toward all human beings: "The Israelites, upon whom the Holy One, blessed be He, bestowed the favor of the Law and laid upon them statutes and judgments, are [a] merciful people who have mercy upon all" ("Laws of Slaves" 9:8).

Just as the narrative of shared suffering in Egypt is a necessary condition for entrance into the covenant at Sinai (Passover precedes Shavuot) so the Creation narrative—sol-

idity with all human beings—is necessary for realizing the true spirit of Torah law. In this way we can understand why the Bible begins with Creation and not with the revealed mitzvot. Those who wish to follow in the spirit of Maimonides' codification of the laws regarding the treatment of slaves should correct the moral distortions that result from taking the Sinai legal narrative as a justification for discriminating between the moral claims and rights of Jews and non-Jews. Maimonides' statement in the "Laws of Slaves" should be understood to mean that loyalty to the Jewish tradition need not be at the expense of solidarity with all of humanity. The moral weight we give to the Creation story for our understanding of revelation can free us from the either/or dilemma of choosing between particularism and universalism that has paralyzed Jews and distorted the meaning of Judaism throughout modern history. Understanding that the Judaic tradition gave us both the Creation and the Sinai narratives can ameliorate the growing divisions and animosities between secular and religious groups in Israeli society.

In arguing for the contemporary significance of the Maimonidean legacy, I cannot ignore a central theme of Maimonides' philosophy that at first appears irrelevant and alien to modern religious sensibilities. As I showed previously, Maimonides characterized a person who attributed corporeality to God as a heretic. Much of Maimonides' thought was devoted to his relentless struggle against any compromise with anthropomorphic conceptions of God. This concern is foreign to what we now find religiously moving in the biblical narrative. As the biblical scholar Yohanan Muffs has so brilliantly shown, biblical descriptions of God are compelling

when understood as a psychological drama involving God as its main "human" protagonist. It is precisely the humanity of God that appeals to Muffs. God becomes more compelling to modern readers of the Bible the more this aspect is emphasized. Muffs cites Saul Lieberman's remark that the most tragic figure in the Bible is God, writing that we are drawn to a God who is part of a human drama and subject to the same emotions, conflicts, and vulnerability that characterize the human condition.

God appeared before man as a personality: exalted yet fallible and warm. He entered into a contractual relationship with man, became involved in the human condition, experienced exasperation over the hardness of men's hearts, regretting that He had ever created man, was moved by the intercession of Moses and other prophets, broke out into fits of rage over the sinfulness of His people, and was so involved with Israel that despite their sinfulness He actually re-espoused them after having delivered them the bill of divorce. God appears to experience all the human emotions: love, anger, involvement, indignation, regret, sadness, etc. By so doing, He gives the seal of divinity to the very essence of our humanity. He implicitly says to man: "You cannot know what is above and what is below, but you can know what is in your hearts and in the world. These feelings and reactions and emotions which make up human existence, if illumined by faith and rationality, are all the divinity you can hope for. To be humane is to be divine: as I am holy, so you shall be holy; as I am merciful, so you shall be merciful." Thus, there is only one kind of knowledge that is open to man, the knowledge of God's humanity. ("God and the World: A Jewish View," in *Personhood of God*)

In spite of the demythologization of nature, the modern religious sensibility appears to be moving toward a new remythologization of religious language. Maimonides' preoccupation with idolatry and God's radical otherness and



spired by the talmudic tradition, where not only mistaken objects of worship determine idolatry but also the moral behavior and character of the worshiper.

How were the Ten Commandments arranged? Five on the one tablet and five on the other. On the one tablet was written: "I am the Lord thy God." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "You shall not murder." This tells that if one sheds blood, it is accounted to him as though he diminished the divine image. To give a parable. A king of flesh and blood entered a province and the people set up portraits of him, made images of him, and struck coins in his honor. Later on they upset his portraits, broke his images and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likenesses of the king. So also if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he had diminished the divine image. For it is said: "Whoever sheds the blood of man. . . . For in His image Did God make man" (Gen 9:6). (Mekhilta, tractate Ba-Hodesh, 7)

The *Mekhilta* identifies the commandment "I am the Lord your God" with "You shall not murder." In destroying a human life and violating the sacredness of a human being, one undermines the presence of God in the world. Faith in God entails an awareness of and respect for the sanctity of human life. When we lose that awareness we can become insensitive to the pain of others; ultimately this can lead to the violent destruction of human life. When we become insensitive to the sanctity of human beings, we are in danger of diminishing God's reality.

In rabbinic literature, the singular, unique worth of every human being derived from the story of Creation. "Beloved and precious are human beings created in the image of God" (Pirkei Avot 3:18). The theme of Creation was also the ground of the Noahide commandment prohibiting murder: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his

transcendence seems far removed from Muffs's compelling description of God's "humanity." Like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Muffs helps us overcome the embarrassment of talking about God in impassioned human terms. We have discovered the intellectual excitement of capturing the literal sense of biblical anthropomorphic language—the very opposite of the Maimonidean intellectual legacy. The concern with corporeality is not the be all and end all of our commitment to the God of Israel. Maimonides' revulsion against ascribing human moral emotions to God does not horrify us as much as it reminds us of how deeply influenced he was by the Greek conception of perfection as the eternal and unchanging. How do we make sense today of Maimonides' rejection of idolatry? What meaning can we give to the unity-corporeality issue, which appears no longer significant?

In fact, the whole concern with idolatry no longer appears important. The modern spirit of tolerance and the celebration of cultural diversity suggest that the issue of idolatry is not only irrelevant but perhaps also dangerous. If, as Maimonides claimed, the central mission of the election of Israel is to bear witness to the unity of God and to struggle against forms of worship and theological conceptions that undermine the belief in God's unity, we cannot avoid asking today: "What modern expression of idolatry would be incompatible with our affirmation and faith in the unity of God? What are the possible characteristics of modern idolatry that we are called upon to reject?"

In the medieval world, idolatry centered on the object of worship, on what was considered unworthy of worship. I present here an alternative approach to idolatry that is in-

blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man" (Gen 9:6). In the spirit of Maimonides' understanding of the relationship between the themes of Creation and faith in the unity of God, I suggest that any religious vision that ignores the dehumanization of the stranger or of members of other faiths is similar to the sin of idolatry insofar as it can lead to a diminishment of God's reality in the world. Rejecting religious views that differentiate between the human worth of members of one faith and those of another would be a modern application of the talmudic principle "One who rejects idolatry is as one who acknowledges the entire Torah." Shifting the focus of idolatry from mistaken conceptions of God and inappropriate forms of worship to how faith influences our perception of and behavior toward other human beings is a legitimate interpretation and extension of the *Mekbilta's* juxtaposition of "You shall not murder" with "I am the Lord your God."

Maimonides taught that belief in the unity of the cosmic God of Creation could not be reconciled with a corporeal conception of God. In the spirit of the *Mekbilta* we can claim that belief in God is incompatible with discriminatory practices and negative descriptions of other faiths that are found in many religious traditions, including Judaism. Belief in the unity of God commits us to affirm unambiguously that "one who saves a single human life is as if one saved a whole human world" (T.B. Sanhedrin 4:5). Halakhic scholars and theologians must examine Judaism critically in order to make sure that nothing in the tradition can legitimize the dehumanization of others or weaken belief in the sacredness of every human being created in the image of God.

We cannot denounce triumphalism and dehumanization in other religions or ideologies while ignoring them in our own tradition. As Maimonides argued, we cannot reject paganism among gentiles while excusing it within the Jewish tradition. If we honestly believe that "One who sheds the blood of a human being thereby diminishes the reality of God in the world," we must be careful not to adopt double standards in judging the religious beliefs and moral behavior of others against our own.

The rabbinic tradition took the insight of the *Mekbilta* a step further by using the language of idolatry to describe a moral character. "Rabbi Johanan said in the name of R. Simon b. Shimon b. Yohai: 'Every man in whom is haughtiness of spirit is as though he worshipped idols.' . . . R. Johanan himself said: 'He is as though he had denied the existence of God'" (T.B. Sotah 4b). With regard to the biblical verse "So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was" (Exod. 20:18), the midrash asks what enabled Moses to approach the "thick cloud":

"But Moses Drew Near unto the Thick Darkness." What brought him this distinction? His meekness. For it is said: "Now the man Moses was very meek" (*ibid.*, 12:3). Scripture tells that whosoever is meek will cause the Shekinah to dwell with man on earth, as it is said: "For thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit" (Isa. 57:15). . . . But whosoever is proud of heart causes the land to be defiled and the Shekinah to withdraw, as it is said: "Whoso is haughty of eye and proud of heart, him will I not suffer" (*ibid.*, 101:5). Furthermore, one who is proud of heart is designated an abomination, as it is said: "Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination of the Lord" (Prov. 16:5). Idols are also designated an abomina-

of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel in which the fullness of the human person is affirmed. In contrast to choosing the 'aqedah as the paradigm of faith in God, I choose the story of Abraham arguing with God for the people of Sodom in which God is expected to act in accordance with Abraham's understanding of justice and morality. "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25). Abraham continues to argue by appealing first for fifty, then forty-five, forty, and so on, righteous men as just cause to spare Sodom. The model of Abraham's pleading on behalf of Sodom suggests that God accepts the legitimacy of Abraham's moral arguments. If this were not so, God would have silenced his protestations immediately with a "My ways are not your ways" response. Or He could have short-circuited the discussion by telling Abraham at the very beginning that there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom. Instead God allows Abraham's tenacious and lengthy plea on behalf of Sodom. It is as if He were celebrating Abraham's protest and inviting him to persist in bringing his moral intuitions to judgment of His actions.

Just as Abraham does not doubt his own moral sense of justice in arguing with God so we in the modern world must not sacrifice our moral intuitions on the altar of loyalty to our particular religious traditions. We must not be intimidated by a "My ways are not your ways" argument when we feel critical of the moral teachings of our tradition.

I believe that God's confirmation of Abraham's understanding of justice is analogous to Maimonides' encourage-



tion, as it is said: "And thou shalt not bring an abomination into thy house" (Deut. 7:26). Hence, just as idolatry defiles the land and causes the Shekinah to withdraw, so he who is proud of heart causes the earth to become defiled and the Shekinah to withdraw. (*Mehilta*, tractate Ba-Hodesh, 9)

These rabbinic texts direct attention away from metaphysical truth-claims about God to the human characteristics necessary for living in His presence. These texts are not the teachings of secular humanists but of pious rabbinic teachers that explain the moral implications of the life of faith.

Many theologians would disagree with my placing the focus of idolatry and the meaning of faith on moral behavior and on the affirmation of the sanctity of human life. They regard the story of the binding of Isaac as the essence of genuine faith, in which obedience to God transcends human knowledge and morality. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, one of the most significant theologians in modern Israel, characterized the 'aqedah (the binding of Isaac) as the most eloquent and appropriate symbol of Judaism. He contrasted Judaism, in which Abraham was called upon to sacrifice his child in the service of God, with Christianity, in which God the Father sacrificed His son for the sake of humanity. For Leibowitz, giving precedence to ethics (the Creation narrative) over complete, uncritical obedience to the mitzvoth (the Sinai narrative) contradicts Judaism's understanding of the life of worship and borders on an idolatrous humanism in which man rather than God is at the center of the universe.

As I argued in *A Living Covenant* and in *A Heart of Many Rooms*, I regard neither of Leibowitz's images of religion as sacrifice — of humanity for God or of God for humanity — as compelling because I prefer an understanding