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OF LOVE, HOLINESS, AND THE OTHER

Commanded to Aspire

THE philosopher Lon Fuller coined the expression, “the morality of aspiration.” In so doing, he sought to emphasize a distinction between the morality of duty and the morality of aspiration. The latter is “the morality of the Good Life, of excellence, of the fullest realization of human powers.” Fuller finds his clearest examples in Greek philosophy. For Plato and Aristotle, shortcoming, not wrongdoing, would characterize the failure of a human being to function at his best.

However, in Fuller’s view, “The morality of the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments is expressed in terms of ‘thou shalt not,’ and, less frequently, of ‘thou shalt.’ It does not condemn men for failing to embrace opportunities for the fullest realization of their powers. Instead, it condemns them for failing to respect the basic requirements of social living.”¹

In his magisterial discussion of the aspirational requirements of Judaism, R. Aharon Lichtenstein mentions Lon Fuller and, with a fine sense of paradox, declares, “The Jew is also commanded to aspire.”² Even though aspiration takes one beyond the bounds of the legal requirement—*lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*—the extra-legal is itself commanded. The classic texts for such commandments, however, are to be found in the Talmud and the Midrash and their commentaries, as well as in classic Jewish commentaries on the Torah. In other words, they are located in the larger world of Torah literature, where biblical texts are interpreted as invoking the morality of aspiration.

¹ Lon L. Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (Yale University Press, 1969), 5–6.

² Aaron Lichtenstein, “Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halacha?” in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Ohio State University Press, 1975), 72.

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Ramban, for example, classically describes “holiness” as the aspiration to go beyond the letter of the law. In the end, the sinews of the law do not provide sufficient nurture for the spiritual life. “One may be a sensualist (*naval*) without stepping outside the law.” A gray area that is not forbidden makes space for personal fastidiousness.³ To navigate this area, one needs the inspiration of an idea like that of holiness. This area is illuminated by the notion of *imitatio Dei*: “Be holy, for I God am holy!” (Lev. 19:2). This is an elitist ethic, which is yet not wholly voluntary.

It is striking that Ramban identifies the source of the aspirational arc precisely within “Old Testament” texts. To read these as requiring only the minimal fulfillment of the morality of duty would fail to do justice to the richer implications of expressions like “Be holy, for I God am holy!” The Torah itself contains imperatives of both duty and aspiration; often, indeed—to quote Fuller himself—“there is an invisible pointer that marks the dividing line where the pressure of duty leaves off and the challenge of excellence begins.”⁴

Another important thinker, the philosopher and psychoanalyst, Jonathan Lear, engages with the psychological nuances and complexities of the notion of aspiration. Crucial to his understanding is the experience of *irony* in moral life. He understands irony as the recognition of a tension between social pretense and aspiration.

Drawing on Socrates and Kierkegaard, Lear develops his understanding of irony. This is not a matter of already knowing the answer to the question that is asked. Rather, he describes it as the experience of no longer being able simply to live with the available social understanding—the social pretense. “Irony is thus an outbreak of pretense-transcending aspiring...”⁵ It comes in the form of ironic uncanniness, accompanied by a longing for direction.

Such outbreaks of ironic disruption can happen at any time; one should, he says, learn to “live well” with the possibility of such experiences. As a serious teacher, for example, he writes of a moment of “breakdown,” of “disruption,” in which “I can no longer make sense of myself to myself.... [or] of what I have been up to.”⁶ What does it *really* mean to be a teacher? “It is as though an abyss opens between our previous

³ The area of *lifnim mi-shurat hadin* (“contextual morality”) itself forms part of the halakhic system. The other main proof-text is “And you shall do the right and the good” (Deut. 6:18). See Ramban, *ad loc.*; also *Bava Metzia* 30b, 83a; Rambam, *Hilkhot De’ot* 1:5.

⁴ Fuller, 10.

⁵ Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 20.

⁶ Lear, 18.

understanding and our dawning sense of an ideal to which we take ourselves already to be committed.” The ironic moment manifests both disorientation and loyalty to the larger meanings of one’s practical identity. The familiar returns as strange and unfamiliar.⁷ It is animated by an experience of “uncanny, enigmatic longing,” that Lear describes as one of “erotic uncanniness.”⁸

Developing a capacity for ironic experience becomes an ethical challenge. He concludes his discussion with this: Human excellence depends on developing “a capacity for appropriately disrupting one’s understanding of what such excellence consists in. Human flourishing would then partially consist in cultivating an experience of oneself as uncanny, out of joint.”⁹ Precisely this uncanniness would generate both unease and the yearning that is aspiration. The erotic element, as we will see, the sense of “enigmatic longing,” tunes this experience to an exquisite key.

Ramban seems to speak to this margin between the socially acceptable and the aspirational, though the erotic element is not obvious. This leaves the concept of holiness somewhat undefined—a transcendent and perhaps ironic disruption of daily life, which stands separate from, though it remains linked with, the parameters of law.

Both Fuller and Lear are interested in the fraught area between law and aspiration. We will turn now to an inquiry into the ways in which Talmudic sages and later commentators have articulated the relations between two prodigious ideals, *holiness* and *love of one’s neighbor*, and the particularities of law.

The Exodus Process

In Leviticus, for instance, the Torah emphasizes that it is for the purpose of *being holy* that the Israelites were taken out of Egypt in the first place.

For I am God your God and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy for I am holy. You shall not pollute yourselves with all kinds of insects that crawl on the earth. For I am God who brings you up out of the land of Egypt to be to you as a God, and you shall be holy for I am holy (Lev. 11:44–45).

Here is the enigmatic relation between God’s holiness and His demand of the Israelites to sanctify themselves. Forging this connection between the human and the divine is the entire purpose of the exodus. The

⁷ Lear, 15.

⁸ Lear, 20.

⁹ Lear, 37.

exodus, too, is an ongoing project, as evidenced by the present tense, “who *brings* you up out of Egypt.” Rashi points this out and quotes R. Ishmael: “If I had not brought them up out of Egypt for any other purpose than that they should not pollute themselves with insects like the other nations, that would have been sufficient!” Bringing them up out of Egypt is an elevation. Separating Israel from its pagan environment is an organic process of elevation.

The Egyptian Exodus had and continues to have an encompassing spiritual purpose. In this midrashic passage, however—perhaps for rhetorical effect—the value of holiness (*kedusha*) is given a minimal meaning (the insect taboo), equivalent to abstaining from impurity. The motive of purification has more to do with disgust than with desire.

Holiness and Aspiration

“Be holy for I God am holy!” (Lev. 19:2).

Like a pool of sunlight in a tangled forest, the demand of holiness moves us from a world of specific taboos, anomalies, and abominations to a blinding moment of aspiration. The difference in tone is unmistakable. From forbidden acts we turn to a positive state of being. How does *being* belong in a legal text so concerned with *doing*?

Rashi relates to this question obliquely in his commentary:

This *parasha* was uttered in an assembly of the entire people, since most categories of law are derived from it. “Be holy!”—Be *separate* from sexual and other sins; because wherever you find caution about sexual sin you also find holiness.

Rashi makes several observations. Structurally, this new *parasha* constitutes a kind of *summa* of biblical law; for this reason it was spoken in the presence of the entire people. In this sense, this *parasha* is seminal and central. The concept of holiness is then translated into legal terms: from the positive to the negative, from *being* to *doing* (or avoiding). Holiness indicates extra caution around sexual taboos. Rashi associates this with a concept of holiness as *separation*, a kind of spiritual fastidiousness.

The association of abstinence with holiness is classic. Although holiness is not the same as purity (*tahara*), as a state of being it is constituted by many acts of withdrawal: “One who abstains from committing a sin, is rewarded as though he had done a good deed.”¹⁰ An apparently passive state of *not-doing* is evaluated on an active register. Clearly, the midrash

¹⁰ *Makkot* 23b.

deals with active resistance to temptation and not with lethargy. Some heroic spiritual movement is taking place.

At the same time, we notice the qualifier, “*as though*” he or she had done a good deed (mitzva). This resistance is similar to but not identical with active virtue. Holiness belongs in this transitional area, which is constructed by the mind of the Rabbis.

A new context for the themes of separation, pollution, and holiness is given as: “You shall be unto Me (*li*) holy, for I God am holy; and I shall separate you from the nations to be Mine (*li*)” (Lev. 20:26). Being *unto God* intimates an undefined connection. The slender word *li*—“unto Me”—is associated with *being holy*, with divine holiness, and with separation from pagan mores.

Rashi’s comment is striking:

If you separate yourselves from them, then you are Mine! If not, you belong to Nebuchadnezzar and his friends! R. Elazar ben Azaria said: One should not say, I am disgusted by pig-meat, or, I could not bear to wear mixed wool-and-linen clothing? Instead, one should say, “I could easily do these things. But what shall I do! My Father in heaven has decreed!”... One’s separation from the ways of the nations should be for My sake. One refrains from sin and accepts the yoke of heaven.

Sexual restraint becomes an expression of a passionate relationship with God. Resistance to sin becomes the energetic enactment of a loyalty: “Of whose party are you?” The moment of resistance to temptation becomes an affirmative moment of identification. When one differentiates oneself from the other nations in the ways of holiness, where the divine decree is at issue, one colors one’s being with another desire. This is, in a sense, an erotic moment: A longing to be *unto Me—Mine*—is realized.

What has emerged is the full presence, in Lear’s sense, of aspiration. As Lear describes it, this is an uncanny experience. An unthinking flux has been disrupted. A gap appears “between pretense and pretense-transcending aspiration.” For Lear, we remember, this is also an *ironic* moment: Ironic experience, he claims, is first personal, present tense. And it is marked by an “enigmatic longing.” It is a sudden shift in perspective, constituted by a desire to be of God’s party. A longing for an intimacy that is at present not fully imaginable moves one to become *different*. One confronts God’s desire of one’s *being*.

The term *kedusha* (holiness), then, is linked with the state of *aspiration*. It is utterly serious and radically discomfiting: questions of value arise. And it affects, in a complex way, one’s practical identity.

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R. Elazar's aphorism insists on the gap between one's natural desires and the fact of God's decree. He insists on the situation of tension between desire and obedience. Only so can the strangeness and the power of God's desire be seen in its impact on a human life. A choice is to be made. In a sense, the choice is inevitable, not because one has no desire for the forbidden but, on the contrary, because one's desire starkly illuminates the *other* thing—"What shall I do? My father in heaven has decreed!" In a sense, one cannot do otherwise.

This understanding of the divine decree in the context of *being unto Me* casts new light on the divine decree that imposes non-rational laws. Now, the source of the imperial decree is "my *Father in heaven*." A complex but powerful relationship with God—king and father—stirs the imagination to a possibility of being. The ultimate effect of all the negatives is to develop a state of being that we may call aspiration.

Living Through Commandments

William James writes of the "higher kind of inner excitement," which is experienced by those who live with a sense of the divine. In the biblical context, this sense of the divine is closely linked with the taboos that are to be transcended in holiness.

The motive for aspiration is, ultimately, a larger sense of life: "And you shall keep my statutes and My laws: If one performs them, one *lives* through them. I am God" (Lev. 18:5). The purpose of the stringencies of the law is *va-hai ba-hem*, "so that you may live through them." A classic rabbinic reading suggests that commandments are to be fulfilled only if life is not endangered by fulfilling them. This becomes an important halakhic principle. But another reading declares that the purpose of fulfilling the laws is increased vitality. If the laws do not have this enlivening effect, then they should be read otherwise.

The nineteenth-century commentator *Ha'amek Davar* reads and re-reads the word *va-hai* in accordance with his understanding that it sometimes refers to the *fullness* of life. This vitality principle should generate deepened study of apparently unenlivening texts.

One example relates to the verse: "Adam became a *living* soul." (Gen. 2:7). Sometimes, he writes, "living" means simply "not-dead." Other times, it means living in the fullest way possible for that created being. A human being experiences such wholeness in the development of her intellectual and spiritual capacities. For the Jew, this means the study of Torah and the aspiration towards love of God. Achieving that fullness of life is

joy at its most intense. “You who cleave to God your God are all of you *alive* this day” (Deut. 4:4).

Kedusha can be understood as the aspiration towards such vitality. A kind of discomfort is its baseline: a restlessness about all given situations. Here, one is not yet who one wishes to be. One seeks out a deeper and larger way to be.

The Ethical Dimension

The sixteenth-century Italian commentator Seforno makes a large claim about the radical commandment: “Be holy!” This, he argues, represents the meta-narrative of Israel from the Exodus to the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, to the Golden Calf, and then to the rituals of purification of Leviticus. From God’s words at Mount Sinai, the purpose of the exodus was defined as, “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a *holy nation*” (Exod. 19:6). This was to be the history of a *holy* nation, attuned to the possibility of resembling the Creator. Indeed, this was the divine intention from the creation of the first human being: “Let Us make man in Our image and after Our form” (Gen. 1:26). The ideal of *imitatio Dei* underlies the first half of the Ten Commandments.

In this history, as Seforno consistently points out at significant moments in the narrative, the people fall back from the ideal articulated for them at Sinai. The Golden Calf episode represents such a tragic falling away from their own moment of transcendence. “They stripped themselves of their ornaments” (Exod. 33:6); they relinquished their intimacy with the divine; God withdrew from their midst (33:3).

Then, a therapeutic process begins to enable a renewed intimacy with the divine. Although this purification of their spiritual being involves the body, these laws governing impure foods and sexual practices are primarily intended to treat the *soul*. The word *nefesh*, used so often in the purification laws,¹¹ is often translated “soul”; but it more likely refers to the living human organism, which is a psychosomatic structure—perhaps to be understood as the *ensouled body*.¹² This future body becomes the object of divine desire.

This is Seforno’s metahistorical reading of the Israelite narrative and particularly of the Leviticus purity laws. The aspiration to holiness represents

¹¹ See, e.g., Lev. 11:44–45.

¹² See Franz Rosenzweig’s use of the term, *Beseelung* or ensoulment in *The Star of Redemption*.

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the central thread of his theology.¹³ The purity laws have specific therapeutic aims, but the larger purpose is the fulfillment of a *divine* aspiration. The Jewish people are the bearers of this aspiration. They fulfill, or fail to fulfill, their own version of God's dream.

In William James's psychological terms, the purity laws have a quality of *healthy-mindedness*,¹⁴ they aim to eliminate impurity, disorder. On the other hand, the holiness ideal draws in its wake a more complex view of evil and disorder as a part of the world's system. This different sort of religion, James suggests, is needed by those who live more habitually with a low "pain-threshold." James calls such sufferers "the sick souls," who, in contrast to the "healthy-minded," find that "pity, pain, and fear, and the sentiment of human helplessness" play a significant role in their understanding of the world.¹⁵ These latter, he makes clear, offer a more profound and complicated view of the situation.

Mary Douglas draws on James's categories in her description of societies that are brought to confront the limits of "dirt-avoidance" in their highly schematic view of the world. In Douglas's classic depiction of Lele purity rituals, the pangolin—the animal that crosses all the taboo boundaries and is therefore normally forbidden for food—is solemnly killed and eaten by Lele initiates, in the inner cult of their ritual life. This "hybrid monster... is reverently eaten by initiates, and taken to be the most powerful source of fertility.... That which is rejected is ploughed back for a renewal of life."¹⁶ The tragic element in human existence creates a need to go beyond systems.

However, as Lon Fuller argues, aspiration has an ethical dimension which is dedicated to the fullest realization of human powers.¹⁷ Unlike other forms of self-development, however, the ethical form of aspiration responds to the fact that the lives of others depend upon it. In the social world, for instance, when professional excellence is under discussion, the doctor or the lawyer or the teacher views her work with great seriousness because of the impact it has on the lives of others. Aspiration to excellence is not simply a matter of right and wrong; but neither is it dispensable.

¹³ See, e.g., Seforno on Lev. 19:2; 11:44–45. On several occasions, Seforno summarizes the history of God's desire of Israel, ranging from the Creation to the world to come, and focusing on the *hishtadlut* (striving, swinging oneself upwards) of the people to satisfy that desire, in both its ethical and their ritual dimensions.

¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1952), 129.

¹⁵ James, 144.

¹⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 1966), 168. The Lele are a central African people living along the Kasai River in today's Democratic Republic of Congo.

¹⁷ Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (Yale University Press, 1969), 5.

Using religious language, Fuller remarks, “Sin is a sinking into nothingness.” The play on words eloquently embodies the counterpoint of sinking and aspiring. Without this energy of aspiration, one loses one’s life.

The aspiration to holiness can also be seen as impelled by the desire to live more fully. As a state of *being unto God*, holiness entails relationship, which carries its own *ethical* imperatives.

10,000 Hours

How, then, is this ideal positioned in relation to the particulars of law? By way of analogy, how do we imagine the relation between the virtuoso musician and the 10,000 hours of practice that are now deemed essential to attain such virtuosity?¹⁸

Sometimes aesthetic experience provides a grammar for appreciating the position of the ideal of holiness. 10,000 hours of practice, dense with repetition, train one to overcome the limitations and bad habits of body and soul. Without these detailed rigors of practice, the virtuoso will, in most cases, not emerge. But, clearly, the hours of practice cannot totally account for the “prodigy” of what sometimes does emerge.

By analogy, specific practices and restraints have an important role to play in the pursuit of spiritual excellence. The idea of holiness is nurtured by the various prohibitions that give it body. But the holy self that the Torah invokes is never guaranteed to appear. There is an *otherness*, a wonder about the holy, as, indeed, Rashi indicates in his translation *perushim*—separate, at a distance. This makes holiness incommensurate with the practices that nurture it.

I think of the Mozart scene in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Set in the brutal atmosphere of a maximum-security prison, the prison-yard is suddenly invaded by the sounds of a Mozart aria. The hero, Andy, in a transgressive act that earns him two weeks in solitary, has locked himself into the warden’s office and is playing the aria over the hissing speakers of the prison. Everyone, from prisoners to warders, stops in his tracks. Routine is disrupted by the sheer fragile beauty of Mozart’s music. Transfixed, every last man stands gazing upward. The experience is one of freedom; pure sound from elsewhere, from another place and another time, is delivered into the “drab little cage” of the prison.

This scene provides an analogy for the uncanny phenomenon of holiness. Being or becoming holy is a function of being moved by a beauty that comes from elsewhere. Here is indefinable longing. The *otherness* of

¹⁸ See, e.g., Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown and Company, 2008). This theory has since been questioned on various grounds.

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the holy evokes a kind of freedom. It is experienced in practices of bodily restraint and spiritual aliveness which help to carry one from one state of being to another, yet unknown. Like classical music, it is usually deemed an elite interest, though its power, it turns out, can be felt by every last man. The practitioner is often marked out as exceptional; but here the Torah commands a whole nation, “Be holy, for I God am holy!”

“Be Holy!”

What happens when the aspiration to holiness fails to arise? In the enigmatic scene at Meriva, God castigates Moses and Aaron for “failing to sanctify Me before the people’s eyes.” The consequence of this failure is dire: “Therefore, you shall not lead the people into the Land” (Numbers 20:12).

The holiness that failed to happen was the public demonstration, before the eyes of the people, of divine holiness. What would it have required to sanctify God? Rashi provides a classic answer: he should have spoken to the rock, rather than striking it. Seeing Moses speak to the rock—the visual impact, “before the people’s eyes,” of a man speaking to a rock—would have engendered in them a thoughtful response: “They would have said, If this rock that does not speak or hear and has no existential needs nevertheless fulfills God’s word, how much more so should I!”

What might have happened—but did not—is an imaginative act. The people might have projected themselves into the rock, recognizing the power of God’s word in their own vulnerable lives. Their own human situation would have been illuminated by the miracle of water from the rock. The purpose of the exercise was the impact it might have on *the people’s eyes*. Failing to speak, hitting the rock, Moses misses the point; the imaginative process is short-circuited; the double blow of the rod induces no self-reflection in the people.

Moses’ failure is a failure to produce in them this movement of aspiration. In other words, he fails to engage their inner world. Speaking to the rock might have created an uncanny moment, a transfigured sense of God’s word in their lives.¹⁹

There is, of course, no knowing what the people might have thought. Yet such imaginative thinking is crucial if God is to be sanctified in the

¹⁹ Agnes Callard discusses a form of rationality she calls “proleptic.” “Proleptic reasons are provisional in a way that reflects the provisionality of the agent’s own knowledge and development: her inchoate, anticipatory, and indirect grasp of some good she is trying to know better” (*Aspiration* [Oxford University Press, 2018], 72).

world. Practical obedience to divine commands requires the larger sense of a divinely connected world.

“Be holy!” is translated by Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner (known as the *Mei ha-Shilo’ah*): “Be attuned!” That is, Be attentive to the radiations of the divine that are always waiting to illuminate human life. Being *mezumanim*, attuned in this way, means both avoiding distraction and opening oneself, standing in God’s presence, face-to-face, in hope of illumination.

Being holy in this sense would mean clearing space, allowing access to the illumination. D.H. Lawrence wrote of “man in his wholeness, wholly attending.” *Kedusha* would then evoke expectation, alertness, aspiration. R. Leiner cites Proverbs 3:3: “Let love and truth not abandon you!”—suggesting the receptive stance of the mystic in a world charged with the divine.

“Be holy!” is immediately followed by a cascade of variegated laws—about life in the family, about the Sabbath, and idolatry, and sacrifice, and social responsibility in agriculture. Punctuated with the statement, “I am God,” these laws form the superstructure on which many legal categories depend.

At the same time, they themselves constitute the detailed injunctions that flesh out the meaning of the general principle of “Be holy!” An ideal of holiness is grounded in ritual and social practices. The sense of the divine runs like an electrical impulse through the text. Without the detailed practices, the ideal would remain undefined. But without the ideal, without the perspective of the *kelal*, all the specifics would lack organic meaning.

Oedipal Tensions

In order to explore this dynamic of *kelal* and *perat* (general principle and particular case), we will look briefly at three examples. The first is, “Each person shall fear his/her mother and father” (19:2), which immediately follows the imperative of “Be holy!” The second is “You shall not place a stumbling-block before a blind person” (19:14). And the third is “Love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18).

Like the others, the injunction, “Each person shall revere (lit. fear) his/her mother and father” is briefly phrased, in four Hebrew words, apparently unconnected with what comes before and after. Much commentary proliferates around these four words. What is the difference between *revering* and *honoring* one’s parents (as in the Ten Commandments)? Why is the mother mentioned first? Does the word *ish* (person)

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refer to both sons and daughters? For our purposes, I would like to focus on one Talmudic passage: “What is reverence? One does not stand in his place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his opinion, nor decide a disagreement between him and another person.”²⁰

The emphasis on the parent’s special *place* refers literally to her or his usual seat. But it also evokes oedipal tensions. Where one sits at table has symbolic implications. An apparently innocent act is understood to express a perhaps unconscious wish or attitude. The desire to supplant, which for Freud has murderous undertones, is acted out in harmless gestures.

Contradicting the parent’s words, similarly, may not consciously trouble the parent; but it nevertheless constitutes an impingement on the general principle of reverence, which implies holding the parent in high regard, even in awe.

This awe is linked with the taboo that Freud placed at the center of his psychoanalytic thought. *Fearing* one’s parents both acknowledges a moment of danger and protects them from oedipal violence. It acknowledges the almost mystical dimension of the parent *as* parent.

Seforno develops this idea: Honoring one’s parents is not sufficient, since it is largely behavioral: it includes the duty of feeding and clothing them. But correct behavior may be accompanied by a disparaging attitude. Here arises the idea of reverence—a genuine regard verging on awe in relation to one’s parents.

It is in this sense that reverence is expressed in negatives: not standing or sitting in their place, not contradicting them. These actions would represent an impulse to fill the parent’s place: that is, to destroy. This unconscious impulse is implicit in the commandment of reverence. In the process, the reverence ideal both inspires the restraints and becomes more fully realized through the confrontation with them.

Stumbling-Blocks

We turn now to the stumbling-block: “You shall not place a stumbling-block before the blind, and you shall fear your God; I am God” (19:14).

Once again, a brief and focused exhortation. The literal meaning is clear, forbidding an act of obvious malice against the handicapped. In this case, however, the principle is framed in the negative, following logically from “You shall not curse the deaf.” But the verse ends: “You shall fear your God!”—which is, formally, a positive commandment. Rashi comments: Because this is something that no one other than you can know for sure, whether you meant it for good or ill, one can evade judgment by

²⁰ *Kiddushin* 31b.

saying, “I meant it well.” This is why the text says, “You shall fear your God!”—who knows your thoughts. Of any issue that is a matter of individual conscience, the Torah says, “You shall fear your God!” *Only* fear of God can assure honesty.

Since motivations are private, they are said to be known only to God. In this case, however, the text cannot be literally referring to tripping up the blind: that could only be malicious. So the verse is interpreted to refer to one who is “blind in a certain matter.” It forbids maliciously exploiting the ignorance of others.

Here are some examples of “blind” situations that the Rabbis adjudicate: giving false information, giving bad advice leading to physical or financial loss, acting as accessory to a crime, even if the other is quite aware of the criminal nature of his intentions, like selling weapons and instruments of violence.²¹ Deception is not a necessary feature of this dynamic.

Further examples of this expanded notion of blindness: serving wine to a *Nazir* who is blinded by his desires: one is provoking the other to sin.²² On similar grounds, it is forbidden to hit one’s adult son, since one is provoking him to hit back.²³ Here again there is no deception involved and, at least consciously, no malice: the father does not *want* his son to strike back. Nevertheless, a degree of emotional awareness is required if one is to avoid the *stumbling-block* situation.

It is also forbidden to act as witness or even as scribe in a forbidden transaction (where usury is involved).²⁴ Even though there is neither deception nor provocation, simply participating in a forbidden act comes under the heading of the *stumbling-block*. This is an unexpected text, since there is no blindness and no willful act of malice.

Even more surprising is the law that forbids, on the same grounds, lending to a friend without witnesses. There is no illicit act, and the motivation is friendship. Nevertheless, a temptation has been introduced into the situation; the unwitnessed loan may tempt the debtor to deny his debt.

Finally, the same *stumbling-block* law is cited as the basis for the duty of marking graves. A priest may unwittingly tread on the grave and violate a prohibition. Here, one is totally passive and yet runs foul of the *stumbling-block* law.

In these examples, even where obvious culpability is absent, there remains an issue of *responsibility*. When the Rabbis cite the *stumbling-block*

²¹ Maimonides, Laws of Murder 12–14.

²² *Pesahim* 20b.

²³ *Mo’ed Katan* 17a.

²⁴ *Bava Metzia* 75b. All the examples in this section are taken from Nehama Leibowitz (*Sefer Vayikra*).

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law, they go far afield from the blind man who is being tripped up. None of the immediate moral associations of the original scene remain in the derivative laws. And yet something of the callousness of the biblical words is activated in the more rarefied circumstances of these laws. In any act, or even in abstaining from an act, one plays a potentially destructive role in the organism of the world.

These laws portray a world of violence, greed, and opportunism. The stumbling-block idea urges that one develop not only a conscience but a consciousness of the shadier modes of collaboration with violence. As we have seen, the connection between a father and a son is more complex than one might have thought. The father should be aware of his fraught role in his son's world. Even the friend who kindly lends money, should transcend a naïve innocence; he should acknowledge his own nature sufficiently to extrapolate to the Other. A witness clarifies the ethical situation and thereby, at least in ethical terms, lightens the debtor's burden.

"You shall fear your God!" sets up an aspirational movement, in which deeper self-knowledge and understanding of the unconscious structure of human relations becomes a trajectory to be pursued beyond one's present grasp.

These cases induce a sense of one's implication with others. In their development from the original stumbling-block scenario, they represent an ethics of aspiration, rather than of duty. There is a moral requirement to sharpen one's sense of responsibility beyond the basic knowledge of right and wrong. An acute moral vision may be developed, as in George Eliot's description:

If we had a keen vision and a feeling for all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded in stupidity.²⁵

George Eliot exacerbates our imagination of what such a sharpening of empathy might do to us. Ordinary human life, it transpires, is far from ordinary; it throbs with desire and fear. Keener senses might become a fatal gift. But the alternative to such intense awareness is, after all, stupidity.

Love Your Neighbor?

The particulars of aspiration, then, play out in a world of pain and violence. With this dark assumption, we now approach the heart of the matter:

²⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Bantam Classic, 2008), 238.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). Reduced to three Hebrew words, this is *the* great ethical commandment. From the center of Leviticus, it addresses us with a demand for radical empathy.

As a special case stands the whole *parasha* of *Kedoshim*, which is characterized as a *summa* of the whole Torah. Without such foundations, the particularities of law cannot be properly understood. But how does this commandment of love belong in its context, in a text bristling with negative commandments?

You shall not go about gossiping among your people; and you shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor; I am God. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall take no vengeance nor bear a grudge against your kinsman. *Love your neighbor as yourself! I am God!* (19:16–18).

Suddenly, again, the burst of sunlight in a tangled forest of hatred, vengeance, gossip: the imperative of love. Of these words, R. Akiva says, “This is the great *kelal*, the foundational principle of the Torah.”²⁶

The problem, of course, is that this noble principle is unrealistic. As Ramban and others say, it runs counter to human nature. We will always love ourselves more than anyone else. Ramban therefore limits the meaning of “love” to a concern for the well-being of the other. Perhaps this is the reason for the dative form, “Love *for* your neighbor”—*le-re’akha*. Wish him well, in the same way as you wish yourself well. Even this limited form of love, however, challenges human nature; you will still wish for more blessings for yourself. But, with this commandment, the Torah asks us to attempt to transcend our envy.

At the same time, human self-love is acknowledged as a fact of life. Ramban himself remarks, “A human being is partial to himself.” *Adam karov le-atzmo*. And R. Akiva famously ruled in accordance with this natural human proclivity: If two people are lost in a desert and one has water sufficient to save one person, one may save oneself: “Your life has precedence.”²⁷

Freud too wrote of this commandment: “[It] is impossible to fulfil; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not get rid of the difficulty.... The commandment, ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself,’ is the strongest defence against human aggressiveness and an excellent example of the... cultural super-ego.”²⁸ Unrealistic, excessive, and ineffective, the super-ego causes suffering without achieving change. The central expression of biblical ethics becomes the harsh voice that polices one’s

²⁶ *Sifra Kedoshim* 2:4 and *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4, cited by Rashi to 19:18.

²⁷ *Bava Metzia* 62a.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Penguin Books, 2002), 79.

inner life: a source of frustration rather than inspiration. The commandment, he says, is “unpsychological.”

This is not entirely unlike Ramban’s comment that the commandment is *haflaga*—an exaggeration, or, in Freud’s terms, enormously inflated. Ramban assumes that the commandment cannot be understood literally. He therefore translates the “love” of the commandment to refer to behavioral benevolence. R. Akiva does not cite it in his ruling; but he does maintain that it is “the great principle of the Torah.”

Your Neighbor?

If we turn our attention from love to “your neighbor,” we notice that the word *re’a* is not a specially friendly word. In the immediate context, we read, “You shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor.” The neighbor is simply another person like yourself who is in danger and whom you might, at some risk to yourself, save from death. He is not someone you particularly love.

“Your neighbor” is potentially the object of envy (Exod. 20:17), of your oppression (Lev. 19:13), the one on whose territory you might trespass (Deut. 19:14). On the rare occasions where the neighbor is a friend, an adjective is required to make that clear: “Your neighbor who is *like your very soul*” (Deut. 13:7).²⁹ In a wedding ceremony, the couple is referred to as “beloved neighbors”!

The *re’a* is, at base, simply one in whose company one finds oneself. This is the Other whom we are commanded to love. It is the sheer otherness of the Other that gives rise to the commandment. Even the Other as your brother is not romanticized: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Lev. 19:17) implies that hatred is not unusual in this relationship. On the contrary, hatred is not forbidden; perhaps, realistically, it could not be forbidden. It is *unexpressed hatred*, hatred-in-your-heart, that is forbidden: “If he has mistreated you, don’t pretend to be his friend.... But reprove him in the right way.”³⁰ Reading the sequence of commandments, Rashbam creates a therapeutic narrative of effectively expressed hostility. The poison of repressed hatred can lead to murder: “If someone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and rises up to strike him down and he dies....” (Deut. 19:11).

The English poet, William Blake starkly described this dynamic in “The Poison Tree”:

²⁹ See also the description of Jonathan and David’s relationship, I Samuel 18:1.

³⁰ Rashbam to 19:17.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

.....

In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

Blake's "friend" may be the biblical "neighbor" as the object of anger. The poison tree is fed by the hypocritical love of the subject; the friend is poisoned by the repression. Telling one's anger relieves pressure; even if it does not lead to murder, repression is an evil in itself. The poison is clearly active in the inner world of the subject. On the one hand, reproving the Other is a notoriously difficult art, which the Rabbis advise us not to try if we cannot do it well. On the other hand, in the context of repression it offers a cathartic release—and hence becomes a commandment.

But if aggressiveness is so prevalent in human relations, what can the commandment to love your neighbor plausibly mean? Here, too, the Rabbis provide specific examples of how the "general principle" may be applied.

One example refers to the death penalty: the form of execution should be as humane as possible. "Select for the condemned an easy form of death!"³¹ This is learned from "Love your neighbor as yourself!" The principle of empathy is at work, even when dealing with someone who seems as distant from oneself as it is possible to be. Assuming "you" are the judge, you must grant the criminal what you would wish for yourself in his place. The neighbor is the quintessential Other in this scenario. Because of this tension, the commandment of empathy becomes powerful.

Similarly, "It is forbidden to marry a wife without first seeing her—lest he see something repulsive in her that makes her unattractive to him. For the Torah says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself!'"³² Physical attraction in marriage is important: This impersonal reality is respected in Jewish law. But the proof-text sheds a different light on the situation. The concern here is for the woman: How would you like to be in her position if she marries you and then you are repelled by her? Again, the empathy, or the humanity, is manifested precisely in a situation where male sexual needs put the woman into an object position. The Talmud mitigates this by enlarging the man's moral imagination: she is different from you, but she is also just like you!

³¹ *Ketubot* 37b; *Sanhedrin* 45a.

³² *Kiddushin* 48a.

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The limits of altruism are acknowledged, even as they are partially redeemed. Another case: “How is it that a son is permitted [when there is no one else able to do it] to bleed (give medical care to) his father? ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”³³ The legal question arises because of the risk that the son may slip up and wound his father, which is forbidden. But “Love your neighbor as yourself.” means doing for the other what one would want done for oneself. In my father’s place, what would I want?

Again, with all the reverence due to one’s father, one is required to have sufficient understanding of one’s own nature to extrapolate to the Other—who in this case is one’s father. In all these cases, the tension of otherness is palpable. It is not just, as Ramban claims, that I wish for the Other what I would wish for myself: love as pragmatic benevolence. Rather, the Other is someone whom naturally I might find unfathomable, unendurable, intimidating. This very otherness is countered by a movement of identification: the Other is just like me, in my own sense of internal otherness! My basic vulnerability calls out for a different sense of kinship in the Other.

One expression of the paradox is found in the Talmudic parable: “How do we understand, ‘Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge!’? This is like someone who was cutting meat and accidentally cut his other hand. Can you imagine that he would take revenge on his cutting hand by cutting it back with his wounded hand?”³⁴ One’s two hands are parts of one body. One should think of revenge as equally absurd. Being part of the same organism affects the relation between the offender and his victim. Perhaps we can understand this common organism as the existence of the unconscious in self and other.

On One Foot

Through a kind of thought-game, the Talmud sponsors the idea of a dynamic connection between people who could not be more different. The classic source for this is the famous story of Hillel and the would-be proselyte, who demands of the Rabbi: “Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot! Hillel answers, “What is hateful to you, don’t do to another: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn.”³⁵

Basing the whole Torah on one principle (like standing on one foot) is Hillel’s serious response to what sounds like a provocation in the mouth

³³ *Sanhedrin* 84b.

³⁴ *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4.

³⁵ *Shabbat* 31a.

of the proselyte. Hillel translates the biblical commandment, “Love your neighbor....” into manageable human terms. Love means not doing to another what you would find hateful for yourself. An impossible positive command is reduced to a plausible and therefore more “rational” negative command.

However, in Rashi’s reading, Hillel is also implying that just as you don’t like to have your wishes overridden, so don’t go against God’s wishes. This is the foundation of the whole Torah, which is the divine word: its Speaker becomes the object of our empathy!³⁶ The assumption is that one is humanly sensitive about one’s own dignity; God, as your “friend,” should then appeal to your moral imagination. To imagine God as vulnerable in this way may seem to stretch anthropomorphism too far. For this reason, Ben Azzai prefers a different foundational principle: “This is the book of human history on the day God created the human being in the image of God” (Gen. 2:5). Theological dogma is more stable than human psychology. But Hillel’s radical theology of ethical sensibility remains to challenge the bounds of common sense.

Now Go and Learn!

Hillel’s answer is most striking in its last part: “The rest is commentary. Now go and learn!” The biblical text, or any text, requires interpretation; particularly when a difficult verse, like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is being read. Hillel himself comments on the role of interpretation. This verse, he says, is the basic principle, the basic text—and the rest is commentary. He is giving the proselyte more than information about basic principles. “Love your neighbor...” lies at the center; but like all Torah texts this one requires of the student a process of interpretation and practice which is called the Oral Torah.

If the proselyte rests content with the “whole Torah,” and neglects the detailed examination of context and human experience, he will be the poorer for it. If, on the other hand, he becomes submerged in commentary and forgets the foundation of it all—“Love your neighbor....”—then he will have understood nothing at all! If one learns the laws governing the execution of condemned prisoners, or courtship, or bleeding one’s father, without attending to the heart of the matter one will have entirely missed the point.³⁷ This the proselyte himself understands, since it is he who challenges Hillel to provide the core text.

³⁶ See Rashi to *Shabbat* 31a, s.v. *de-alakh senei*.

³⁷ See R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, vol. 2, 142.

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What will one have missed? What does the *kelal*, the general principle offer that all the applications lack? Precisely the strangeness, the provocation of the original wording, which cannot be accessed without translation and yet can never be fully translated. When all is said and done, the radical claim, “Love your neighbor....” eludes domestication: this is its uncanny offering to the reader.

Ground on Which We Meet

At heart, the commandment implies, “Love your neighbor—who is just like yourself.”³⁸ The subject is not self-love and benevolence but shared identity. The quality of love may not be the same, but the very being of the Other mirrors one’s own being. This neighbor—who has every reason to be wary of you, who may need to be protected from your aggression; who may be of a different gender; who may be a man condemned to death, or a revered father—this neighbor is profoundly connected with you. In theological terms, the connection is rooted in the idea that both were created in the image of God. But this idea now needs to be acknowledged in the powerful strangeness of the Other’s presence.

However, this empathic recognition is not, as Freud scathingly declared, a demand of the super-ego. On the contrary, being with another means acknowledging one’s own inner otherness. One is not being exhorted by the voice of the policeman or the judge; rather one unavoidably sees a resemblance in the very ground of one’s being. Eric Santner writes, “To put it most simply, the Other to whom I am answerable has an unconscious, is the bearer of an irreducible and internal otherness.”³⁹ Being with another means “exposure not simply to the thoughts, values, hopes, and memories of the Other, but also to the Other’s touch of madness, to the way in which the Other is disoriented in the world....”

The encounter creates a shared opening to the uncanny strangeness of the “space we call home.” In this vision of things, being just like the Other is based on the fact “that every familiar is ultimately strange and that, indeed, I am even in a crucial sense a stranger to myself.”⁴⁰

In Santner’s discussion, the Other is just like you—precisely in the sense that he too has blind spots, points of failure, that make him both threatening and unbearable. But precisely here begins “a specific way of

³⁸ See *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, vol.1, 37–38.

³⁹ Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (Chicago University Press, 2001), 82.

⁴⁰ Santner, 6.

opening to the Other in the place and time we already inhabit.”⁴¹ In our obligations to the Other, we open ourselves also to the idea of God as present within this paradoxical love of the neighbor. That is, within the most concrete dimensions of living in the midst of life we recognize the presence of God who nevertheless remains absolutely transcendent.

This is love of the neighbor who is just like you in being disoriented in the world. The singular demonic being of the Other becomes the ground on which we meet: what Santner calls the various forms of Egyptomania, the remains of lost forms of life that distort one’s being.⁴² Here, the Golden Calf is encountered time and time again. Meeting on this ground, we engage directly with defensive fantasies and allow new possibilities to arise.⁴³

Opaque Radiance

The moment of encounter becomes the moment of acknowledging what it is to be created in God’s image. Beyond the idiosyncrasies of internal and external otherness, there remains the *kelal gadol*, the great principle, “Love your neighbor—who is like you!” Translated into many possible forms of encounter, it yet remains irreducible.

Like the other great principle—“Be holy!”—loving the neighbor remains, in all its radiance, somehow opaque. Beyond all legal transactions, it makes a demand that is radical, anarchic, private, and subject to controversy and hypocrisy. Holiness, too, with all its specific applications, is ultimately a personal discipline that resists rigorous evaluation. One aspires to more than can be embodied in formal practice. Like the practice of music, we have suggested, the rules go only so far in accounting for the genius of what can happen. A new world of values, even perhaps a new sensibility, is formed that brings one back to the original yearning as the only satisfactory ground of this future: “This is what I was after all along.”⁴⁴

At the heart of all the rituals of atonement, too, there is the principle of the thing—*li’beyot li*—“being unto Me.” Being unto God is refracted into myriad practices and avoidances. Acknowledging the aggressiveness of the human heart, the community works to clear a space for the heart of the matter. This is a cathartic process in which, indeed, the process is the encounter with God. And yet, the principles of holiness and of love of

⁴¹ Santner, 91.

⁴² Santner, 45.

⁴³ Santner, 101.

⁴⁴ Callard, 76.

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the neighbor suffuse the practices of purity with an energy that is, and is not, inherent in those practices.

“You shall revere your God:” There are matters that are relegated to the privacy of the heart; there only the divine can testify to the truth. There, one is free to lie, or to experience the ironic uncanniness of things. The scapegoat is expelled into the wilderness. The Golden Calf is confronted, smashed against the desert rocks. But a sensibility that values truth and love and holiness must infuse all acts of purification if they are to be meaningful. The human heart, the individual conscience validates the practices. At the same time, the behaviors, the *mitzvot*, affect the heart.

This is the hermeneutic circle of religious life. Without a grasp of the whole, how can one engage with the part? Without the part, how can one begin to access the whole? The movement of the two questions perhaps constitutes what we have called aspiration.

A teaching from *Sefat Emet*:

Rashi comments on “You shall revere your God”: This is said of matters that are left to the individual conscience. The obvious meaning of this is that only fear of God can move one to scrupulous fulfillment of these requirements. But it is also true that fulfilling these commandments brings one to the fear of God. Human behavior and human intentionality have a reciprocal relation to each other.... So both readings are true, as it is written, “The reward of a commandment is a commandment.”

And certainly through the depth of fear of God one can come better to fulfill commandments of the private conscience. In turn, the reward for conscientious fulfillment of these commandments is the fear of God that will lead one to the better fulfillment of those same commandments—and so on forever.⁴⁵

“And so on forever,” concludes *Sefat Emet*. The energy of aspiration feeds into the acts and is fed by them. This is the dynamic of deepening awareness of the ways in which behaviors and intentionality are implicated with each other. The separate acts, the individual people, so differentiated, subject to conflict, to purification, are nevertheless, from a different perspective, limbs of one body. How then can there be revenge, hatred, or oppression?

But both perspectives apparently need to be kept in motion. The world in which “I am holy,” and in which your neighbor is like yourself,

⁴⁵ *Sefat Emet, Kedoshim* [5636/1876].

involves a movement towards encounter with what radically connects self and other; and a counter-movement into oneself. Separateness gives way to a vision of oneness; separateness dissolves. And returns—“And so on forever.”

In 2001, an experiment was conducted in which the brains of people who were engaged in deep prayer or meditation were scanned using a technology known as SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography). One finding was that certain areas—in the posterior superior parietal lobe—went dark during deep meditative states. “This part of the brain normally feeds us ongoing signals regarding the physical limits of our individual selves in relation to everything else, helping us separate ‘us’ from ‘not us,’ with messages such as ‘I am here, not there.’” These signals stopped firing in the deepest meditative states.⁴⁶

This quieting down, it was speculated, allowed the subjective experience of oneness and connectedness that mystics have known through the generations. It constitutes a moment of union with reality. Perhaps learning how to tune down the flow of incoming sensory information helps to achieve “the art of union with reality.”⁴⁷

With an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.⁴⁸

Perhaps when we come to such moments in the Torah as “Be holy, as I God am holy!” or “Love your neighbor as yourself!” something in us quiets down. Like the moment when we put our hands over our eyes and say, *Shema Yisrael*—“Hear, o Israel, God our God is One!” The sunlit space which is an enclave in the forest is deeply linked by roots and spores to the forest organism, a part of the whole.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing* (Bantam Books, 2008), 65–66.

⁴⁷ Evelyn Underhill, cited in Mayer, 66.

⁴⁸ Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” (July 13, 1798).